

FORCED ASSIMILATION THROUGH EDUCATION: RUSSIAN POLICY IN THE OCCUPIED TERRITORIES OF UKRAINE AFTER 2014

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- **Education as an instrument of institutional occupation**

Russian educational policy in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine constitutes a fundamental instrument of institutional occupation rather than a humanitarian initiative. By controlling the learning environment, the Russian Federation aims to secure the cognitive domain, dismantling the socio-cultural foundations of the Ukrainian state to replace them with narratives compliant with Russian geopolitical interests. Schools have been transformed from centres of learning into primary mechanisms for legitimising the Russian presence, where the educational infrastructure serves as an “anchor” for the regime to project an image of normalcy and irreversibility.

- **Evolution of strategy: The hybrid and scaled stages**

The evolution of this strategy is distinctively marked by two chronological phases: the “Hybrid” Stage (2014–2021) and the “Scaled” Stage (post-2022). The initial phase in Crimea and the Donbas focused on a gradual legal transition and the co-optation of existing local personnel to maintain stability. In contrast, the post-2022 invasion phase in the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions involved an aggressive, rapid unification of educational content with Russian federal norms. This second stage is characterised by the creation of management systems “from scratch”, often bypassing local structures due to a lack of loyal cadres.

- **Management crisis: Personnel shortages and instability**

The administrative management of education in these territories reveals a heavy reliance on imported personnel, or “Varangians”, due to the scarcity of local

collaborators. While the 2014 occupation of Crimea saw a smooth transition using former Ukrainian officials, the 2022 occupation faced a severe deficit of professionals willing to cooperate. Consequently, Russia has deployed officials from its own federal regions to head local ministries, using the occupied territories as career springboards for Kremlin bureaucrats. This has led to significant personnel turbulence, with the average tenure of a regional “Minister of Education” lasting no more than 1–1.5 years due to corruption scandals, incompetence, and internal power struggles.

- **Coercion and incentives: The struggle for collaboration**
To secure the compliance of teaching staff, the occupation administration employs a mix of coercion and financial incentives. In mid-2022, teachers in the Kherson region were offered salaries ranging from 645 USD to 725 USD, with directors offered up to 2,400 USD – amounts significantly higher than average wages in many Russian regions. Despite these incentives and the threat of repression, preliminary estimates suggest that the number of Ukrainian educators who chose conscious collaboration did not exceed 1%. The motivations for those who did collaborate range from adaptive survival strategies to ideological affinity with the “Russian world”.

- **Resistance and the “educational underground”**
Conversely, the resistance of Ukrainian educators has proven to be a significant obstacle to Russian integration plans. Unlike the situation in 2014, the post-2022 period saw a robust “educational underground”. Strategies of resistance included mass migration, refusal to cooperate, and the clandestine teaching of the Ukrainian curriculum. As of May 2024, 1,975 educators (about 0.5% of the total) remained in occupied territories while refusing to work for the occupier, maintaining their employment relationship with Ukraine. This resistance highlights that while Russia controls the physical

school buildings, it struggles to command the human capital necessary for effective indoctrination.

- **Curriculum weaponisation: Erasure of identity**

The curriculum imposed is designed to systematically erase the Ukrainian national identity. The Ukrainian language and history have been removed from the syllabus and replaced with narratives that present Ukraine as an enemy and Russia as the only “Motherland”. In Crimea, for instance, not a single school remains with Ukrainian as the language of instruction. New textbooks, such as the “History of Donbas and Novorossiya”, are being introduced to cement the official interpretation of history as Russia’s struggle for the “reunification of historical lands”, effectively depriving children of the cognitive tools to critically assess their reality.

- **Systemic militarisation of youth**

A central pillar of this policy is the aggressive militarisation of youth, transforming schools into recruitment centres for future soldiers. Children are integrated into Russian paramilitary organisations like *Yunarmia* and the *Movement of the First* and are subjected to mandatory rituals such as “Conversations on Important Things” (*Razgovory o vazhnom*) and the “Hero’s Desk” (*Parta Heroya*) initiative. This system normalises war, framing military service and dying for Russia as the highest civic duty. The visual and rhetorical saturation of the school environment with war symbols aims to remove moral barriers regarding violence.

- **Strategic goals and systemic vulnerabilities**

Ultimately, the report concludes that the Russian educational system in the occupied territories is a cohesive mechanism for forced assimilation and social mobilisation. Approximately 1.6 million Ukrainian children are viewed as a strategic demographic resource to be moulded into loyal Russian subjects. However, the analysis argues that this system remains inherently vulnerable due to its reliance on coercion, the administrative

instability of the occupation regime, and the persistent agency and resistance of Ukrainian families and educators who continue to maintain cultural and educational links with Ukraine.

INTRODUCTION

Russian educational policy in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine should not be analysed merely as a humanitarian endeavour or an administrative necessity; rather, it constitutes a fundamental instrument of institutional occupation. While military force secures physical territory, the educational system is deployed to secure the cognitive domain. By controlling the learning environment, the occupying power aims to dismantle the socio-cultural foundations of the Ukrainian state and replace them with narratives compliant with Russian geopolitical interests. Consequently, schools have transformed from centres of learning into primary mechanisms for legitimising the Russian presence and enforcing systematic indoctrination.

The weaponisation of education in this context is not an improvisation born of the 2022 invasion but rather it is a deliberate strategy developed over a decade. Since 2014, Moscow has refined its approach to integrating captured territories into its cultural and legal space. This policy has evolved from localised experiments into a standardised, totalitarian model. Understanding this evolution requires analysing the process through two distinct chronological and operational phases: the “Hybrid” stage and the “Scaled” stage.

The first phase, covering the period from the annexation of Crimea to the eve of the full-scale invasion, can be defined as the “Hybrid” Stage. During these years in Crimea, Sevastopol, and specific districts of the Donbas, the focus was on the legal and organisational transition of existing institutions to Russian federal standards. This stage relied heavily on the co-optation of local administrative personnel and a gradual displacement of the Ukrainian language and culture. It served as a testing ground for the initial tools of “patriotic” upbringing, which increasingly took

on a militarised character, though the facade of regional autonomy was often maintained for propaganda purposes.

Following 24 February 2022, the strategy shifted dramatically into the “Scaled” Stage. This phase is characterised by the aggressive export of previously tested practices to the newly occupied territories of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions. Unlike the hybrid phase, this stage involved the creation of a vertical educational management system essentially “from scratch”, often bypassing or purging existing local structures. The hallmark of this period is the total and rapid unification of educational content with Russian federal norms and a significant intensification of militarised indoctrination, reflecting the urgency of Russia’s annexationist goals.

In this strategic framework, school infrastructure serves a crucial geopolitical function: it acts as an “anchor” for the occupation regime. The physical reopening of schools is utilised in propaganda to demonstrate a return to “normalcy” and stability under Russian rule. By forcing the educational process to resume, the occupation administration attempts to project control and irreversibility. The teacher, within this system, is no longer merely an educator but is transformed into a key provider of state loyalty, expected to enforce the new ideological order within the classroom.

The curriculum imposed in these territories is designed to sever the younger generation’s connection to Ukraine. Through the systematic removal of Ukrainian history, literature, and language from the syllabus, the policy aims at a profound alteration of identity. This is coupled with aggressive militarisation, where children are integrated into Russian paramilitary youth organisations. The objective is twofold: to erase the national memory of the occupied population and to cultivate a new demographic resource loyal to the Russian state and ready for future mobilisation.

However, the implementation of this monolithic system has encountered significant friction. A substantial portion of Ukrainian educators have adopted diverse strategies of

resistance, disrupting the occupier's plans. These strategies range from refusal to cooperate and subsequent migration to distance teaching "in exile" and, most notably, the clandestine teaching of the Ukrainian curriculum within the occupied territories. This "educational underground" highlights that while Russia controls the buildings, it has struggled to fully command the human capital necessary for effective indoctrination.

This paper analyses how personnel policy, curriculum content, and upbringing practices form a cohesive system aimed at reshaping the identity of Ukrainian children and adolescents. It argues that while this system is robust in its administrative design, it remains inherently vulnerable due to its reliance on coercion and the persistent agency of Ukrainian educators and families. By examining the transition from the hybrid to the scaled stage, this analysis exposes the mechanisms of forced assimilation and the limits of Russia's soft power in the occupied territories.

1.

FROM HYBRID INTEGRATION TO SYSTEMIC INDOCTRINATION: STAGES, MECHANISMS, AND VULNERABILITIES OF RUSSIA'S EDUCATIONAL STRATEGY (2014-2025)

Russian educational policy in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine is not a “humanitarian” endeavour, but rather an instrument of institutional occupation. Since 2014, and particularly following the full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022, education has become one of the primary mechanisms for legitimising the Russian presence and for the systematic indoctrination of children.

Two distinct stages can be traced in this process:

1. The “Hybrid” stage (2014–2021): Characterised by the legal and organisational transition of Crimea, Sevastopol, and specific districts of the Donbas to Russian educational standards. This stage relied heavily on local administrative personnel, the displacement of the Ukrainian language and culture, and the launch of initial tools for “patriotic” (militarised) upbringing.
2. The “Scaled” stage (since 2022): Characterised by the export of tested practices to the occupied territories of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions; the creation of an educational management vertical “from scratch”; the

total unification of educational content; and the intensification of militarised upbringing.

In this context, school infrastructure serves as an “anchor” for the occupation regime: the resumption of studies is demonstrated as a return to the “norm” of life under occupation, while the teacher is transformed into a key provider of loyalty. At the same time, a significant portion of Ukrainian educators chose strategies of resistance – ranging from migration and distance teaching “in exile” to the clandestine teaching of Ukrainian curricula within the occupied territories – which significantly hindered Russian plans.

The following analysis demonstrates how personnel policy, curriculum content, and upbringing practices form a cohesive system aimed at altering the identity of children and adolescents – and why this system remains inherently vulnerable.

1.1 The educational management vertical

One of the key directions of Russian policy in the occupied territories has been the formation of its own vertical for educational management. In 2014, in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, the city of Sevastopol, and parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, the “new” authorities relied on Ukrainian educational officials who agreed to cooperate with the occupation administrations.

- Firstly, this enabled the rapid restoration of the administrative apparatus, allowing the occupation authorities to promptly begin restructuring the educational process to fit Russian standards.
- Secondly, it ensured the manageability of the educational system by preserving the professional core of educational management.
- Thirdly, it lent legitimacy to the new political reality in the eyes of educators and the population, as experienced functionaries ensured a transition without excessive shocks.

1.2 Reliance on local personnel

The situation in Crimea and Sevastopol serves as an illustrative example. The occupation there was rapid and occurred with virtually no armed resistance; consequently, the educational system experienced no turbulence. As early as the spring of 2014, the transition of educational institutions to Russian legislation began. Former Ukrainian officials continued to hold leadership positions in regional and local education administrations. A particularly symbolic case is that of Natalia Honcharova, who had headed the Ministry of Education, Science, Youth, and Sports of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea since 2012 and remained in her post after the region's annexation until the end of 2019.

The situation unfolded similarly in the city of Sevastopol. Here, the Department of Education was headed by the director of a local gymnasium, Viktor Oganesyan, known for his active pro-Russian stance. For many educators and parents, he embodied the old model of “Soviet teaching” – paternalistic and ideologically driven, yet understandable and predictable. It was precisely such figures who became the public authorities of the occupation regime.

In contrast to 2014, the occupation authorities in the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions in 2022 faced a severe shortage of loyal personnel. The overwhelming majority of Ukrainian educational managers fled to Ukrainian-controlled territory or abroad or avoided cooperation under various pretexts. Under these conditions, the occupation authorities were forced to create an educational administrative vertical essentially from scratch. This process even involved fugitive Ukrainian officials, such as the former Minister of Education and Science of Ukraine, Dmytro Tabachnyk, who had been residing in Moscow for a considerable time.

For instance, in the Zaporizhzhia region – where the regional centre remained under Ukrainian control – the occupation authorities transformed the city of Melitopol into the “temporary administrative capital” (a function performed by Henichesk in the occupied part of the Kherson

region since November 2022). Consequently, the creation of a regional “Ministry of Education” was based on “Melitopol cadres”, a process accompanied by organisational difficulties and a deficit of experienced managers.

1.3 Personnel competitions

A distinct group of appointees consists of winners of public federal or regional personnel competitions. This trend is linked to the preference for such HR practices by Sergey Kiriyenko, the First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration of Russia¹. The objective is to create an impression of openness and professionalism in personnel selection.

For example, Valentyna Lavryk – a teacher of Ukrainian language by training and a “Merited Teacher of Ukraine” (2013), as well as the former director of the Simferopol Academic Gymnasium – headed the “Ministry of Education, Science and Youth of the Republic of Crimea” in November 2019 following her victory in the regional contest “Your Government”.

In 2021, local official Andriy Lustenko became the “Minister of Education of the Luhansk People’s Republic” after winning the “Leaders of Luhansk” competition. By 2022, he was replaced by the Muscovite Ivan Kusov, a finalist in the Kremlin’s “Leaders of Russia” selection process.

1.4 The “Varangians” (Outsiders)

Despite their deference to Moscow, local elites are not enthusiastic about the co-optation of individuals from Russian

¹ Помните «Селигер», на котором собиралась вся провластная молодежь? Теперь таких форумов в 20 раз больше – и проходят они по всей стране. Вот как устроена эта индустрия – и кто ее контролирует, Медуза, 15 August 2023, <https://meduza.io/feature/2023/09/15/pomnite-seliger-na-kotorom-sobiralas-vsya-provlastnaya-molodezh-teper-takih-forumov-v-20-raz-bolshe-i-prohodyat-oni-po-vsey-strane> [20.11.2025].

regions – disparagingly referred to as “Varangians” – into the power verticals of the occupied territories. The appointment of these “Varangians” is often the result of struggles between various influence groups, both within the corridors of power in the capital and among local “clans”, the military, or special services. Consequently, at the first opportunity, attempts are made to oust such outsiders.

At the same time, the appointment of a “Varangian” was in some cases dictated by elementary necessity – specifically, to organise operations in the region. One of the most illustrative examples is the activity of Mikhail Rodikov, an official from the Moscow region. After three years as Director of the Department of Education in Sevastopol (2015–2018), where he managed the reorganisation of the city’s educational system and its alignment with Russian standards, he was deployed to the occupied part of the Kherson region. There, in July 2022, he headed the newly created “Ministry of Education and Science”.

In his interviews, Rodikov openly admitted that his task was “creating an education system from scratch” and “transferring Ukrainian institutions into the legal field of Russia”². His tenure in Kherson coincided with preparations for the “annexation referendum”, confirming that educational policy was part of the strategy to legitimise the occupation. After a year of work, Rodikov left the region without explanation.

This policy became even more pronounced in the “Donetsk People’s Republic” (DPR). In July 2022, Olga Koludarova, an employee of the Russian Ministry of Education, was appointed “Minister of Education and Science”. Within two years, she was promoted to Deputy Minister of Education of Russia, confirming the function of the occupied territories as a career springboard for Kremlin officials.

² *Михаил Родиков: опыт Севастополя бесценен для Херсона*, ForPost, 23 July 2022, <https://sevastopol.su/news/mihail-rodikov-otpyt-sevastopolya-bescenen-dlya-hersona> [20.11.2025].

Furthermore, experience in dangerous occupied regions serves as a validation of loyalty to the Putin regime.

This approach was reaffirmed in April 2025, when Alexander Kalyagin, a former deputy director of a department within the Russian Ministry of Education, became the “Minister of Education of the Zaporizhzhia region”.

1.5 Personnel turbulence

Alongside this, one of the most characteristic features of the occupation’s administrative vertical is its instability. Despite the general centralisation of the management system, there is a constant rotation of regional leaders:

- In Sevastopol, there have been eight directors of the Department of Education in 11 years;
- In the Donetsk and Luhansk “People’s Republics”, there have been six and five, respectively, over the same period;
- In less than four years in the Kherson region, there have been five, and in Zaporizhzhia, three.

Thus, the average tenure of a regional “Minister” of Education is no more than 1–1.5 years, indicating a lack of systematicity and stability in personnel policy.

The first factor of personnel turbulence is the change of “regional heads”. Each newly appointed “governor” has attempted to form their own team, purging previous functionaries and bringing in personally loyal executors. This practice is particularly noticeable in the “People’s Republics” of Donbas, where the loss of power or death of a leader triggered “governmental” perturbations.

The second factor consists of corruption scandals, which have become a typical instrument of internal struggle for influence and financial flows. This complements the previous criterion; however, in conditions of opaque distribution of financial and material resources, it is a crucial factor for understanding the functioning of the administrative vertical and the associated temptations. The cases of the

first “Ministers of Education” in the so-called “People’s Republics” – Lesya Lapteva, Valentyna Tkachenko, and Igor Kostenok – are well known. Their removal from office was accompanied by loud allegations of embezzlement and arrests, yet the initiated criminal cases had no logical continuation or real consequences.

The third factor is professional incompetence and managerial miscalculations. A portion of the appointees lacked experience in civil service or educational management. As a result, unsuccessful decisions regarding remuneration, the organisation of the educational process, or personnel policy triggered waves of dissatisfaction among parents and educators. For instance, in Sevastopol in November 2014, the Head of the Education Department, Igor Olenchenko, was forced to resign following protests by educators over salary cuts linked to a change in the payment calculation methodology. His successor, Volodymyr Tyunin, lasted only seven months. Significantly, even the local branch of ruling party “United Russia” openly advocated for his dismissal, accusing him of professional incompetence.

The fourth factor is directives from Moscow. The intervention of Moscow curators in personnel matters is a widespread phenomenon. In such cases, the replacement of leaders is symbolic rather than administrative in nature – intended to demonstrate “renewal” or a “strengthening” of the integration course.

Thus, with the exception of Crimea, we can observe institutional instability in the management of regional education across the temporarily occupied territories.

2. **PEDAGOGICAL STAFF: COLLABORATION AND RESISTANCE AMONG EDUCATORS**

Russian authorities and the proxy structures they created have demonstrated a consistent interest in engaging the maximum number of local educators in the occupied territories of Ukraine. This interest was systemic in nature and relied on the long-term humanitarian expansion of the Russian Federation, which unfolded during the 1990s and 2000s in Crimea, Sevastopol, and the Donbas. The lack of an adequate response from the Ukrainian state, as well as the failure to formulate a cohesive policy to counter external influence in the humanitarian sphere, created favourable conditions for the collaboration of local educators following the occupation of these regions in 2014 and the minimisation of resistance.

However, the situation in 2022 in the Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, and Kharkiv regions demonstrated significantly different dynamics. A substantial portion of educators refused to cooperate with the occupation authorities, which resulted in a personnel deficit and stalled the process of forming a Russian educational space in these territories. Consequently, local occupation authorities were forced to recruit educators from Russian regions.

The occupation authorities' interest in the collaboration of local educators is based on several key factors:

1. The legitimisation factor: The resumption of operations in educational institutions in occupied territories is viewed

as a demonstration of “stability” and “well-being”. This narrative is actively promoted through Russian-controlled media to cultivate an image – for both internal and international audiences – of the local population accepting the new reality.

2. The social-communicative factor: Teachers constitute one of the most influential professional communities with direct access to children and parents; in rural areas, they typically serve as public authorities. Through the pedagogical environment, the occupation authorities aim to relay messages of loyalty to the new regime, neutralising potential pockets of resistance.
3. The administrative factor: Educators who voluntarily agreed to cooperate are perceived by occupation administrations as more disciplined and predictable executors. Furthermore, through communication with students, teachers can indirectly gather information regarding sentiments within families, providing valuable intelligence for Russian special services.
4. The ideological factor: Teachers were viewed as the key instrument for the indoctrination of children. Through the curriculum, classroom rhetoric, and extracurricular activities, a targeted influence is exerted on children’s identities – ranging from the imposition of Russian value orientations to the systemic displacement of Ukrainian narratives and cultural markers.

2.1 Collaborationism

Despite the experience of the 2014 occupation, the Ukrainian state managed to provide a clear legal assessment of the phenomenon of collaborationism only in March 2022. Amendments to the Criminal Code of Ukraine defined collaborative activity as a crime against the foundations of national security. Notably, one area of emphasis was recognising actions related to aiding the enemy in implementing the educational standards of the aggressor state – i.e.,

legitimising a foreign educational system as an element of occupation authority – as unlawful. Such attention to the educational sphere reflected an understanding of the school's role not merely as an institution for knowledge transfer, but as an instrument for forming identity and political loyalty.

Although preliminary estimates suggest the number of Ukrainian educators who chose the path of conscious cooperation with the occupation authorities did not exceed 1%³, the very fact that individual teachers betrayed professional and civic principles caused significant social resonance. This called into question the stability of moral guideposts and provoked public discussion regarding the boundaries of permissible survival strategies under occupation.

Collaborationism is a behavioural adaptation strategy under conditions of external control, containing deep ethical dilemmas. It cannot always be viewed as a conscious betrayal; therefore, it is expedient to distinguish between two types:

- **Passive collaborationism:** Driven by pressure, threats of physical violence, deprivation of means of subsistence, or fear for the lives of relatives.
- **Active collaborationism:** Linked to ideological affinity with the occupier, personal gain, or a desire for social advancement.

As with other behavioural strategies, individuals assess the ratio of risks to benefits, where the material factor is often combined with worldview, identity, and cultural factors. An analysis of the motivations of educators who agreed to cooperate allows for the identification of several primary types:

³ Д. Кречетова, *Влада знає все прізвища педагогів-колаборантів, вони відповідатимуть перед законом – Шкарлет*, Українська правда, 14 November 2022, <https://life.pravda.com.ua/society/2022/11/14/251304> [20.11.2025].

- **Adaptive (Mimicry):** This type reflects a desire to preserve professional activity, avoid persecution, and ensure a stable standard of living. Educators of this type do not display ideological loyalty to the occupation regime, guided instead by the instinct of survival. This group includes teachers who consider their work “apolitical” and use arguments such as “I just teach children.” This category also includes individuals who had limited opportunities for evacuation due to elderly or sick relatives, or who feared the uncertainty associated with displacement.
- **Material:** The Russian occupation administration used financial incentives as a tool for recruitment. In mid-2022, teachers in the Kherson region were offered salaries in the range of 645–725 USD, and directors around 2,400 USD, which was several times higher than the average wage level in most regions of the Russian Federation⁴. This indicates an attempt to transform material motivation into a means of loyalty.
- **Career:** For certain individuals, the occupation opened new opportunities for career advancement. Some educators, unable to attain leadership positions within the Ukrainian educational system due to professional or personal qualities, perceived collaboration as a “social elevator”.
- **Compensatory (Vindictive):** The occupation became a chance for individuals with discredited reputations or conflict-ridden pasts to regain status and influence. For such educators, collaboration performed the function of psychological compensation and revenge.
- **Ideological:** This group is characterised by a conscious pro-Russian orientation. Their convictions were formed

⁴ M. Honchar, *Education policy of the Russian Administration in Occupied Kherson region (the end of February – October 2022)*, “Studies in Comparative Education” 2022, no. 2, DOI: 10.31499/2306-5532.2.2022.270951.

well before the Russian aggression – under the influence of Soviet nostalgia, Russian media, or the belief in “one people”. This is particularly characteristic of older educators who identify the “return of Russia” with the restoration of Soviet stability.

At the same time, motivational factors rarely appeared in isolation. In most cases, there was a combination of pragmatic, psychological, and moral motives.

Special attention must be paid to cases of coerced collaboration by representatives of the occupation administration or special services, which are recorded in numerous testimonies. Methods of pressure included threats of personal reprisals, blackmail regarding the safety of family members, physical violence, detention, as well as psychological pressure through “corrective conversations” and searches. In such situations, the concept of the “voluntary nature” of collaboration becomes relative and requires a differentiated approach to determining guilt and the degree of responsibility.

2.2 Resistance

The resistance of educators did not take on an armed character, yet its consequences for the occupation authorities proved tangible. For the preservation of national identity, this resistance is no less important than military victories.

Three main forms of educational resistance can be distinguished:

- **Departure:** The most common strategy was the migration of educators from temporarily occupied territories – either abroad or to Ukrainian-controlled territory. Many of them continued their pedagogical activity using distance education tools. This type of resistance became a form of “preserving the school in exile”, where the educational process under Ukrainian standards was reproduced in

virtual space, maintaining the unity of students regardless of their location⁵.

- Latent resistance: Due to various life circumstances, a portion of educators were forced to remain in the occupied territories while refusing to cooperate with the occupation authorities. Some changed their field of activity, working outside of education. Until the summer of 2024, they were also entitled to receive financial support from the Ukrainian state in the form of “downtime” payments – two-thirds of their salary (approximately 150 USD). However, in June 2024, the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine insisted on ceasing such payments and terminating employment relations with educators remaining in the temporarily occupied territory (as of 1 May 2024, there were 1,975 such individuals, or about 0.5% of the total number). The rationale for this decision was the impossibility of properly controlling who actually received these funds.
- Active resistance: A distinct group of educators, having refused collaboration and remained in the occupation zone, demonstrated the courage to continue teaching secretly – in Ukrainian distance schools or by providing individual consultations to students who also remained in the occupied territories.

Unlike the situation in 2014, the resilience of educator resistance was ensured by the following factors:

- The extensive network of official communication channels with educators in the temporarily occupied territories;
- The active use of online banking, which allowed educators to receive salaries, pensions, and other financial aid;

⁵ V. Ferraro, G. Lotta, M. Honchar, *How Wars Impact Public Administration and Street-Level Bureaucracy: Teachers and Education Professionals on the Frontlines of the Russian Occupation in Ukraine*, Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, 2025, DOI: 10.1093/jopart/muaf035

- The active use of distance education tools, facilitated by the prior experience of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Educator resistance did not go unnoticed by occupation structures. Teachers frequently became victims of repression. Dozens of cases of enforced disappearances, searches, and interrogations have been recorded. There are known cases where school principals were held in basements for refusing to hand over keys to educational institutions or to open them for the “new administration”. Usually, educators were released after interrogation, but these events had a distinctly intimidating character.

These actions were not an organised movement, but collectively they formed a network of horizontal resistance. The psychological endurance of educators is explained not only by professional ethics but also by a deep sense of mission. For the majority, the school is not simply a place of work, but a form of service to society. That is why even those who left the occupied territories continued to teach their students remotely, maintaining the educational link between occupied communities and Ukraine.

3.

THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS AS AN INSTRUMENT OF INDOCTRINATION

Approximately 1.6 million Ukrainian children potentially residing in the temporarily occupied territories constitute not merely a demographic group but a strategic resource for the occupation authorities. The administration prioritises the formation of an educational space that not only ensures learning but also reproduces political loyalty and a new model of the “Russian citizen”.

The full-scale invasion of 2022 merely consolidated a process that has been underway since 2014: the gradual transformation of education in the occupied territories into an instrument of political, ideological, and cultural expansion. From the first days of the occupation of Crimea, and subsequently parts of the Donbas, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia regions, the Russian authorities have viewed the school not as a space for knowledge, but as an instrument for the systemic construction of loyalty, a means of destroying Ukrainian identity, and a tool for shaping a generation for whom Ukraine is presented as an “enemy” and Russia as the “only Motherland”.

Indicative of this are the methodological materials prepared for educators by the “Crimean Republican Institute of Postgraduate Pedagogical Education”, which explicitly state that the teacher must “...cultivate in refugee children positive feelings toward the country that saved them from death and showed heartfelt care and assistance: gratitude and love for Russia and the Crimean land, ready to become

their new Fatherland”⁶. This directive effectively requires educators to function not as bearers of knowledge, but as ideological mentors tasked with forming a positive image of the occupation authorities in children.

3.1 Destruction of Ukrainian linguistic and cultural presence

The primary task of the occupation authorities was the eradication of the Ukrainian language and culture from all spheres of life, particularly education. On the Crimean Peninsula, this process began immediately after the annexation of the territories, and by the autumn of 2014, all schools on the peninsula had been transferred to Russian curricula. The only Ukrainian-language gymnasium in Simferopol fully switched to Russian as the language of instruction as early as September 2014, despite protests from parents.

Today, not a single school with Ukrainian as the language of instruction remains in the territories of Crimea and Sevastopol. This fact is one of the most obvious markers of the systemic Russification of the peninsula’s educational space. Formally, Ukrainian remained one of the “state” languages after 2014 according to the local constitution; however, in practice, it has been completely displaced from curricula, textbooks, and public life. Ukrainian language teachers were forced to retrain as Russian language teachers or were dismissed.

The Crimean Tatar language, which also holds state status on the peninsula, has been preserved in only seven of the fifteen schools where it was taught prior to annexation. The policy of the occupation authorities has led

⁶ *Методические рекомендации по преподаванию учебных предметов детям, прибывающим с территории Украины, на которой проводится Специальная военная операция (иностранный язык), Крымский республиканский институт постдипломного педагогического образования, https://krippo.ru/files/ukr_metod/f1.docx [16.11.2025].*

to the marginalisation of the Crimean Tatar language among the youth.

The process unfolded somewhat differently in the territories of the so-called “People’s Republics” of Donbas. For a time, certain Ukrainian components were retained in the curricula. However, this was merely a tactical step. By 2017, Ukrainian subjects had completely disappeared, replaced by “History of Donbas” and “Literature of the Peoples of Donbas”.

New curricula promoted the narrative of a “separate path for Donbas”, claiming it had “always been part of the Russian world”. In the region’s Ukrainian past, emphasis was placed solely on episodes from the Soviet period, and after 2014, exclusively on themes of the “struggle against the Kyiv regime”. Any mention of democracy, human rights, or European values disappeared from textbooks. Civic education was replaced by the propaganda of state patriotism.

From 1 September 2025, the process of unifying educational content for all occupied regions was brought to a systemic level. With the participation of the Russian Military-Historical Society, a new line of textbooks titled “History of Donbas and Novorossiya” for grades 5–7 was printed for schools in the Donbas, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia regions. This series is positioned as a supplement to the unified Russian history textbook compiled by V. Medinsky and A. Torkunov, cementing the official interpretation of history as “Russia’s struggle for the reunification of historical lands”.

3.2 Militarisation of upbringing

If the key task during the initial stage of occupation was the destruction of the Ukrainian educational space, the main priority subsequently became the formation of a new type of citizen – politically loyal, disciplined, and psychologically prepared for participation in military actions. ,

The Russian Federation has built a comprehensive institutional system of military-patriotic upbringing in the occupied territories, which includes schools, youth organisations, specialised cadet and Cossack classes, as well as a network of extracurricular clubs and camps.

Massively, using various forms and tools (uniforms, weaponry, ceremonials, etc.) and starting from an early age, the system attempts to shape in boys and girls a perception of war as a natural state, and military service as the highest degree of civic duty. Unlike the Soviet period, when the cult of the army was part of patriotic mythology, the modern Russian model has a more aggressive, mobilisation-oriented character and is directly linked to the justification of armed aggression against Ukraine.

As early as kindergarten, children are introduced to army symbols and “heroes of the special operation”. Posters depicting military equipment, flags, and the letters Z and V are placed on walls; educators conduct thematic events with a military context. The visual presence of military symbols forms an environment where war is perceived as a norm, not a tragedy.

In schools, this continues through the ritualisation of the educational process: every Monday involves raising the Russian flag and singing the anthem. Teachers are required to conduct “Conversations on Important Things” – mandatory educational hours dedicated to themes of “serving the Fatherland”, “protecting Donbas”, “fighting fascism”, etc. During such lessons, videos from the front, excerpts from films, and war songs are used. All of this is presented as “moral-patriotic education” but is, in fact, a component of war propaganda.

The symbolic component is no less important. The school space is being transformed into a space of cults: schools are massively renamed after Heroes of the Soviet Union and Russia or fallen participants of the “Special Military Operation” (SVO); corridors feature stands with portraits of military personnel from different eras and slogans like “We don’t

abandon our own". Children participate in drawing contests titled "My Army – My Pride", write letters to soldiers, and collect humanitarian aid for the front. These practices have a dual effect: they ostensibly cultivate empathy, but in reality, they remove the moral barrier regarding violence, transforming it into "service".

One of the most illustrative elements of the militarisation of the educational space in schools is the "Hero's Desk". This practice involves creating special places in classrooms dedicated to participants of the "Great Patriotic War" and fallen "heroes of the SVO" – primarily alumni of the school. The desk is decorated in the colours of the Russian flag, featuring a portrait and biography of the "hero", along with quotes about patriotism and duty to the Fatherland. At the level of educational work, such initiatives are enshrined in official methodological recommendations and viewed as an "instrument of patriotic upbringing". It is implied that sitting at such a "desk" is an honour. The "Hero's Desk" has a dual effect: on the one hand, it legitimises war as a societal norm; on the other, it creates personal examples for children to "emulate". Through the personalisation of military death, the educational space is transformed into a memorial one, where the memory of war is integrated into daily school life and becomes a vital element of ideological upbringing.

Systematicity is lent to this work by the school's annual educational plan, based on methodological recommendations from the Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation, and the introduction of the position of Advisor to the Director on Educational Work, whose role is to ensure coordination.

Extracurricular forms of work play a substantial role in militarisation. A key role in this process is played by mass children's and youth organisations – *Yunarmia* (Young Army), "Movement of the First", and "Warrior" (*Voin*). Their activities cover both extracurricular and out-of-school work, creating an alternative socialisation environment for children where the core value is subordination to the state.

Yunarmia operates most systematically, possessing a structure analogous to the military. Formally, the organisation's goal is the development of civic responsibility, but the actual result is the assimilation of military rituals and behavioural norms in a hierarchical environment, which serves as the foundation for future mobilisation readiness. Students aged 10–17 are enrolled in its ranks. Participation in the movement is often formally voluntary, but in practice, it is a mandatory condition for participation in school events and contests. Members of *Yunarmia* wear uniforms, undergo drill and medical training, visit military units, and perform symbolic “combat tasks” – for example, preparing gifts for soldiers or participating in parades.

Movement of the First performs the role of the “civilian facade” of military upbringing. Its branches organise mass festivals, contests, and “Lessons of Courage”, which form a positive attitude toward military service and “heroes of the SVO”. Through them, the ideological narrative of Russia as a “liberating force” is cemented, and children learn to equate civic activity with the demonstration of political loyalty.

A separate direction is the creation of Cadet and Cossack classes, which have official status within the Russian educational system. Such classes have existed in Crimea since 2015, and after 2022, they are being actively opened in the occupied territories of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions.

In the curricula of Cadet classes, subjects with military-patriotic content constitute a significant portion. Children study in them from the age of 6–7, undergoing military training according to a separate program. Each class has a patron unit (military, police, Investigative Committee, Prosecutor's Office, Rosgvardia, etc.) with an assigned officer-curator, and military-oriented subjects are included in the timetable. Students wear uniforms and participate in ceremonial events, reviews, and competitions.

Cossack classes complement this process with a component of “Orthodox-patriotic upbringing”, in which the cult of service to the state is combined with elements of religious rhetoric. Such a system creates a closed environment in which the child is integrated into military culture from an early age.

The Soviet game “Zarnitsa” has received new meaning, content, mass participation, and financial injections. Participation in it is a mandatory part of school educational work. Thus, the model of “play through war” is reproduced, cementing the emotional connection between heroism, strength, and violence.

The militarisation of the educational process is not limited to school walls. Summer camps play a significant role; after 2022, they became one of the most effective tools for the ideological processing of children from the occupied territories. Under the guise of “health shifts”, thousands of schoolchildren from temporarily occupied territories are sent to various regions of Russia. Lectures on the “historical unity of the peoples of Russia”, drill training sessions, meetings with “SVO” participants, and screenings of patriotic films are conducted in these camps. For children, this entails a prolonged stay away from home, in a fully controlled information environment, under the supervision of experienced instructors⁷.

Synchronously with the militarisation of educational content, a repressive demilitarisation of consciousness occurs – that is, the displacement of any alternative ideas regarding peace, cooperation, and tolerance. Teachers are warned that conversations about peace or doubts regarding the goals of the “SVO” constitute “discrediting the army” and are punishable.

⁷ А. Павлюк, *Копали окопи і ставили розтяжки: історія дівчини з Херсонщини, яка була у військовому таборі в РФ*, Українська правда, <https://life.pravda.com.ua/society/istoriya-18-rizhnoji-ukrajinki-shcho-bula-u-viyskovomu-tabori-v-rf-310250/> [23.11.2025].

Thus, the child not only absorbs militarised content but is also deprived of the cognitive tools for its critical assessment. The result is the formation of a closed system in which every level – from kindergarten to university – reproduces a model of the world where Russia is a “besieged fortress”. Education ceases to be a sphere of personality development, transforming instead into a mechanism for recruiting future soldiers and loyal citizens.

The tragic consequence of this educational policy has been the formation of a generation that has undergone socialisation entirely under conditions of occupation. Over the nearly eleven years of occupation in Crimea and parts of the Donbas, the Russian education system has encompassed children born in independent Ukraine. Graduates of schools in occupied Crimea and Donbas now form the core of those mobilised into the Russian armed forces. Local media regularly report on their deaths on the front lines of the “SVO”, while schools open “Hero’s Desks” and conduct “Lessons of Courage”. Such practices form a stable behavioural model in which service and death for Russia appear not only permissible but honourable. In this way, the educational system in the occupied territories has turned into an instrument for reproducing loyalty and justifying war.

CONCLUSIONS

Russian educational policy in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine is a systemic and targeted instrument of subjugation through the sphere of humanitarian influence. Its content extends far beyond the traditional understanding of education as a means of knowledge transfer or child socialisation. In this context, education performs the functions of legitimising the occupation authority, exerting ideological influence, exercising social control, and mobilising human resources for the political and military needs of the aggressor state.

■ **Education as an instrument of political occupation**

The Russian Federation constructs the educational system in the occupied territories according to the logic of state administration, where the school becomes the administrative hub of the new order. It is used not merely for teaching but for the reprogramming of public consciousness – cementing the image of Russia as a “liberator” and creating an imaginary world in which independent Ukraine is presented as a hostile country. In this sense, school education constitutes an infrastructure of a colonial type: it is subordinated to the task of integrating the regions into a “unified Russian space” not through persuasion, but through coercion, the imposition of power symbols, and the substitution of historical memory.

■ **The institutional vertical as a mechanism of control**

The formation of an educational management vertical constituted the first stage of the occupation policy. The reliance on local personnel (2014) created an illusion of continuity, neutralised social unrest, and allowed Russia to rapidly implement its educational standards. However, between 2022 and 2025, a personnel deficit forced the occupation authorities to alter their selection

principles, prioritising political loyalty. This led to the influx of “Varangians” – officials from Russian regions who lacked local authority but guaranteed control from the centre. Thus, educational management became a mirror of the colonial administration, where the key role is played not by competence but by the degree of subordination to federal curators. The constant rotation of personnel and the short tenure of “Ministers of Education” indicate the instability of the occupation vertical, which remains in a state of permanent “reformatting”. Such turbulence not only destabilises the system but also demonstrates a limited level of trust even within the occupation apparatus itself.

■ **Collaborationism as a social phenomenon**

Collaboration within the educational environment is behavioural rather than ideological in nature. For educators who agreed to cooperate, the determining factor was not conviction, but the assurance of a stable existence. The Russian occupation authorities perceive them as tools for creating an illusion of “normal life” under occupation. However, the low percentage of collaborators (under 1%) testifies to the ethical resilience of Ukrainian educators. At the same time, collaborationism cannot be viewed solely through a legal lens. It reflects the moral dilemma of the individual under occupation, where the choice between survival and betrayal is often dictated not by worldview but by fear, self-preservation, or psychological pressure. This requires a differentiated policy of responsibility following de-occupation, one that takes into account the degree of voluntariness and the nature of each individual’s participation.

■ **Educational resistance as a form of civic resilience**

Ukrainian teachers have demonstrated a unique phenomenon of non-violent resistance based on professional solidarity, ethical principles, and a sense of mission. This resistance was not political, but value-based: teachers defended not a government, but the right to truth,

culture, and dignity. They preserved the symbolic unity of the Ukrainian educational space, transforming digital education into a “school in exile”. It is precisely due to this continuity that Ukraine has not lost control over its educational space.

- **Indoctrination and militarisation as a strategic goal**

Russian educational policy in the temporarily occupied territories reflects a shift from an enlightenment model to a mobilisation model of education. Curricula, school rituals, youth organisations (*Yunarmia*, “Movement of the First”), cadet classes, and educational camps share a singular goal: to create a generation capable of accepting violence as a norm of life without question. This system operates not only through the content of textbooks but also through the emotional environment: war symbols, portraits of “heroes”, and the cult of “patriotic death”. Education loses its humanistic essence and becomes part of the state propaganda mechanism, which seeks to cement psychological loyalty from childhood.

- **The displacement of Ukrainian identity**

The destruction of the Ukrainian language and culture in education is not a side effect but a targeted act of genocide. In Crimea and the Donbas, the process of Russification has already been completed: not a single Ukrainian school remains. The same process is unfolding in the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions, where the Ukrainian language has been deprived of public status. Such a policy evidences an attempt to erase the Ukrainian cultural code and replace it with the myth of a “single people”.

- **The vulnerability of the Russian model**

Despite the outward display of discipline, the occupation educational system possesses a high level of structural vulnerability. It is sustained by administrative coercion, financial injections, and fear, rather than by public support. Its personnel are accidental and morally unmotivated, and even the slightest change in the political situation is capable of triggering a domino effect.

An additional factor of weakness is the existence of the parallel Ukrainian educational network “in exile”, which maintains communication with children and families in the temporarily occupied territories. This creates an additional information channel that undermines the monopoly of Russian influence.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To counter these systemic threats, the following actions are recommended for the Government of Ukraine and the international community:

1. Legislative and administrative measures regarding collaboration and resistance
 - Differentiation of collaboration liability: The Ukrainian legal framework must refine the definition of collaborationism to distinguish clearly between “active” and “passive” actors.
 - Recommendation: Amend the Criminal Code to differentiate between educators who took leadership roles or engaged in ideological indoctrination (e.g., implementing “Conversations on Important Things” or “Hero’s Desk” initiatives) and those who engaged in “survival strategies” under duress or threat of violence.
 - Rationale: Indiscriminate criminalisation risks alienating the “latent resistance” and complicates future social reintegration.
 - Reinstatement of financial support for educators in TOT: The decision by the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine in June 2024 to cease “downtime” payments to teachers remaining in occupation should be reconsidered.
 - Recommendation: Restore financial support mechanisms for verified educators who refuse to cooperate with the occupation administration.
 - Rationale: Cutting these ties severs the link between the Ukrainian state and its citizens, potentially forcing educators into “adaptive” collaboration due to the lack of subsistence means,

and undermines the “educational underground” that hinders Russian control.

- **Sanctions against “educational tourists” (Varangians):**
 - **Recommendation:** It is imperative to bolster Ukraine’s efforts in information sharing with international partners to facilitate the imposition of sanctions and the prosecution of all officials implicated in the implementation of Russian educational policy within the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine.
 - **Rationale:** These individuals are not civilians in the traditional sense but agents of institutional occupation. They should be subject to personal international sanctions and travel bans.

2. Counteracting militarisation and cognitive occupation

- **Documentation of war crimes against children:**
 - **Recommendation:** It is imperative to significantly intensify efforts towards the systematic documentation of the activities of paramilitary organisations such as *Yunarmia* and the *Movement of the First*, as well as the introduction of Cadet/Cossack classes in the TOT, as constituting violations of international humanitarian law.
 - **Rationale:** The militarisation of education and the preparation of children for mobilisation constitute a violation of the Geneva Conventions. This data must be prepared for the International Criminal Court (ICC) to prosecute those responsible for the “repressive demilitarisation of consciousness”.
- **Cognitive de-occupation strategy:**
 - **Recommendation:** Develop a comprehensive “Cognitive De-occupation Strategy” that includes psychological rehabilitation programs for children subjected to prolonged indoctrination and militarised propaganda.

- Rationale: Since the occupation has lasted over a decade in some areas, a generation has been raised in a “besieged fortress” mentality. Physical de-occupation will not automatically reverse the psychological effects of the “cult of war”.
- 3. Strengthening the “school in exile” and digital resistance
 - Expansion of the distance education infrastructure:
 - Recommendation: Increase investment in secure distance education platforms and “schools in exile” that allow children in TOT to maintain contact with the Ukrainian curriculum.
 - Rationale: Distance learning is the primary tool for preserving national identity. The current reliance on the personal heroism of teachers is insufficient without robust state technical and security support.
 - Flexible reintegration pathways for students:
 - Recommendation: Significantly intensify efforts to facilitate access to education by implementing robust systemic solutions for the simplified recognition of learning outcomes and ensuring secure digital connectivity for students in the TOT. Furthermore, it is essential to establish remedial programmes centred on History, Language, and Civic Education – subjects most distorted by Russian propaganda – whilst automatically validating neutral disciplines (e.g., Mathematics, Sciences) to mitigate academic penalties.
 - Rationale: Fear of academic exclusion or the need to retake years of schooling discourages families from maintaining ties with the Ukrainian educational space.
- 4. International advocacy and monitoring:
 - Monitoring of textbook weaponisation:
 - Recommendation: Establish a monitoring group to analyse Russian textbooks introduced in TOT, specifically the “History of Donbas and

Novorossiya” series and materials by the Russian Military-Historical Society.

- Rationale: These texts serve as evidence of the deliberate intent to erase national memory and rewrite history. This evidence is crucial for combating Russian narratives in the Global South and among international academic communities.
- Pressure on international organisations:
 - Recommendation: Ukraine must strategically mobilise its diplomatic leverage within international bodies, notably UNESCO and UNICEF, to instigate a rigorous review of partnership protocols. The objective is to ensure that neither direct perpetrators of the Russification of children (such as *Yunarmia*) nor their broader ecosystem of affiliated entities, financial sponsors, and proxy organisations are granted consultative status, funding, or any platform for cooperation. It is crucial to institutionalise exclusion mechanisms that prevent international resources from legitimising actors complicit in forced indoctrination.

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