



Russian Civil environment -related activities in occupied Ukrainian territories: Mechanisms of Control and Erasure

Introduction

Russia's approach and activities to and within the civil environment in the context of its occupation of Ukrainian territories stands in stark contrast to international law and humanitarian principles on which NATO doctrines are based on for instance. Instead of supporting recovery, rebuild and humanitarian assistance, Russian civil-related activities serve as strategic tools for domination, the systematic erosion of Ukrainian sovereignty and finally assimilation into the Russian state. This document analyses the specific measures employed by Russian authorities, organizing them thematically across various areas, including education, culture, infrastructure, children, citizenship, and economic control. Supported by multiple human rights reports and legal frameworks, the analysis highlights the manipulative and coercive nature of Russia's efforts in the civil environment.

Recommendations

- Strengthen international documentation and prosecution of forced child transfers and Russification policies.
- Support underground education and cultural resistance networks.
- Provide technical and financial aid to restore Ukrainian infrastructure in liberated areas.
- Establish public awareness campaigns to counter Russian propaganda narratives.
- Enforce targeted sanctions on individuals and institutions involved in illegal civil-related activities.

● Education as a Tool of Russification

Russian authorities have systematically imposed Russian curricula and language in schools located in occupied areas of Ukraine, beyond the original settlements of ethnical Russian population of Ukraine, imposing the Russian educational system, anti-Ukrainian propaganda, and Russian as the language of instruction in schools. The report "Education under Occupation" by Human Rights Watch documents instances of threats, detention, and torture against school staff who resist these changes. Parents of children enrolled in Ukrainian online educational programs have also faced threats. These actions violate the Geneva Conventions and international human rights laws by imposing a foreign educational system and propaganda framework.

● Destruction of National Symbols and Cultural Heritage

In cities like Kherson, Melitopol, and Berdiansk, Russian forces have replaced Ukrainian signage with Russian equivalents, removed memorials, and destroyed national symbols. This erasure of identity extends beyond visual elements. Amnesty International (2024) details the suppression of cultural, religious, and linguistic rights of Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars in Crimea since 2014. These actions violate the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property.

● Linguocide and Cultural Re-engineering

More than 100 documented cases highlight the suppression of the Ukrainian language in media, education, and public life. Public use of Ukrainian is penalized, while Russian is forcibly imposed as the dominant language. This strategy is not only about language but about identity erasure. Such efforts represent an attempt to re-engineer the cultural and ideological framework of the population.

● Coercive Passportization and (il)Legal Assimilation

Russia pressures civilians to accept Russian citizenship by linking it to essential services like healthcare, pensions, and education. This forced passportization financially and legally binds the population to the occupying power. This strategy not only undermines Ukrainian sovereignty and violates international principles of civilian protection in conflict zones, but also reinforces Russia's control over the region by creating a dependency on the occupying power.

● Manipulation and Control of Critical Infrastructure

The control and destruction of critical infrastructure has played a central role. These actions transcend conventional military objectives — they are part of a broader hybrid warfare strategy designed to manipulate civilian life, erode trust in the Ukrainian state, and reshape the operational environment to favour long-term Russian control. Russia exerts control over vital utilities such as electricity, heating, water, and communications. In cities like Mariupol and Enerhodar, services have been deliberately cut off and then reinstated under Russian control, often in exchange for political loyalty. This tactic creates dependency, facilitates propaganda dissemination, and contributes to psychological warfare.

● **Forced Transfer and Assimilation of Children**

One of the most alarming aspects of Russia's activities is the forced relocation and adoption of Ukrainian children. The Yale Humanitarian Research Lab has confirmed at least 314 cases of children taken from Donetsk and Luhansk and placed with Russian families, often after altering their legal identities. The report states that the goal of the program was to eradicate Ukrainian identity and "Russify" the children, and with this, strengthen the Russian nation. The Better Care Network estimates up to 200,000 children may be affected. These actions constitute illegal transfers under international law and may meet the definition of genocidal acts.

● **Economic Subjugation through Currency Imposition**

Russia has imposed the ruble and criminalized the use of the hryvnia in occupied territories. Local businesses must operate in rubles, and Russian banking systems are established. This situation intensifies the economic and psychological pressures on local populations, eroding trust in the Ukrainian government and further entrenching loyalty to and dependency on Russia. This not only isolates these regions from Ukraine economically but also deepens Russian control, contravening international law on occupation economics.

● **Time Zone Manipulation**

Time zones have been changed to align with Moscow time. Though seemingly administrative, this shift disrupts daily life and symbolically integrates the regions into the Russian state. Educational

schedules, transportation, and services are restructured accordingly, further distancing these areas from Ukraine. The goal with this is not only to disrupt the functioning of the local society but also to exacerbate the already existing mistrust of the Ukrainian government. Through the disruption of local routines and identities, the population increasingly questions the effectiveness and strength of the Ukrainian government.

● **Gender-Based Violence and Human Trafficking**

Reports confirm that sexual violence, human trafficking, and exploitation—particularly of women and children—are prevalent in occupied areas. Displacement and lack of oversight enable forced labour and abuse. Russian military civil-military structures offer little to no protection. The absence of justice mechanisms fosters widespread impunity.

● **Propaganda and Narrative Control**

To justify its actions, Russia disseminates narratives around the "protection of Russian speakers" and the "denazification" of Ukraine. These propaganda strategies aim to legitimize occupation policies, suppress dissent, and win international neutrality. Understanding and countering these narratives is vital to resisting psychological and ideological warfare.

● Conclusion

Russian civil environment -related activities in Ukraine are not humanitarian efforts but instruments of hybrid and occupational warfare. From education and culture to infrastructure and children's rights, these measures erode Ukrainian identity, foster dependency, and consolidate imperial control. They violate international law and require coordinated international documentation and accountability efforts. Civil resistance — from teachers defying Russian curricula in their classrooms, to parents safeguarding the Ukrainian language at home, to underground networks risking everything — remains a powerful act of defiance, too often unrecognized by the international community. These forms of non-violent resistance are crucial in preserving national identity, building societal resilience, and documenting abuses for future accountability. Supporting Ukraine means defending its territory and its national identity and civic fabric.

Sources

- Human Rights Watch. (2024). Ukraine: Forced Russified Education Under Occupation. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/06/20/ukraine-forced-russified-education-under-occupation>
- Amnesty International. (2024). Russia/Ukraine: A Decade of Suppressing Non-Russian Identities in Occupied Crimea. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/03/russia-ukraine-a-decade-of-suppressing-non-russian-identities-in-occupied-crimea>
- Ukrainian World Congress. (2023). Russian Policy of Linguocide in the Occupied Territories of Ukraine. <https://www.ukrainianworldcongress.org/russian-policy-of-linguocide-in-the-occupied-territories-of-ukraine/>
- Yale Humanitarian Research Lab. (2023). Russia's Systematic Program for the Re-Education and Adoption of Ukraine's Children. <https://medicine.yale.edu/news-article/yale-research-documents-russias-systematic-re-education-and-adoption-program-for-ukrainian-children/>
- Better Care Network. (2023). The Taken Children of Ukraine. <https://bettercarenetwork.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/fronek-et-al-2023-the-taken-children-of-ukraine.pdf>

Address:

Brasserskade 227A
2497 NX The Hague
The Netherlands

Contact Information:

Registry CCOE: +31 (0)889566439
Public Affairs Office: +31 (0)889 566441
E-Mail: info@cimic-coe.org
Webpage: www.cimic-coe.org

