

Support for Ukrainian citizens in Russia: The Invisible Work of Human Rights Defenders

Hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian citizens are currently in territories controlled by Russian authorities, and many of them require continuous assistance.

They can be primarily divided into several categories:

- Ukrainian citizens in Russian-occupied territories;
- children abducted by Russian authorities and military personnel;
- prisoners of war;
- civilian hostages;
- Ukrainian citizens forcibly relocated to Russia but not currently incarcerated.

A separate group consists of Ukrainian inmates transported to Russia, where they continue to serve their sentences imposed by Ukrainian courts.

How Russian activists help

Some of the social and professional connections necessary for providing assistance began to form after 2014, following the annexation of Crimea and the Russian invasion of Donbas region. Following the full-scale invasion of February 24, 2022, the situation changed. The number of victims has increased dramatically, and the contacts between Ukrainian and Russian human rights defenders, lawyers, and activists have become more complex.

Currently, cooperation is not public; these activities are criminalized in Russia, and cooperation with citizens of the aggressor is frowned upon in Ukraine. Nevertheless, on the Ukrainian side, this work is possible within the framework of the Memorandum of Cooperation signed in 2003 with the Office of the Verkhovna Rada Commissioner for Human Rights. Systematic work is being conducted in a number of areas, with the participation of Russian human rights defenders, without whose assistance the work in Russia is impossible, such as:

- the search for Ukrainian children, civilian hostages, and prisoners of war;
- establishing communication with lawyers;
- establishing contact with families in Ukraine;
- release/exchange;
- documenting crimes against humanity, in particular, torture, filtration, and forced deportation.

The search is complicated in the case of prisoners of war, civilian hostages, and children, as most civilian hostages and some prisoners of war are held without charge. Their data is processed not through the Federal Penitentiary Service or the Ministry of Defense, but through the FSB.

The most pressing issue is the return of children. According to the National Information Bureau of Ukraine, 19,546 Ukrainian children have been deported or forcibly displaced since 2022. Around 400 children have been returned. These figures have remained almost unchanged since the arrest warrant for Vladimir Putin and Russian 'Children's Ombudsman' Maria Belova-Lvova was issued in March 2023.

The urgency of this work is due to the fact that Russia has introduced a new procedure for giving children from Ukraine Russian citizenship. Now, a director of a children's organization can apply for citizenship on behalf of the child, without the requirement of finding the parents or the guardians first. In the case of teenage boys, upon reaching military age, they are subject to conscription as Russian citizens.

Assistance from European institutions is possible in the following areas:

- Targeted funding for collecting data on Ukrainian children deported to Russia;
- Ukrainians who managed to leave the occupied territories for European countries require assistance with legalization. Some of them were forced to accept Russian citizenship and find it difficult to prove coercion and persecution. It is essential that EU and Member States' regulations on refugees from Ukraine would take these people into account and that they are provided with support in the form of legal advice and on the violation of their rights and the political motives behind their persecution in Russia for obtaining their temporary protection status;
- Coordination and support of collective cases by EU Member States before the International Court of Justice against Russia for grave violations of the UN Convention against Torture and the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Recognizing the ongoing genocide as soon as possible and ensuring the punishment of Russian war criminals is an essential form of support for Ukrainian citizens;
- To initiate a meeting of countries bordering Russia that are party to the Convention for the Protection of Persons from Enforced Disappearances to ensure that these countries fulfill their obligations to prosecute Russian officials responsible for enforced disappearances.

The continuous, high-risk work undertaken by Russian human rights defenders is indispensable; without their direct participation, providing assistance to Ukrainian citizens illegally detained in Russia would be impossible. This essential cooperation must remain clandestine, yet it persists daily despite the severe risks faced by those operating internally. Providing the appropriate, discreet legal and financial support is therefore the most direct means for the international community to enhance the effectiveness of these life-saving efforts.

This policy paper draws on the unique expertise and evidence of Mykhailo Savva, Center for Civil Liberties and the experts of the project Kidmapping.