

Invisible in Russian captivity

Analysis of the illegal detention of civilians incommunicado: family testimonies and challenges in locating them

This analytical note was prepared by the NGO Association of Relatives of Political Prisoners of the Kremlin (hereinafter referred to as the Association) based on incidents documented by the organization that contain signs of war crimes and crimes against humanity. It takes into account the stories of victims who received free legal assistance from the Association in locating civilians who have gone missing and are likely being illegally detained by the Russian Federation incommunicado, as well as civilians who have gone missing under special circumstances as a result of the Russian Federation's military aggression.

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Summary

The analytical note by the NGO “Association of Relatives of Political Prisoners of the Kremlin” “Invisible in Russian Captivity,” highlights the main problems faced by the families of civilians who have gone missing as a result of the Russian Federation's armed aggression against Ukraine and for whom there is evidence of their illegal detention by the Russian Federation.

The study focuses on the experiences of families whose loved ones have disappeared under special circumstances or whose whereabouts remain unknown, although there are grounds to believe that they may have been illegally deprived of their liberty by representatives of the Russian Federation in the context of the armed conflict. The main problems in establishing the whereabouts of such persons were identified on the basis of a survey of 44 families, as well as during the provision of legal assistance to them. Key challenges include formalism in the responses of state bodies, fragmented procedures, lack of interagency coordination, social isolation, and psychological and financial exhaustion of families.

The note contains systemic conclusions about the ineffectiveness of the current search mechanism, which is designed primarily for peacetime. At the same time, examples of successful locating of missing persons and the factors that contributed to this are analyzed, in particular: effective communication with state structures, testimony of released prisoners, involvement of human rights defenders and lawyers.

Based on the collected data, practical recommendations have been formulated for families of missing persons under special circumstances and state institutions. In particular, it proposes the introduction of a “single window” model to facilitate interaction with the authorities, the creation of an interagency coordination center, the unification of the legal status of civilian and military missing persons, the updating of the regulatory framework, and the strengthening of institutional support for victims.

The document is intended not only to summarize analytical data, but also to serve as an advocacy tool aimed at changing state policy in order to effectively protect the rights of victims of Russian war crimes and restore justice.

Terms and abbreviations

NGO “Association of Relatives of Political Prisoners of the Kremlin” - Association

Coordination Headquarters - Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War

Joint Center of the Security Service of Ukraine - Joint Center for the Coordination of the Search and Release of Prisoners of War and Persons Illegally Deprived of Liberty as a Result of Aggression against Ukraine

UN - United Nations

URPI - Unified Register of Pre-trial Investigations

FSB - Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation

ICRC - International Committee of the Red Cross

ICMP - International Commission on Missing Persons

OSINT - Open Source Intelligence

VPN - Virtual Private Network, a service that creates a secure, encrypted connection between a device and the Internet, thereby protecting online privacy and security.

Contents

Introduction and methodology

1. Legal status of civilians missing under special circumstances and persons whose whereabouts are unknown but who are likely to have been unlawfully deprived of their liberty as a result of the Russian Federation's armed aggression

2. Analysis of the problems of searching for civilians missing under special circumstances: results of a survey of relatives and experience of independent searches

2.1. Expert assessment of data and socio-demographic characteristics of respondents

2.2. Problems faced by families during the search

2.3. Main challenges and obstacles in the search process

3. Recommendations for improving the effectiveness of the search for civilians missing under special circumstances and persons whose whereabouts are unknown but who are likely to be illegally detained

3.1. Recommendations for family members

3.2. Recommendations for state authorities on providing legal and social support to families

Algorithm of actions for relatives of civilians missing under special circumstances and persons whose whereabouts are unknown but who are likely to be illegally detained by the Russian Federation: a step-by-step guide to conducting an independent search

Introduction and methodology

The problem of civilians going missing under special circumstances during the Russian Federation's armed aggression against Ukraine is one of the most painful topics today. Mass abductions, enforced disappearances, detention without communication and legal status have become not an exception but a terrible reality for many Ukrainian families. In this situation, it is important not only to record the scale of the phenomenon, but also to seek practical solutions that can help today.

This analytical material is based on an analysis of legal norms and data from state bodies and international institutions. The study is based on the experiences of 44 families of civilians who have gone missing under special circumstances as a result of Russia's military aggression since the start of the full-scale invasion. These are stories of families who, despite bureaucracy, prolonged lack of information about the whereabouts of their loved ones, and fear, continue to search for their relatives, find information, support each other, and fight for the truth.

The study examines cases of disappearances of civilians under special circumstances, i.e., as a result of the Russian Federation's armed aggression against Ukraine, as well as persons whose whereabouts are unknown but who were likely illegally deprived of their liberty by the Russian Federation's occupation or law enforcement agencies. This refers, in particular, to cases where there are witnesses to the detention of a person in the occupied territory by police or FSB officers, after which their whereabouts are not disclosed or state authorities refuse to comment on the situation.

The aim of the study is to identify the systemic challenges faced by the families of missing civilians and to formulate practical recommendations for improving state policy in the area of searching for missing persons, documenting cases of disappearance, and supporting victims.

In accordance with the set goal, the study involved a number of tasks:

- to analyze the level of awareness of relatives regarding the mechanisms for searching for missing persons;
- to identify the main difficulties in interacting with state authorities;
- to determine the level of accessibility of legal, social, and psychological support;
- to assess the effectiveness of state and international institutions in the search process;
- to highlight successful practices in locating missing persons.

The research methodology involved analyzing regulatory and legal acts, statistical data from state authorities, and responses to requests for access to public information.

The key source was the results of a survey of relatives of civilians who went missing under special circumstances. The survey made it possible to collect both successful search stories and cases where the search was unsuccessful. The testimonies obtained illustrate not only the pain caused by the loss, but also the determination, endurance, and consistency of the families' actions.

A total of 33 people whose testimonies had previously been documented by the organization were interviewed. Of these, 14 reported that they had managed to obtain information about the whereabouts of their relatives.

The data collection tool was a structured questionnaire that included 25 open and semi-open questions. The questionnaire covered the following areas:

- general information about the respondent, date and place of the survey;
- experience in searching for missing persons, interaction with state and international structures;
- organizations contacted by relatives, nature of responses, availability of written confirmation;
- registration of personal accounts on the Coordination Headquarters website, availability of data in state registries;
- interaction with structures of the aggressor country and unofficial channels in the temporarily occupied territories;
- legal, social, and psychological context: level of awareness, DNA testing, difficulties in proving family ties, access to assistance;
- motivational goals of families: recognition of captivity, inclusion in exchange lists, obtaining social guarantees;
- technical aspects of updating data in state systems.

All surveys were conducted in compliance with the Law of Ukraine “On the Protection of Personal Data,” based on the voluntary consent of respondents and with respect for the sensitivity of the information obtained.

For families who were able to find out the whereabouts of their missing relatives, an additional question was asked about what, in their opinion, helped them achieve this result. This approach made it possible to combine quantitative and qualitative information and gain a deep understanding of the situation of the families.

In April 2025, the organization's documentarians additionally collected 11 testimonies from relatives of persons who had the status of missing under special circumstances or disappeared after being detained by the occupying authorities of the Russian Federation, and whose whereabouts remained unknown.

As part of the study, requests for public information were also sent to key state bodies, in particular to the Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War, the Commissioner for Missing Persons, the Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights, and the Coordination Center for Victim and Witness Support. The purpose of these requests was to ascertain the procedures, the extent of assistance provided, and statistics on appeals from relatives of missing civilians.

The study does not claim to be representative of all families of missing persons, but reflects the experience of a sample of individuals who have already interacted with our organization or independently sought assistance. Despite the limited sample size, this experience allows us to identify systemic trends and formulate informed conclusions.

The key findings and recommendations of the study are based precisely on this experience — both painful and successful — including the developed algorithm of actions for other families. The study focuses not only on legislation and official reports, but above all on the experience of families who have survived the disappearance of their loved ones.

The purpose of this material is to amplify their voices — to make the search process less traumatic and the provision of support more effective.

1. Legal status of civilians missing under special circumstances and persons whose whereabouts are unknown but who are likely to have been unlawfully deprived of their liberty as a result of the Russian Federation's armed aggression

With the start of the Russian Federation's full-scale armed aggression against Ukraine, the issue of the disappearance of civilians has become particularly relevant. The disappearance of civilians under special circumstances is one of the manifestations of war crimes accompanying this aggression. Such cases indicate systematic violations that require a response at both the national and international levels.

Unlike prisoners of war, whose status is clearly regulated by international law, civilians often remain in a state of legal uncertainty — especially in occupied territories, during shelling, forced evacuations, or deportations. The lack of timely information about the circumstances of the disappearance complicates both the search and the legal support of such cases.

International humanitarian law — in particular the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols — imposes obligations on states to protect the civilian population during armed conflict. Persons not participating in hostilities must be protected from violence, abduction, and unlawful detention. Enforced disappearances are prohibited by international law. In the context of the Russian Federation's armed aggression, the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court is particularly relevant, defining enforced disappearance as a crime against humanity if it is part of a systematic or large-scale attack on the civilian population.

Mass abductions of civilians, prolonged detention without contact with the outside world, torture, and refusal to inform relatives or lawyers — such actions by Russian forces may fall under the classification of these crimes.

In addition to international humanitarian law, the issue of missing persons is also considered in the context of international human rights law. Ukraine ratified the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance in 2015, committing itself to refrain from such practices and to investigate them effectively. Russia is not a party to this convention, which complicates the application of relevant international mechanisms. However, Ukraine can implement the provisions of the convention into its domestic legislation — in particular, regarding the search for missing persons, granting status, and providing compensation.

At the national level, the key regulatory act is the Law of Ukraine “On the Legal Status of Persons Missing under Special Circumstances” (2018). This law provides for the creation of a Unified Register of Missing Persons, defines the procedure for submitting applications, mechanisms for supporting families, and the functioning of a special commission. Its provisions apply to both military and civilian persons in accordance with international standards.

However, the implementation of the law in practice is complicated by the temporary occupation of territories, limited access of families to authorities, insufficient coordination between state structures, and the overload of investigative bodies. In addition, the Unified Register often does not contain up-to-date or verified information.

The Law of Ukraine “On the Legal Status of Persons Missing Under Special Circumstances” also establishes which state authorities are authorized to conduct searches, coordinate actions, and provide support to the families of victims.

In particular, these authorities include:

- **The Commissioner for Persons Missing Under Special Circumstances** — coordinates search activities, facilitates interagency cooperation, maintains registers, and communicates with families and international organizations;
- **The National Police of Ukraine** — conducts operational searches for persons, maintains a unified register of missing persons, and provides information on the progress and results of searches;
- **Security Service of Ukraine** — gets involved in cases that seem like a threat to national security or are related to temporarily occupied territories;
- **State Emergency Service of Ukraine** — takes part in search and rescue efforts, especially during combat or man-made disasters;
- **General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine** — searches for missing military personnel and coordinates cooperation with law enforcement agencies;
- **Local authorities** — ensure the transfer of information, interact with families, and assist in establishing the facts of disappearance at the local level.

As part of the investigation, requests were also sent to state bodies that, according to their powers or actual practice, are involved in responding to cases of missing civilians: the Office of the Verkhovna Rada Commissioner for Human Rights, the Commissioner for Missing Persons, the Coordination Center for Victim and Witness Support at the Office of the Prosecutor General, and the Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War. The responses received demonstrated a general willingness to cooperate, but at the same time confirmed the fragmentation of functions, the lack of centralized recording of appeals, and the lack of analytical summaries of the situation. Some agencies are limited by the framework of criminal proceedings, while others focus primarily on international representation or respond sporadically.

This experience underscores the importance of creating a coordinated, clear mechanism for interaction between families and the state, in particular in the form of a “single window” model that would provide access to comprehensive support and information within a single coordination center.

This study examines cases of civilians who disappeared under special circumstances in connection with the Russian Federation's aggression, as well as persons whose whereabouts are unknown but who are believed to be illegally detained by the occupying authorities or law enforcement agencies of the Russian Federation.

Legal regulation in Ukraine is based on a combination of national and international approaches, but there is a gap between legislation and its application during the active phase of the war. This requires improving mechanisms and increasing international pressure on the aggressor state through systemic violations.

Particular attention should be paid to the situation in the temporarily occupied territories, where there have been reports of mass abductions of activists, journalists, local leaders, teachers, religious figures, and citizens with pro-Ukrainian views. There have been cases of civilians being detained without official charges and without their families being notified. Many are taken to unknown locations, including prisons in the Russian Federation or filtration camps, where they are tested for loyalty. Some individuals are forcibly deported or relocated within the occupied territories or abroad.

International mechanisms play an important role in the search for missing persons. The International Committee of the Red Cross, although it has limited access, records cases of enforced disappearances and negotiates with the parties to the conflict. Russia often fails to provide information about detained civilians, in violation of its obligations. Non-governmental organizations document the testimonies of victims and witnesses of crimes, collect evidence of illegal detention, and cooperate with national and international structures. Civilians who have disappeared or been abducted are often held in isolation—without communication, medical care, parcels, or lawyers. Families live in a state of uncertainty. Granting official status as “missing under special circumstances” is important for receiving legal, psychological, and social support.

According to the PACE resolution “Missing persons, prisoners of war and civilians in captivity as a result of the Russian Federation’s aggression against Ukraine”, as of October 2024, the number of missing or captured persons was 65,956, of whom 50,916 were officially registered as missing. The actual number may be higher. Not only the missing persons themselves suffer, but also their families. As of February 3, 2025, according to the Commissioner for Missing Persons, 62,948 people are being searched for, of whom 10,291 have already been identified or found. The International Committee of the Red Cross reports that the number of people missing as a result of the war has doubled in the last year and reached about 50,000 cases, of which about 90% are military personnel.

These data demonstrate the scale of the problem. Existing mechanisms in Ukraine, designed for peacetime, are proving ineffective during wartime. Searches are conducted within the framework of criminal proceedings, which slows down the process. Investigators are overloaded, which reduces efficiency.

Ukraine should take into account international experience in searching for missing persons, adapt it to national conditions, and use the practices of civil society organizations and law enforcement agencies.

During the human rights club of the Center for Civil Liberties in March 2025, the key challenges of searching for missing civilians in the context of Russian aggression were identified. It was noted that since the beginning of the war, about 156,000 war crimes have been registered, and 1,321 investigators are conducting investigations, which leads to delays. The majority of cases concern the Donetsk, Luhansk, and Kherson regions.

In total, more than 69,000 criminal proceedings have been opened in relation to missing persons, and 9,739 people have been found alive. However, the current criminal law model, designed for peacetime, does not meet the needs of war. Investigations into crimes in the occupied territories can continue for years even after de-occupation.

To increase efficiency, specialized regional centers have been established, where investigators and forensic experts focus on cases of missing persons. This is a positive step, but it requires improved interagency coordination, support for families, access to databases, and simplified procedures.

The issue of missing civilians is important from the perspective of human rights, humanitarian response, and international responsibility. The scale of the cases testifies to the cruelty of the war and the systematic repression of the civilian population. This requires further mobilization of efforts by the state, the international community, and human rights organizations to document, search for, release, and rehabilitate victims and their families.

2. Analysis of problems in searching for civilians missing under special circumstances: results of a survey of relatives and experience of independent searches

2.1. Expert assessment of the data obtained, socio-demographic characteristics of respondents

The main tool for collecting information within this study was a comprehensive study of the experiences of the families of the victims. It included additional surveys of family members, documentation of testimonies, and analysis of the legal assistance provided by the organization.

The documenters surveyed 44 people whose relatives went missing under special circumstances or whose whereabouts remained unknown after being detained by the occupying authorities and law enforcement agencies of the Russian Federation. Of these, 33 respondents shared their experiences in a survey format, and 11 provided full testimonies. The vast majority of respondents were women (wives, mothers, sisters) who independently seek information and interact with state authorities. In 14 cases, the search was successful — relatives found the missing persons. Among the missing persons, 85% are men. At the time of the survey, the respondents lived both in the territory controlled by Ukraine and abroad, three of them in the temporarily occupied territories.

The geography of the places of disappearance covers the following temporarily occupied regions of Ukraine:

- Zaporizhzhia region - 29 people (including 7 in Melitopol, 6 in Energodar, and the rest in other settlements in the region)
- Donetsk region - 4 people
- Kharkiv region - 4 people
- Kyiv region - 3 people
- Luhansk region - 2 people
- Kherson and Sumy regions - 1 person each

Most of the cases documented in the study relate to events in the Zaporizhzhia region. All of these individuals had civilian status, did not participate in military operations, did not pose a threat to others, and were not involved in criminal or subversive activities.

Under international humanitarian law, such persons are entitled to protection from detention and violence. Therefore, their unlawful detention indicates the presence of signs of internationally wrongful acts - in particular, unlawful deprivation of liberty and violation of international humanitarian law.

2.2. Problems in the search process

The survey results clearly show that most families encountered numerous difficulties at every stage of the search for their loved ones. From contacting institutions to receiving information, each step was accompanied by formalities, delays, or a complete lack of feedback.

One of the most systemic problems is the complicated and fragmented search process. Families contacted various state and non-state institutions — the police, the Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War (KSH), the National Information Bureau (NIB), the Security Service of Ukraine, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Ombudsman's Office, and others. On average, families contacted 4–5 institutions, but the process was unstructured and lacked systematic support. Many respondents noted that due to shock and disorientation, they did not keep track of the sequence of appeals, but usually started by contacting the police. This indicates the strong emotional pressure that families experience at the initial stage.

The quality and timeliness of responses are of greatest concern. Some families received formal, template letters without specific information, although within the established deadlines. Respondents' reports contain quotes such as:

- “All responses are standard, in the style of ‘work is in progress’”
- “Honestly, they didn't really respond. They said they were busy with the military right now”

Some respondents reported that the responses confused the names of the missing persons, which increased mistrust. Even families who received extracts from registers or information about criminal proceedings did not receive clear information about the place of detention or the fate of the missing persons.

In more than 60% of cases, responses were provided verbally or by telephone, making it impossible to document the requests. Only about a third of respondents received official written responses by email or in paper form. However, written responses were only provided in a timely manner if a written request was submitted. In most cases, there were no responses to verbal inquiries. In some cases, communication took place through a personal account on the Coordination Headquarters website or public initiatives (social networks). At the same time, about half of the respondents were forced to repeatedly contact the authorities themselves or turn to journalists and human rights activists to draw attention to their cases.

The current state of affairs forces families not only to reapply, but also to search for information on their own, which has become common practice. The responsibility for the search lies entirely with them, which increases the emotional burden. For example, one of the respondents said: **“I’ve been searching for three years. It’s hard. I understand that only I feel the pain.”**

The lack of state support and assistance is one of the key problems. Communication after submitting an application also leaves much to be desired. Families rarely receive feedback and do not know how often they should receive information about the progress of the search. For example, after adding new data to the electronic office, they rarely receive confirmation of its acceptance. In most cases, families initiate contact themselves. As one active searcher noted: **“I can’t remember the last time someone called. If I need something, I contact them myself.”**

Most respondents answered negatively when asked about receiving assistance (legal, social, or advisory) from the state. Only a few received legal assistance thanks to acquaintances or volunteers, while others noted the lack of any work with civilians. The problems faced by families are systemic in nature: the lack of a single algorithm for action (78% of respondents did not know where to turn first), the lack of coordination between agencies, and the lack of a referral mechanism. Families lack a single “entry point” for communicating with the state. As one respondent noted: **“We went to the police, and then we didn’t know what to do. Every agency said, ‘This is not our responsibility.’”**

Most families repeatedly inquired about the measures taken and the results of the search, but the responses were mostly formal and did not give a sense of progress (over 60% of respondents). Among the 43 families surveyed, the whereabouts of the missing person were established in 14 cases. Almost all of these cases involved contacts with the occupying authorities or individuals who were in the temporarily occupied territories. Several stories contain clear confirmation that the information about the location was provided by officials of the aggressor state. For example, one respondent noted:

“The place of detention is known; it was accurately determined based on information from Russian officials (investigator, lawyer).”

Another respondent said:

“A month after the abduction, the ‘investigators’ (in the temporarily occupied territory — author’s note) who came to our house for another search told my mother where the missing person was. Then the Russian prosecutor’s office responded to my request and wrote down the location. Then they showed it on television — on Russia 1.”

In this situation, a sequence of actions by the Russian side can be traced—from verbal notification to media demonstration of the detainee. This corresponds to the widespread practice of the occupiers of filming civilians who have been illegally deprived of their liberty, forcing them to admit to fabricated charges, and publishing such videos on Russian social networks and news programs. Some respondents noted: **“The FSB also officially confirmed that he is in a pre-trial detention center in the Donetsk region,”** which indicates the possibility of obtaining information about the place of detention from the Russian security forces. At the same time, such answers often changed or contradicted each other: **“In 2024, the Russian Ministry of Defense provided a written response stating that he had been**

detained and was being held on Russian territory. But later they said they didn't know where my father was."

This indicates inconsistent communication and the impossibility of trusting information from the occupying authorities regarding the fate of loved ones. The respondents themselves emphasized the paradoxical nature of the situation: **"If the Russians had not wanted to 'show' him themselves (publication on Russian social networks), I don't know if we would have found him so quickly."**

An analysis of the responses of families who managed to locate missing persons shows that appeals to the Russian authorities can be effective in cases where a civilian has been officially charged under Russian law or has already been convicted. In such situations, information is provided by the FSB, the prosecutor's office, or investigators.

Most respondents reported that one of the methods they used to search for their loved ones was to contact Russian law enforcement agencies and the Russian Federation's Human Rights Commissioner. However, in cases of incommunicado detention—that is, without contact with the outside world, relatives, or lawyers—it is virtually impossible to obtain any official confirmation.

In such cases, the Russian Federation systematically denies the fact of detention, does not acknowledge the person's whereabouts, which allows them to conceal their status and effectively deprives the family of access to information.

Thus, responses from Russian authorities can only be useful in limited cases — when a person has been officially charged or convicted. In all other cases, especially in cases of prolonged detention incommunicado, requests remain unsuccessful or are accompanied by refusals.

A successful example is the case of a respondent who established the location of a relative thanks to a Russian lawyer recommended by a human rights organization operating in the Russian Federation. The lawyer was able to obtain confirmation of the detention and facilitated a short phone call, which was the first confirmation that the person was alive and being held in the Russian Federation. At the same time, in many cases, lawyers, especially those appointed by the Russian authorities, do not provide real assistance due to their dependence and bias.

According to relatives, one way to obtain information was to contact people who had previously been in captivity (military personnel, civilians) and had been released as part of mutual exchange procedures or after serving their sentences. These individuals confirmed that they had been detained together with the missing persons. In particular, in early 2025, a video went viral in the Ukrainian media, in which the mother of a missing soldier emotionally addresses a man who has just been released from captivity, who replies: **"I saw him! He's alive! He was in the cell with me"**. This short dialogue was the first real confirmation that

her son was alive. Such personal, unofficial contact is an important way of obtaining information, especially when official sources remain silent.

After release, the Coordination Headquarters conducts interviews with those released, which allows important evidence about other detainees to be gathered. The procedure is regulated by **Resolution No. 296 of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine dated March 15, 2024**. However, there is currently no clearly defined mechanism for transmitting information about other detainees to their families. This creates a communication gap — instead of official channels, families are forced to search for information on their own by establishing contact with those who have been released.

Summary of methods that helped families locate their loved ones:

- Searching open sources: Russian media, social networks;
- Official responses from Russian authorities (investigators, prosecutors, FSB) in cases where individuals are not being held incommunicado;
- Reports from released witnesses within the framework of mutual release procedures;
- Involvement of lawyers and civil society organizations;
- Independent initiative of relatives: drafting appeals, registering personal accounts on the websites of the KSH and NIB..

According to respondents, Ukrainian state authorities do not always demonstrate a proactive stance in communicating with families. Often, the initiative to submit appeals and conduct searches depends on the relatives themselves, and they receive little information in response.

The first confirmations of location often came from Russian sources — lawyers, official responses, or pro-Russian media. This does not indicate the effectiveness of Russian authorities, but only their monopoly on information about individuals against whom criminal cases have already been opened.

It should be emphasized that appeals to the Russian authorities are not a sign of trust, but a necessary step due to the lack of official intergovernmental communication. Ukrainian authorities, given the absence of diplomatic relations with Russia, are limited in their ability to make such requests officially. Families are forced to search for information on their own or through international human rights organizations, which significantly complicates the process. The results of the study show inconsistencies in communication, lack of proper response, formalization of procedures, and lack of systematic support for families of missing civilians. Despite the efforts of individual state structures, it is necessary to create an effective algorithm of actions that will not only record appeals but also contribute as much as possible to establishing the whereabouts of missing persons.

2.3. Main challenges and obstacles in the search process

The responses of survey participants show that relatives of missing persons face a range of challenges on a daily basis, including administrative difficulties, emotional exhaustion, and social isolation. One of the key problems is the lack of systematic communication on the part of state institutions. More than 60% of respondents say that communication with representatives of official structures, if it occurs at all, is sporadic and formal. In many cases, after submitting an application to law enforcement agencies or creating a personal account on the Coordination Headquarters website, the family receives no response for months or even years. This creates a deep sense of helplessness.

Of particular concern is the situation where families are forced to perform the functions of the state — independently searching for witnesses, contacting lawyers, collecting documents, and transmitting information to various agencies, expending their own resources and energy without adequate support or coordination. In effect, this means shifting state responsibilities onto the shoulders of vulnerable citizens. Limited access to legal aid is also a serious problem. Only a small proportion of respondents received free legal advice, particularly within the free legal aid system. In most cases, families were either unable to obtain legal assistance due to financial constraints or were forced to turn to acquaintances or volunteers. This significantly limited the possibility of protecting the rights of the missing within the legal framework.

Among the 43 respondents, at least three said they had received assistance from the Association's legal support service. This assistance was crucial in intensifying the search for their relatives. Thanks to cooperation with the Association, families were able to establish contact with official institutions, prepare appeals, and learn about the mechanisms for recording the fact of captivity. In one case, the organization helped enter data into the Coordination Headquarters' registry, and in another, it helped draft legally sound requests to the authorities. While this analysis was being put together, legal help was given to five families of missing people, including in three cases by drafting additional statements and requests, including to Russian institutions. This shows that the Association's legal aid service not only provides legal support but also provides information support, consultations, and, if necessary, psychological support. The organization's lawyers help prepare appeals to state bodies, intergovernmental institutions, and international human rights structures.

The existence of such a mechanism on the part of the non-governmental sector partially compensates for the inaccessibility of state services at certain stages of the search and provides families with not only technical but also moral support. Another important problem pointed out by respondents is the limited understanding of what state mechanisms exist in general. Some families were unaware of the activities of the Coordination Headquarters or the National Information Bureau, and those who had heard of them often did not understand in which cases to contact them, what assistance could be obtained, or how the procedure worked. This indicates a lack of state information policy regarding support for families of missing persons.

Among the least formalized but most tangible difficulties are psychological and social ones. These aspects are not always articulated directly, but they come through in other responses—about fatigue, isolation, and disappointment. All respondents show signs of deep emotional exhaustion caused by prolonged waiting, independent searching, and lack of response from institutions. As one mother noted: ***“I’ve been searching for three years. It’s hard. I understand that only I am suffering.”***

Many are characterized by a state of chronic stress - from constant uncertainty, lack of communication with institutions, and lack of real information. The responses included words such as “emptiness” and “shouting into the void” - metaphors that most accurately convey the feelings of relatives forced to walk the corridors of government agencies and receive formal “rejections” every time. One respondent noted: ***“It’s emotional exhaustion - it’s like screaming into the void, and someone just closes the door.”***

Social isolation is also a significant factor. Some relatives report that they have not received any official information for months or years, which creates the impression of exclusion from social space. Many avoid discussing their situation with those around them and withdraw into themselves because they do not know where to turn or what else to do.

The economic burden on families cannot be ignored either. A significant proportion of those surveyed invest their own funds in preparing appeals, traveling to other cities or regions, and communicating with private lawyers.

The social aspect of the difficulties also proved to be extremely important. The lack of support from the social environment only deepened the feeling of loneliness. As one respondent said: ***“No one is looking for civilians. No matter where you turn, there is no result, and you get the impression that no one needs civilians.”***

In addition, most respondents mention unstable information support. Families constantly face the fact that “organizations change” and new structures do not share data with each other. As one respondent admitted: ***“The responsible organizations are constantly changing, and they do not share information with each other. We still have no contact with the investigator who is handling the case at the police.”***

At the same time, each of these stories testifies to the extraordinary resilience and determination of families who, despite the lack of emotional, social, and financial support, continue to search for and document any clue about the fate of their loved ones. It is their persistence that highlights the need for a comprehensive support system — one in which the state creates all possible conditions for the search for their relatives. Families of the missing often find themselves in a state of deep confusion and an information vacuum. They do not always understand which state agency to contact, which of them is responsible for certain functions, and how to get help. The lack of a clear structure and accessible explanation of the functions of various institutions leads to relatives either not contacting state agencies at all or contacting them chaotically, without getting the expected result. As a result, many seek information from unverified sources, social media, or unofficial channels. This is not a result

of mistrust, but rather a result of the complexity of navigating the existing system and psychological exhaustion. In such conditions, there is a critical need to create a single mechanism that is understandable to every family — for example, a “single window” service where relatives could receive comprehensive support: from basic information to legal and psychological assistance.

3. Recommendations for improving the effectiveness of searches for civilians who have gone missing under special circumstances and persons whose whereabouts are unknown but who are likely to be illegally detained

3.1. Recommendations for family members

This analytical material is intended to structure the available options for reporting, recording the fact of disappearance, international response, and participation in release processes, taking into account the Ukrainian and international context. First and foremost, it is important to record the fact of disappearance itself. To do this, the family is advised to contact the National Police of Ukraine or its territorial units with a statement about the crime. The report should detail the circumstances of the incident, including the date and place of disappearance, possible witnesses, or any other information that may help identify the perpetrators or the likely place of detention. After the report is filed, the police must enter the data into the Unified State Register of Pre-trial Investigations and provide the investigator's contact information. We recommend that you send a request to the investigator and obtain an extract from the Unified State Register of Pre-trial Investigations, which confirms the opening of a criminal case.

At the same time, it is recommended to report the case to the Joint Center of the Security Service of Ukraine, which coordinates the search and release of prisoners of war and persons illegally deprived of their liberty as a result of the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine. The application is submitted via an online form, which ensures prompt processing and inclusion in the database. It is also important to submit information to the Secretariat of the Commissioner for Missing Persons at the Ministry of Internal Affairs, as well as to register a personal account in the system of the Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War. It is important to understand that the information you submit is verified at various levels. That is why it is recommended to duplicate the information to all relevant institutions: the Coordination Headquarters, the National Information Bureau, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and the Ombudsman's Office.

To increase the chances of a successful search, especially in cases of detention or abduction in territory temporarily controlled by the Russian Federation, it is recommended to consider communicating with international structures. In particular, you can submit an application to the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, to the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP), which maintains global databases on missing persons.

It is worth mentioning alternative search sources separately. During consultations with the Association's legal aid specialists, it was noted that family members of missing civilians in special circumstances independently used open Telegram channels, in particular “Baza PIB,” “Znaideno UA,” “Iryna Ukraine,” as well as the web resource “Posukh.Polon.” It was on these platforms that respondents often found initial information about the possible whereabouts of their relatives or added data about the missing persons. Although such actions have no legal status, for many families they became the first practical step in the search and a hope to receive a signal from other families that the missing person is alive, which facilitates further appeals to state authorities.

If, during the search process, information is received about the probable whereabouts of a person in the Russian Federation or in the temporarily occupied territory (sometimes they are held in temporary detention centers, pre-trial detention centers in the temporarily occupied territory of Ukraine, and the person is a suspect, accused, or incommunicado), it is important to assess the possibility of sending appeals directly to the Russian authorities. These include the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation, the military prosecutor's office of the joint group of troops (forces) of the Russian Federation, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation and its territorial divisions, the Military Police Department of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, the Federal Penitentiary Service, and the Human Rights Commissioner of the Russian Federation. Appeals must be in Russian with attached copies of documents confirming kinship (this is necessary to avoid a formal refusal to provide information). Such appeals can be sent by mail or via electronic forms using a VPN connection.

If partial or contradictory information is received, the family has the right to appeal against the inaction or formalism of Russian structures by contacting the Human Rights Commissioner of the Russian Federation. If there is a suspicion that the missing person has been convicted, it is worth trying to search for them in the institutions of the Federal Penitentiary Service of the Russian Federation. This requires technical preparation — an email address from a Russian server, a VPN, and knowledge of the probable region of conviction.

As one of the effective alternative approaches to searching, especially in the absence of official information or communication from the occupying structures, OSINT (Open Source Intelligence) is increasingly being used. This is a comprehensive tool that involves the collection, analysis, and use of publicly available information: Internet resources, social networks, forums, public registries, media, photo and video materials, as well as data leaks. During the full-scale war, OSINT has become a key method for searching for missing persons, used not only by volunteers and journalists, but also by relatives themselves.

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It is used to establish the circumstances of the disappearance, possible location, witnesses, facts of illegal detention, and digital evidence. In this analytical material, we also used OSINT tools as an auxiliary method — in particular, to identify account activity after the date of disappearance or to find mentions in open sources. This data can be useful not only for search purposes, but also for building a case file in cases of war crimes and crimes against humanity. In the context of using OSINT as an auxiliary method, it is worth noting the possibility of cooperation with the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP). This intergovernmental organization specializes in searching for and identifying persons missing as a result of armed conflicts, human rights violations, natural disasters, organized crime, migration crises, and other emergencies. As part of its activities, the ICMP also uses OSINT methods — in particular, analysis of open sources, social networks, online maps, and publications — to identify possible traces of missing persons. The commission's approach is unique in that it combines technological tools, analytics, and international legal support. Relatives of missing persons can submit a search request to the ICMP themselves using a special [online form](#). After registering the request, the commission launches its own investigation, including the use of open sources, and may cooperate with governments, international organizations, and other structures to obtain official information.

In addition to submitting an application, family members are encouraged to regularly monitor open sources themselves: social networks, platforms with testimonies from prisoners or persons who have been in places of detention, as well as media resources.

In addition to recommendations on interacting with government agencies and international organizations, families of persons missing under special circumstances are advised to pay attention to a specialized search methodology developed by Professor Mykhailo Savva, PhD in Political Science, as part of the project “Advocacy for the Rights of Civilian Prisoners of War.” This methodology is a unique tool created at the intersection of public experience, legal practice, and systematic analysis of existing challenges. The methodology is a step-by-step guide for relatives of missing persons, covering all key stages: from notifying Ukrainian authorities of the disappearance to submitting requests to the relevant Russian authorities, including the Federal Penitentiary Service. The document contains sample applications and appeals, which greatly facilitate the preparation of official documentation. This resource helps not only to identify the legal status of the missing person (civilian, prisoner of war, or foreign prisoner), but also to strategically plan the further search. In the context of the surveys that formed the basis of this study, numerous families pointed to disorientation, ignorance of procedures, and a lack of tools to help structure their actions. That is why the application of this methodology can be an important tool for regaining control over the search process and strengthening the position of families in their dialogue with the state.

In addition, during the public presentation of the methodology, a number of critical questions were raised that families face on a daily basis: how to speed up the process of obtaining answers, how to act in the face of refusals from Russian institutions, and whether it is possible to consolidate the efforts of families to achieve a common goal. The answers given by Mykhailo Savva emphasized the importance of persistence, consistency, and the need for international partnership, particularly with the International Committee of the Red Cross. The application of this methodology allows for increasing the effectiveness of families' actions, improving the quality of communication with state and international structures, and, in the long term, contributing to a more prompt and sensitive response from the system.

An expanded version with additional examples and algorithms has been published on the website of the Association of Relatives of Kremlin Political Prisoners. In parallel with all actions, it is necessary to maintain contact with the Ukrainian structures responsible for the exchange: the Coordination Headquarters and the National Information Bureau. All new information - about witnesses, health status, whereabouts - must be entered into the personal account and into the materials of the criminal proceedings. Regular updates of information create the conditions for a person to be included in the exchange lists.

If you have any questions, we recommend that you contact the Association's legal aid service. Specialists will help you draft the relevant applications and letters, as well as provide competent support.

3.2. Recommendations for government authorities on providing legal and social support to families

Based on an analysis of current legislation, the results of a survey of relatives of missing persons conducted by the Association's documenters, and the results of the organization's legal aid service, a vision of the necessary steps to resolve problematic issues has been formed.

1. Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine

- Create a single interagency center to support families of missing persons, operating on a “one-stop shop” principle. The center should provide comprehensive informational, legal, and psychological support, advise on the algorithm of actions, and coordinate interaction between families and state institutions.
- Within this center, provide for the creation of an expert unit that would carry out analytical work, search for and verify information, and monitor open sources and international databases. The center should involve specialists with experience in searching for persons missing under special circumstances, in particular those who have already worked on cases of illegal detention of civilians, possibly with the involvement of international grant funding or in cooperation with non-governmental organizations.
- Recommend that local communities introduce positions of responsible persons in administrative service centers and community resilience centers who would provide initial consultations to families of persons missing under special circumstances, assist with documents, and explain the mechanisms for filing appeals.
- **Ensure a state program of psychological support for families of persons missing under special circumstances**, with the possibility of long-term participation. This could include support groups, individual consultations, and online formats. Psychological assistance should be **systematic**, not one-time.

2. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine

- Initiate the procedure for determining a protecting power in accordance with the 1949 Geneva Conventions and the 1977 Additional Protocol I, which will represent Ukraine's interests in communications with the aggressor state regarding persons whose whereabouts are unknown. This will help families in their search for the whereabouts of their loved ones who have been unlawfully deprived of their personal liberty.
- Expand international cooperation with organizations that have the mandate and tools to search for missing persons (ICRC, ICRC, UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances) for the purpose of data exchange, joint analysis, and coordination of actions.

3. To the Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War

- Develop a clear, transparent, and understandable mechanism for informing families in cases where, during interviews with persons released from captivity, information is received about other civilians or military personnel who were held with them in places of detention.

The mechanism should include:

- **recording the testimony** provided by released persons;
- **verification of the data** obtained through interagency cooperation;
- **timely transmission** of confirmed information to the authorized bodies and relevant families.

4. The Commissioner for Persons Missing Under Special Circumstances

- Introduce a standardized protocol for communicating with relatives of persons missing under special circumstances, which provides for regular updates on the progress and results of the search.
- Initiate a campaign to raise awareness of the rights of relatives of persons missing under special circumstances and the available support mechanisms. Such a campaign should include both online resources and offline products—brochures, stands, and information platforms in government institutions. Develop and distribute information materials.

5. Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine

- Continue to ensure high-quality criminal proceedings regarding missing persons, including recording all evidence received, including that from unofficial sources (families, journalists, human rights defenders).
- Expand the use of OSINT technologies in police operations, providing the necessary technical and human resources.
- Introduce a clear mechanism for receiving reports from citizens abroad, including the possibility of submitting reports through consular offices and online platforms. Ensure the prompt processing and registration of such reports, as well as informing applicants about the progress of their cases.
- Conduct an information campaign among the Ukrainian diaspora to raise awareness of the available channels for reporting crimes from abroad.

6. To the Verkhovna Rada Commissioner for Human Rights

- Strengthen monitoring of responses from Russian authorities received directly by families, record cases of formalism, delays, or refusals, and use them as grounds for international advocacy actions.

**Algorithm of basic actions
for relatives of civilians who have gone missing under special circumstances and persons
whose whereabouts are unknown but who are likely to be illegally detained by the
Russian Federation:
step-by-step procedure for independent search**

Record the fact of disappearance

- File a crime report with the National Police of Ukraine or its territorial structural units. Indicate the circumstances of the incident, the date, place, possible witnesses, and provide evidence.
- Make sure that the data is entered into the Unified Register of Pre-trial Investigations (URPI), obtain an extract from the URPI and the investigator's contact details.

Contact key government agencies

- The Joint Center of the Security Service of Ukraine for the Coordination of the Search and Release of Prisoners of War and Persons Illegally Deprived of Liberty as a Result of Aggression against Ukraine — fill out an [electronic form](#) o request a search for Ukrainian defenders who have been captured by the aggressor country and persons illegally deprived of liberty as a result of aggression against Ukraine.
- Secretariat of the Commissioner for Missing Persons at the Ministry of Internal Affairs — fill out the questionnaire at services.mvs.gov.ua.
- Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War — register your personal account at cabinet.koordshtab.gov.ua .

Submit information to international bodies

- International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) — submit data via the [form](#).
- UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances — spsubmission.ohchr.org or hrc-wg-eid@un.org . They have developed [recommendations](#) on how to contact the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances.
- International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP) — icmp.int.

Monitor open sources

- Check Telegram channels: “Baza PIB,” “Znaideno UA,” “Iryna Ukraina,” and others.
- Register on the [«Пошук.Полон»](#) platform.

Contact the Russian authorities with a request about the missing person

- Send an appeal to the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation, the Main Directorate of the Military Police of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, the territorial divisions of the

Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation, the military prosecutor's office of the special group of troops (forces) of the Russian Federation, the Human Rights Commissioner of the Russian Federation, and the Federal Penitentiary Service of the Russian Federation. Do this in Russian, using a VPN (an application that allows you to access the Internet with a different IP address) and proof of kinship.

- If no information is provided within one month after sending appeals and applications to the state authorities of the Russian Federation, you can file a complaint about human rights violations with the Human Rights Commissioner of the Russian Federation through the [electronic reception](#). Regularly update the information in your personal account on the Coordination Headquarters website <https://cabinet.koordshtab.gov.ua/login> and notify the investigator so that the information can be included in the criminal case file.
- Report any new facts: health status, new witnesses, letters, videos, calls.

If possible, communicate with military personnel and civilians who have been released from captivity, as they may have heard information about the missing person and seen them.

Seek free legal assistance

Contact the legal support service of the NGO “Association of Relatives of Political Prisoners of the Kremlin” — specialists will help you prepare documents, advise you, and accompany your actions.

You can contact the Association for legal support by filling out the form on the [website](#) or [writing](#) to us at: info@relativespp.org