

Analytical Review of the Activities of the NGO “Association of Relatives of Political Prisoners of the Kremlin” on Documenting War Crimes of the Russian Federation against the Civilian Population in Ukraine in December 2025

Executive Summary

The analytical review for December 2025 was prepared on the basis of an analysis of fourteen (14) testimonies provided by witnesses and victims concerning fourteen (14) civilian individuals who were unlawfully deprived of their personal liberty as a result of the armed aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine. The documented cases cover the period from 2022 to 2025 and relate to the detention of civilians in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine and in the Russian Federation, followed by their confinement in unofficial places of detention, detention facilities, pre-trial detention centers, and penitentiary institutions both in the occupied territories and on the territory of the Russian Federation. In at least nine cases, indications of enforced disappearance or prolonged incommunicado detention were identified, including the absence of access to the outside world, legal assistance, or official confirmation of the fact of detention.

The documented detentions occurred predominantly in the temporarily occupied territories of Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk, and Luhansk regions; one case of enforced disappearance on the territory of the Russian Federation was also recorded. Subsequent chains of transfer of detained persons indicate a systematic practice of transferring them to places of detention on the territory of the Russian Federation, in particular to the Republic of Mordovia, Saratov Oblast, and Belgorod Oblast, which bears the hallmarks of the unlawful deportation of the civilian population.

Among the documented cases, convictions were recorded in respect of at least four (4) civilians under the provisions of the criminal legislation of the Russian Federation, including for “espionage” and “terrorism,” in proceedings accompanied by gross violations of the right to a fair trial. At the time of preparation of the review, three (3) individuals remain in incommunicado detention or are considered missing, while six (6) individuals were released.

During the documentation of testimonies in December 2025, instances of unlawful deprivation of liberty of elderly persons (four (4) individuals), a married couple, as well as cases in which civilians were detained together with prisoners of war were also recorded. This indicates a further escalation of practices involving gross disregard for the norms of international humanitarian law. The collected testimonies also confirm persistent patterns of torture, cruel treatment, psychological pressure, and persecution on the basis of family ties or pro-Ukrainian views, pointing to the systematic and targeted nature of the respective violations.

In most cases, detentions were carried out without any legal grounds, without notifying the reasons, and with complete concealment of information about the whereabouts of detained persons for prolonged periods. The totality of the established circumstances indicates that

unlawful deprivation of liberty is used by the Russian occupation authorities not as an exceptional measure, but as an element of a systematic policy of control, intimidation, and persecution of the civilian population perceived as disloyal. The identified facts bear the hallmarks of war crimes and, where committed in a widespread or systematic context, crimes against humanity under international criminal law.

Methodology and Sources

This analytical review was prepared on the basis of a qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews collected by documenters of the NGO “Association of Relatives of Political Prisoners of the Kremlin” in December 2025. The sources of information included direct testimonies of individuals who were unlawfully deprived of their personal liberty, as well as detailed testimonies of their relatives who are searching for missing persons or remain in constant contact with detained individuals.

Testimonies were collected in compliance with the principles of informed consent, respondent safety, and anonymization of personal data. In eight cases, testimonies were provided by close relatives of the detainees; in six cases, by the victims themselves. The analysis was conducted with due regard to international humanitarian law, international criminal law, and international human rights law, including the 1949 Geneva Conventions, their Additional Protocols, the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the UN Convention against Torture.

In addition to direct testimonies, the analysis also relied on materials from criminal proceedings whose existence or content was reported by respondents (including extracts from the Unified Register of Pre-Trial Investigations, notifications from investigative bodies, and procedural documents), as well as copies of medical documents referenced or provided by victims, decisions or materials of de facto “courts” of occupation administrations, and notifications of detention or transfer.

Information from open sources referenced by witnesses was also taken into account, including media publications, communications by human rights organizations, information from international organizations (including the ICRC), as well as responses from Ukrainian state authorities to information requests submitted by relatives regarding the whereabouts, status, or search for unlawfully detained individuals. The combined use of these sources made it possible to cross-verify certain facts, identify common patterns, and prepare a generalized analytical review in accordance with standards for documenting violations of international humanitarian and international criminal law.

General Characteristics of the Testimony Set

In December 2025, fourteen testimonies were analyzed concerning the unlawful deprivation of personal liberty of civilians by representatives of the armed formations of the Russian Federation and occupation administrations under its control during the period 2022–2025. All

documented cases share the common feature of a complete absence of legal grounds for detention and the refusal of occupation authorities to provide any information on the legal status and whereabouts of the individuals.

In most cases, detentions were accompanied by complete isolation from the outside world at the initial stage, which lasted from several weeks to one year. Relatives systematically received refusals from occupation “law enforcement” bodies to confirm the fact of detention, creating a situation of prolonged uncertainty and psychological pressure.

All documented cases bear indications of serious violations of international humanitarian law, international criminal law, and international human rights law, including the prohibition of arbitrary detention, torture, enforced disappearance, and the right to a fair trial. In particular, witnesses and victims stated:

“The torture lasted approximately 30 minutes; electric current was applied to my earlobe, finger, and torso; they tortured me for 2–3 minutes at a time. At the end of the interrogation, they put a bag over my head, poured water on me, and continued the torture until I began to lose consciousness, after which they removed the wires.”

“They gave me a bunch of keys and ordered me not to let go of them, attached electrodes to my leg, other parts of my body and genitals, poured water on my left sneaker for better contact, and forced me to turn the handle of a field telephone. During the torture, I had a hat on my head fixed with electrical tape, so I could not see the occupiers. Two people were present in the room during the torture: one with a laptop and the other directly operating the current and attaching the electrodes. They pressed a hard object against my head and told me I would be left without sight and hearing.”

“There are many people in the cells; I do not know the exact number; detainees are held together. In Mordovia, detainees are forced to stand in their cells for 16 hours a day. They bathe once a week for literally one minute.”

“Near the stairs, a heavily built man beaten until bleeding always sat on a chair, handcuffed to the bars. I know nothing about him; later he disappeared somewhere; the supervisor ... forbade looking in his direction. They fed us once a day at an unspecified time. The ration was a plastic bowl of pasta or barley with the smell (yes, just the smell!) of canned meat, two or four crackers (for the first 2–3 days they gave two slices of bread of the ‘Dachnyi’ or ‘Kozatskyi’ type), and a teabag; sometimes they added a plastic cup of hot water.”

“I tried to improve my living conditions by making a ‘bed’ out of chairs. But they turned out to have been sawn, so they could collapse at any moment. I wonder if it was another expression of Russian ‘humor’? So, as before, I slept sitting at a table, remembering how I used to do it during lectures in my student days.”

“According to my father, my mother has lost a lot of weight. He says that if he did not bring food, it would be completely bad. The conditions there are very poor: water is provided once a week, and only 5 liters per person per day. They communicate through glass.”

“The trial in my brother’s case took place three times; the hearings were closed; my brother was brought in person only once, for the pronouncement of the verdict; there were no witnesses in court, but they were allegedly recorded on paper. In February 2025, my brother was sentenced, as a state-appointed lawyer (I cannot disclose his personal data) informed me, saying that Mykola had been under investigation and was convicted under Article 276 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation (espionage) and sentenced to 11.5 years of imprisonment in a strict-regime colony.”

Geography and Circumstances of Detention

The detention of civilians documented in the December testimonies occurred predominantly in the temporarily occupied territories of Kherson (Bilozerk, Skadovsk, Pryozersne, Kherson), Zaporizhzhia (Melitopol (2), Enerhodar, Atmanai), Donetsk (Mariupol (2)), and Luhansk (Starobilsk) regions, as well as in Chernihiv (Staryi Bilous) and Kharkiv (Tavilzhanka) regions, and on the territory of the Russian Federation (presumably Tyumen). Typical places of detention included private households, apartments, streets in населений пунктах, and workplaces. The total number of documented cases of arbitrary detention and deprivation of liberty by territory is as follows:

Kherson region – 4 cases
Zaporizhzhia region – 4 cases
Donetsk region – 2 cases
Luhansk region – 1 case
Kharkiv region – 1 case
Chernihiv region – 1 case
Russian Federation – 1 case

Testimonies indicate that detentions were carried out by armed representatives of the occupation forces or structures affiliated with them, often without insignia and without presenting any documents or explaining the reasons for detention. In several cases, prior attempts to coerce individuals into cooperation with the occupation authorities were documented; refusal served as the immediate trigger for subsequent abduction.

Based on the analysis of the documented testimonies, a clear set of actual and potential grounds for persecution can be identified, used by the occupation authorities of the Russian Federation as formal or informal pretexts for unlawful deprivation of liberty. The predominant reasons were accusations of so-called “espionage” (Article 276 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation), “terrorist act” (Part 2 of Article 205 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation), and “participation in a terrorist community” (Part 2 of Article 205.4 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation). In most cases, these accusations were based

on pro-Ukrainian views, refusal to cooperate with the occupation authorities, “opposition to the ‘SMO’,” the results of “filtration,” or so-called “denunciations.” A separate group consists of cases of persecution due to professional activity or previous status (service in the police, the Armed Forces of Ukraine, participation in Territorial Defense), as well as due to family ties with servicemen of Ukraine’s Defense Forces. Some abductions and detentions bear the hallmarks of arbitrary repressive actions aimed at intimidating the local population and “filtering” civilians.

Profile of the Victims

Among the documented victims, men predominate; however, five cases concern women, including elderly persons. The victims’ ages range from approximately 30 to over 60 years old. All individuals have civilian status and were not members of the Armed Forces of Ukraine at the time of detention. Cases were also recorded involving the detention of persons with severe chronic illnesses, including diabetes.

The victim profile indicates targeted persecution of individuals who refused cooperation with occupation administrations, had prior experience of service in the police, the Armed Forces of Ukraine, participation in Territorial Defense, or were relatives of persons whom the occupation authorities considered disloyal.

Typology of Violations and Legal Qualification of Crimes

All documented cases involve unlawful deprivation of liberty. In at least nine testimonies, incommunicado detention was recorded, lasting from several months to one year. In seven testimonies, additional grave violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law were documented, including torture and cruel treatment manifested through the use of electric current, beatings, psychological pressure, prolonged detention in stress positions, deprivation of food, sleep, and medical assistance. Some testimonies contain information about the torture of other detainees held in the same places of confinement.

A systematic practice of fabricating criminal cases under provisions of the criminal legislation of the Russian Federation on “espionage” (Article 276 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation), “terrorism” (Article 205 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation), or “participation in a terrorist community” (Article 205.4 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation) is observed. The collected facts allow for the qualification of these acts as war crimes and, where committed in a widespread or systematic context, crimes against humanity, including enforced disappearances, unlawful imprisonment, and torture.

Overall, among the fourteen (14) civilians unlawfully deprived of liberty identified in December 2025, criminal proceedings were initiated against five (5) individuals. Of these, four (4) individuals are serving sentences pursuant to convictions. Two (2) individuals remain in incommunicado detention, one (1) individual is considered missing, while six (6) individuals were released from unlawful detention.

Chains of Transfer

The analysis of testimonies of witnesses and individuals unlawfully deprived of personal liberty as a result of the armed aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine makes it possible to reconstruct typical chains of transfer of detainees and to determine their quantitative and spatial characteristics. The data obtained indicate the systematic nature of multi-stage transfers used as a tool of control, disorientation, and concealment of detention locations.

Initial detentions occurred predominantly in the temporarily occupied territories in southern and eastern Ukraine: during filtration measures, searches, or document checks; in private homes, at checkpoints, or at detainees' workplaces. In most cases, initial detention took place in unofficial or temporary places of confinement, including basements, local administration buildings, occupation "police" departments, or repurposed industrial sites. It was at this stage that physical and psychological violence was most frequently recorded, including beatings, threats, sleep deprivation, and mock executions.

In ten out of fourteen cases, two or more stages of transfer between different detention locations were recorded before final placement or the start of formalized criminal prosecution. Initial detention locations often had no official status (basements, private buildings, administrative premises). Subsequent stages of transfer demonstrate recurring routes that can be условно divided into two main models.

The first model involves internal transfers within the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine, where detainees were moved between several settlements or detention sites without crossing the state border. Such transfers were often accompanied by complete isolation from the outside world and the absence of any registration (incommunicado detention). For instance, individuals were detained in Zaporizhzhia region (Enerhodar) and initially held in basement premises or temporary holding cells. Later, some detainees were moved to Verkhni Krynytsi (Zaporizhzhia region), and subsequently to Melitopol (Zaporizhzhia region).

The second, more complex model involves transfer from the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine to the territory of the Russian Federation. In these cases, routes included transfer to transit points in the occupied territories; subsequent convoying through border areas; and placement in pre-trial detention centers, colonies, or other places of confinement in the Russian Federation. For example, after detention in Kharkiv region, one individual was transferred to Saryi Oskol (Belgorod Oblast, Russian Federation) and later to the settlement of Udarnyi (Republic of Mordovia, Russian Federation). Other individuals, following convictions, were transferred from the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine to Saratov Oblast (Russian Federation) via the route Skadovsk (Kherson region) — Chongar (Kherson region) — Simferopol (Autonomous Republic of Crimea) — Taganrog (Krasnodar Krai, Russian Federation) — Pugachov (Saratov Oblast, Russian Federation).

Conditions of Detention

Testimonies documented in December 2025 reveal the systematic nature of cruel, inhuman, and degrading conditions of detention of civilians unlawfully deprived of their personal liberty as a result of the armed aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine. In virtually all cases, detention took place outside any legal procedures, without notifying relatives, and without access to lawyers, medical care, or independent monitoring mechanisms.

The most common initial places of detention were so-called “basements,” “cells,” or premises not intended to hold people: basements of administrative buildings, schools, district departments, private houses, or improvised detention sites. Witnesses describe these premises as cramped, dark, without natural light or ventilation, with constant dampness, unsanitary conditions, and limited access to water. In a number of cases, detainees were held together with other persons in severely overcrowded cells, making normal sleep or movement impossible.

Most testimonies report systematic interrogations accompanied by physical and psychological violence. Beatings, ضربا with hands, feet, and objects, as well as electric shock torture, are described as repeated practices rather than isolated incidents. Torture was used to obtain “confessions,” coerce cooperation, force the signing of fabricated documents, or compel the recording of public self-incriminating videos. Violence often occurred during interrogations or immediately after detention, but in some cases continued throughout the entire period of detention.

Psychological pressure included threats of execution, threats to harm family members, prolonged isolation, and complete uncertainty regarding one’s status and the duration of detention. The incommunicado regime was typical: detainees had no possibility to inform relatives of their whereabouts, did not receive letters or parcels, and received no official information about the reasons for detention. In a number of cases, relatives were systematically provided false information that the detainee was not held in the respective place of confinement.

Food conditions in most documented cases were inadequate: limited portions, lack of regularity (sometimes only once per day), poor-quality food, or complete absence of food for prolonged periods. Water supply was unstable or severely limited, and hygiene items such as туалетный папир were often absent, further worsening sanitary conditions. Medical assistance was either not provided at all or was purely formal, even in cases of obvious bodily injuries, consequences of torture, or serious chronic illnesses.

Particular attention is drawn to the practice of detaining civilians together with other detainees, including prisoners of war or convicted criminals, without regard to age, health, or sex. This created additional risks to the physical and psychological safety of detainees and indicates a complete lack of minimum standards of treatment of persons deprived of liberty.

In particular, it was established that during detention in the settlement of Udarnyi (Republic of Mordovia, Russian Federation), a civilian unlawfully deprived of liberty was held together with at least three prisoners of war for an unspecified period (approximately during 2024–2025). Prior to transfer to Mordovia, the same individual was also held together with at least one prisoner of war in Saryi Oskol (Belgorod Oblast, Russian Federation) for an unspecified period (approximately during 2023–2024).

The totality of the described detention conditions allows the documented practices to be qualified as violating the UN Convention against Torture and, in the context of an international armed conflict, as serious violations of international humanitarian law, including the prohibitions of torture, cruel treatment, and unlawful deprivation of liberty of the civilian population. The repetition of these practices across multiple testimonies indicates not individual abuses but a systemic character of such detention conditions.

Judicial Proceedings and Violations of the Right to a Fair Trial

In at least five (5) cases, so-called “judicial proceedings” were reported, conducted with gross violations of basic fair trial guarantees. Four witnesses reported that their relatives were convicted by so-called occupation “courts” or courts of the Russian Federation, including the Southern District Military Court (Rostov-on-Don, Russian Federation), the so-called “Supreme Court of the ‘LPR’” (Luhansk, temporarily occupied territory of Ukraine), and an unidentified “court” in Simferopol (Autonomous Republic of Crimea, temporarily occupied territory of Ukraine). Hearings were closed; relatives’ access was restricted or fully prohibited; defense was provided by formally appointed lawyers; and verdicts were based on fabricated charges or “confessions” likely obtained under pressure or as a result of torture. Sentences ranged from 11 to 18 years of imprisonment in general- and strict-regime colonies.

Information about Other Victims and the Broader Context

Most witnesses reported other civilian individuals who were detained together with them or about whom they know facts of torture or severe bodily injuries. This indicates a mass and systemic character of the practice of unlawful deprivation of liberty, extending beyond isolated cases and bearing the hallmarks of a coordinated policy of persecution of the civilian population.

Conclusions

The totality of the analyzed testimonies confirms the existence of persistent patterns of unlawful deprivation of personal liberty, torture, enforced disappearances, and the imitation of “justice” in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine and in the Russian Federation. These acts bear the hallmarks of war crimes and crimes against humanity under the Rome Statute of the ICC and require further systematic documentation, legal qualification, and use within national and international accountability mechanisms.

The identified quantitative indicators and the geography of transfers confirm that unlawful deprivation of liberty is not carried out as an isolated act but as a process involving a series of coordinated actions by different structures. The recurrence of routes, the similarity of detention conditions, and the multi-stage nature of transfers indicate the existence of an organized practice relevant to the qualification of these acts as war crimes and crimes against humanity. The reconstruction of transfer chains makes it possible not only to establish individual circumstances of specific cases but also to identify systemic patterns that can be used for further criminal investigations, advocacy, and international legal response.

Recommendations

Taking into account the results of the analysis of testimonies of witnesses and individuals unlawfully deprived of liberty as a result of the armed aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, as well as the identified recurring patterns of violations of international humanitarian and international criminal law, it is advisable to undertake the following measures:

To Law Enforcement Authorities:

- a) Ensure continuous systematic documentation of facts of unlawful deprivation of liberty, including the circumstances of detention, places and conditions of detention, chains of transfer of detainees, the use of torture and cruel treatment, as well as related judicial or pseudo-judicial proceedings. Such documentation should be carried out in accordance with standards of admissibility of evidence in national and international criminal proceedings.
- b) Integrate the collected testimonies into the work of Ukrainian pre-trial investigation bodies and use them to qualify the respective acts as war crimes and, where the necessary elements are present, crimes against humanity, including enforced disappearances, unlawful imprisonment, torture, and persecution of the civilian population.
- c) Regularly conduct analysis of victims' testimonies as a tool to identify new trends, update the typology of violations, and assess the evolution of practices of unlawful deprivation of liberty in the context of a protracted armed conflict.
- d) Treat conveying and forced transfer of civilians, including deportation to the territory of the Russian Federation, as independent episodes of international crimes to ensure proper criminal-law assessment and to increase the effectiveness of investigations. Such acts should be documented separately from the initial unlawful detention and should include establishing the role of escorts, administrations of detention facilities, and so-called "judicial" bodies in the temporarily occupied territories. The relevant facts should provide grounds for opening separate criminal proceedings under Article 438 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine, taking into account the cumulative nature of violations of international humanitarian law.

e) Pay special attention to conducting forensic medical and forensic psychiatric examinations in accordance with the UN Istanbul Protocol, including documenting the consequences of torture and cruel treatment, such as injuries from electric shocks, systematic beatings, and psychological disorders, including post-traumatic stress disorder.

f) Establish a centralized repository of such expert conclusions to ensure sustainability of the evidentiary base, avoid re-traumatization of victims, and contribute to identifying typical patterns of violence.

g) Include in the evidentiary strategy the systematic collection and documentation of documentary confirmations related to the registration of detainees. This includes correspondence and confirmations from the International Committee of the Red Cross, registration data in detention facilities, information on “delivery” and individual identifiers of the Federal Penitentiary Service of the Russian Federation, as well as extracts from so-called “personal accounts” or electronic record systems. The practice of refusal by “appointed” or occupation-controlled lawyers to provide case materials to families or victims’ representatives should also be documented as an element of obstruction of the right to defense and access to information.

h) Develop a separate procedural approach to qualifying the activities of so-called “courts” in the temporarily occupied territories. The unlawful detention of civilians, issuance of unlawful verdicts, and subsequent transfer beyond the occupied territory to the Russian Federation should be documented as separate complex crimes encompassing unlawful deprivation of liberty, deprivation of the right to a fair trial, and deportation of the civilian population.

To Executive Authorities:

a) Ensure proper recognition of the status of persons unlawfully deprived of liberty, including access to social, legal, and psychological support. Recognition procedures should be people-centered, not impose an excessive burden of proof on victims, and take into account the specific nature of crimes committed under occupation.

b) Strengthen international cooperation to exchange information regarding detention locations of civilian hostages, conditions of detention, and responsible persons, as well as use the collected materials in international mechanisms, including within the ICC framework, universal jurisdiction, and sanctions regimes.

c) Develop specialized programs for treatment and rehabilitation of individuals released from unlawful detention facilities. Such programs should include treatment of chronic illnesses and complications, including cardiovascular and renal pathologies, the consequences of prolonged starvation (anorexia, critical weight deficit), as well as dental damage.

d) Ensure long-term psychosocial support for families of persons held incommunicado or considered missing.

e) Strengthen technical cooperation with the International Committee of the Red Cross to verify transfer routes and the current status of detained persons.

To the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine:

a) Advocate for ICRC access to specific pre-trial detention centers and colonies on the territory of the Russian Federation where, according to documented testimonies, civilians unlawfully deprived of liberty are held, including facilities in Krasnodar, Volgograd, Kazan, Irkutsk, the Republic of Buryatia, Saratov Oblast, and the Republic of Mordovia.

b) Systematically use documented routes of deportation and detention of civilians in bilateral and multilateral diplomatic formats to advocate for their release.

To International Institutions and Human Rights Organizations:

a) Use the documented transfer routes, detention conditions, qualifications under provisions of the criminal legislation of the Russian Federation, and described practices of treatment of detainees to prepare targeted submissions to the International Criminal Court and UN special procedures on torture and enforced disappearances.

b) Use the documented routes, conditions, and practices to initiate targeted personal and sectoral sanctions regimes against the Federal Penitentiary Service of the Russian Federation and associated “judicial” and administrative bodies.

Organizational Context and Cumulative Indicators

Since 2022, documenters of the NGO “Association of Relatives of Political Prisoners of the Kremlin” have identified and interviewed more than 634 individuals—witnesses and victims of enforced disappearances, arbitrary detentions, and other international crimes against the civilian population. Documented violations include, primarily, unlawful deprivation of personal liberty, as well as shelling of civilian infrastructure, appropriation of private property by occupation forces, and other related crimes.

As of 31 December 2025, information has been identified and documented regarding 477 civilians who were unlawfully deprived of personal liberty in the context of the armed aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine. Of these, 14 individuals were identified and documented during testimony collection in December 2025.

The documentation of war crimes and the preparation of this analytical review were carried out by the Documentation Department and the Research and Analytics Department of the NGO “Association of Relatives of Political Prisoners of the Kremlin.”

This report relies on the technological resources of the I-DOC database developed by the Case Matrix Network and provided with the support of our partner, the Norwegian Helsinki Committee, an international human rights organization based in Norway that promotes and protects human rights, democratic values, and the rule of law.

The documentation project is implemented with the support of the Norwegian Helsinki Committee (NHC). The views and conclusions expressed in this publication are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of the NHC.

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

<https://www.relativespp.org/>

info@relativespp.org

<https://www.facebook.com/relativespp>