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Russian mobilisation in occupied areas of Ukraine

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Since the beginning of the Russian attack on Ukraine, Russian authorities have pursued a repressive policy towards the residents of the areas occupied by Russian forces. This policy initially affected the residents of Crimea and the controlled parts of Donbas in 2014, and since 2022, has extended to parts of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions. One manifestation of these actions is the forced issuance of Russian passports (passportisation), conscription, and mobilization of the population in southeastern Ukraine. These measures primarily target individuals suspected of disloyalty to the occupying authorities, especially representatives of minority groups, including the Crimean Tatars, exhibiting clear signs of ethnic cleansing.

Situation in the Occupied Areas of Ukraine. Since the onset of the Russian aggression on territories under Russian occupation, we have witnessed a systematic violation of basic human rights in various forms. In the early months of the war, many residents of these areas disappeared without a trace. Arrests primarily targeted those suspected of loyalty to Ukraine, including active Ukrainian socio-political activists, as well as local elites, such as teachers, civil servants, members of uniformed organizations, and healthcare professionals, among others. All traces of these territories' connection to Ukraine were systematically eradicated. These actions were accompanied by the plunder of state property, functioning enterprises, and private property. The population that chose to remain in areas under Russian control is subjected to pervasive surveillance and intimidation. Their access to Ukrainian media was cut off, they were integrated into the Russian information space, and subjected to the influence of Kremlin propaganda (emphasizing the supposed Russian character of southern and eastern Ukraine). They were also denied the use of Ukrainian mobile networks, blocked from accessing Ukrainian websites, infiltrated into internet messaging platforms, and restricted in their ability to use the Ukrainian hryvnia. Strengthening Russian authority was furthered by the expansion of a collaborative administration, security structures, and school and university networks where a strong pro-Russian sentiment is propagated, often based on chauvinistic Russian textbooks. Children are subjected to indoctrination, and orphans are taken to Russia or Belarus, where they undergo a process of Russification. Ukrainian authorities have reported that this may apply to as many as 200-300 thousand children. However, confirming these figures is challenging. The population that chose to leave underwent a vetting process, with some passing through filtration camps.

Individuals who remained were coerced into collaboration through threats or promises of high earnings or positions within the subordinate administrative structures. Collaborators could temporarily occupy properties left behind by residents who had fled the areas. The imposition of the so-called passportisation policy has been exerted from the very beginning. Without a Russian passport, residents could not open accounts in the functioning Russian banks, receive social benefits paid by the occupation administration, and even access humanitarian aid, including essential medications for chronically ill individuals (diabetics, those with cardiovascular diseases, and cancer patients).

Mobilisation in Crimea. The primary concern associated with acquiring Russian citizenship was the possibility of conscription and mobilisation into the Russian army. In the case of Crimea, which the Russian Federation has treated as an integral part of its territory since 2014, conscription and subsequent mobilisation have been conducted on a large scale. The independent organization representing Crimean Tatars, the Centre of Crimean Tatar Resources, estimated that as many as 60,000 individuals were drafted into the military in Crimea as of September 2022. However, it is difficult to conclusively verify this number, but reports in Ukrainian media

indicate the ongoing mobilization of residents of Crimea. It is worth noting that Russian authorities are employing tactics reminiscent of imperial Russian “recruitment” and those of the Soviet era, when individuals suspected of disloyalty to the authorities were conscripted on a massive scale. In this case, Crimean Tatars are primarily the first to be called upon. As noted by members of the SOS Crimea organization, in some areas, up to 80% of those mobilized are representatives of this minority. In September 2022, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy described Russia’s actions as another example of its “genocidal policy” and called on the world for a strong reaction.

In August 2023, there were reports of a planned mass mobilization of Crimean residents. The representation of the President of Ukraine in Crimea suggested that the Russian Federation plans to mobilize approximately 30,000 individuals in the coming months and additionally conscript 10,000 for mandatory military service, subsequently deploying them to the front. However, due to the political situation in Crimea, it is currently impossible to verify this information.

Mobilisation in Southeastern Ukraine. Mobilization from the Russian-controlled Donbas has occurred on a massive scale since the beginning of the invasion. According to the Meduza portal, citing data from the Eastern Human Rights Defenders Group from July 2022, around 140,000 individuals were conscripted in self-proclaimed people’s republics, with 48,000 sent to the front while the rest underwent training and worked in the rear before being deployed to combat zones. In the majority of cases, these were poorly trained and equipped individuals, leading to significant losses in clashes with experienced Ukrainian soldiers. Human rights defender Paweł Lisianski estimated that by August 2022, about 30,000 individuals mobilized from the self-proclaimed Donbas republics could have died in battles against Ukraine. Even if these numbers were inflated, it is crucial to highlight that the mobilization process continued in the following months of the war, and casualties continued to rise during the successful Ukrainian counteroffensives in the Kharkiv and Kherson regions, as well as the battles for Soledar and Bakhmut.

Russians, while enforcing passportisation in the occupied areas, simultaneously mobilize the local population for combat against Ukraine. This is due to the deepening personnel problems faced by the Russian army, brought about by the prolonged war and increased attacks linked to the Ukrainian forces’ counteroffensive. According to estimates from the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine from May 2023, Russia forcibly conscripted between 55,000 to 60,000 individuals from the controlled parts of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions. These individuals were primarily recent recipients of Russian citizenship. Currently, it is impossible to verify these numbers. Ukrainian and Russian media reported in late August and September 2023 that new mobilisation waves were occurring, which were denied by Russian authorities. However, Ukraine reports the continuation of “quiet” mobilization in the occupied areas, including unemployed individuals.

Conclusions

Since the commencement of the invasion in Ukraine, Russia has sought to compensate for its human losses sustained during the conflict by recruiting from the poorest regions of Russia and minority ethnic and religious groups suspected of disloyalty to the authorities. To a considerable extent, these actions have also affected the occupied territories of Ukraine, where tens of thousands of individuals were conscripted into the army, often under duress, with a significant portion being Crimean Tatars. The compulsory mobilization of residents in the occupied areas represents a violation of Article 51 of the 1949 Geneva Convention for the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War. In conjunction with mass arrests and deportations, including those carried out via “humanitarian corridors” to Russian territory, affecting Ukrainian orphans, these actions exhibit clear signs of war crimes or even ethnic cleansing.

The repressive policies of the occupying authorities are combined with Russian colonization of Crimea and the southeastern regions of Ukraine, as well as infrastructure projects, such as the construction of a railway line

connecting the Rostov Oblast with Crimea (via Taganrog, Mariupol, Berdiansk, and Melitopol), and a new dual-lane expressway built alongside the railway line. In addition to their military significance, these new infrastructure projects also hold propagandistic importance. Russia aims to strengthen the belief among the local population that the occupied territories will not be liberated by Ukraine.

The population living in the occupied areas, aside from constant surveillance, ubiquitous propaganda, and various forms of persecution, also faces an extremely dire humanitarian situation. Chronic issues include a lack of gas, electricity, and water supplies. A significant challenge is the high cost of living in local stores where primarily Russian goods are sold. Currently, the population is cut off from international aid and can only rely on Russian "humanitarian convoys," which are incapable of improving their situation.