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How Russia Fabricates Criminal Cases Against Ukrainians

The imposition of Russian criminal law in the occupied territories has granted its security services sweeping powers.

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On the night of September 25, 2023, Russian security forces stormed the home of Tetiana and Oleh Plachkovs in Melitopol. The couple was led out in handcuffs, and taken to an unknown location.

Four months later, having been charged with “espionage,” Tetiana was brought to a Melitopol hospital in a coma. Ukrainian officials demanded her evacuation, but received no response. In May, Tetiana, 51, died. Oleh remains missing.

Experts warn that their story is emblematic of a systematic Russian practice of detention, torture and coerced confession to construct a parallel legal reality in which the aggressor casts itself as the victim. Over the past three years, de facto courts in the occupied territories have issued at least 190 sentences based on fabricated charges, primarily for treason or espionage.

Borys Petruniok, a war crimes documenter and analyst at the ZMINA Human Rights Centre, said that imposition of Russian criminal law in the occupied territories granted its security services sweeping powers, as well as being completely counter to international humanitarian law.

"Any form of dissent can be labeled as sabotage or espionage," he explained. "Under the guise of combating terrorism, the Kremlin is legitimising the persecution of civilians and its repressive practices as a whole."

[Tetyana Katrychenko](#), director of the Media Initiative for Human Rights, said Russia had a long-term objective.

"Russia has already collected hundreds, if not thousands, of pieces of fabricated evidence and is issuing sentences based on baseless accusations. Eventually, it will attempt to use this body of falsehoods to justify its aggression."

Ukraine is investigating the unlawful criminal prosecution of its citizens in the occupied territories as evidence becomes available, including testimonies from released detainees, relatives and lawyers, as well as documents and open-source material. This work is carried out by the Prosecutor General's Office, the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), the Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights and the Tribunal for Putin coalition.

Andrii Yakovliev, managing partner of Umbrella Law Firm and an expert with the Media Initiative for Human Rights NGO, said that while the introduction of Russian legislation in the occupied territories violated the law of occupation, it did not automatically qualify as a war crime.

By contrast, the fabrication of criminal cases may constitute a serious violation of international humanitarian law.

Mykyta (not his real name) is from the Donetsk region. After his city was occupied, Russian forces took him and his family first to Donetsk and from there to Russia.

Mykyta, 19, had no intention of staying in Russia and immediately planned his escape route: a flight to Kaliningrad, and from there, a crossing into Poland.

But he was detained without explanation at the Russian border, and as he was being transported to a police station, security forces seized his phone and were seen tampering with it.

Later, it became clear what they were doing: while he was being transported to the police department and interrogated, new posts appeared on his VKontakte page, a Russian social media site he had not used in years.

The posts were reposts of fundraisers for the Azov Regiment, which Russia has designated a terrorist organisation. This manufactured digital

trail became the evidence in the fabricated case against him, and Mykyta was placed in pre-trial detention on April 15, 2023.

He was charged under Article 205.2 of the Russian Criminal Code concerning public incitement or justification of terrorism, which carries a sentence of up to seven years in prison.

Mykyta spent nearly a year behind bars, facing constant pressure from security service officers to confess, until the court delivered its verdict in February 2024: a 60,000-rouble fine (740 US dollars). Having already served his time, he was released directly from the courtroom.

Legal experts note this as a perfect example of Russia's usual playbook: a baseless arrest, followed by the fabrication of evidence, coercion and a swift, rubber-stamped verdict.

Coerced Confessions

Petruniok stressed that the use of torture to obtain confessions and the issuance of sentences without the right to a defence constitute simultaneous violations of the Geneva Conventions, the prohibition of torture and the right to a fair trial.

However, this continues to be routinely used to extract supposed confessions.

Vladyslav Striukov, a marine with the 36th Marine Brigade, was captured on April 12, 2022, during the defence of Mariupol, although Russia only confirmed his detention in May 2023.

A confession video [circulated by Russian media](#) in which Striukov apparently confirmed he had orders to shoot civilians was presented as evidence of his alleged crimes, and in 2023, he was sentenced to 20 years in prison, increased to 24 after the authorities opened a second case.

After his return to Ukrainian-controlled territory in September 2024 as part of a prisoner swap, Striukov described in detail the systematic torture used to extract these confessions.

"I was beaten with a baton, tasered and had dogs set on me," he said. "They attached a wire to my genitals and electrocuted me until I agreed to write a 'confession'. I couldn't take it anymore... I told them, 'I'll write that I killed all of Mariupol myself, just make it stop.'"

Another Ukrainian soldier, Dmytro 'Rasti' Kanupier of the 12th Azov Special Purpose Brigade, was sentenced by Russia to 29 years in prison on fabricated 'war crimes' charges. He had also been held captive for about two and a half years.

During his detention, Dmytro was repeatedly interrogated. Investigators demanded he provide information about alleged crimes committed by the Ukrainian military in Mariupol. The interrogations, which involved torture, lasted from one to twelve hours. Kanupier and several of his fellow soldiers, along with Vladyslav Striukov, were accused of the alleged murder of civilians in Mariupol.

According to Dmytro, his 'trial' took place within a single day, with three hearings held in approximately three hours. The state-appointed defence attorney failed to provide a defence: during the proceedings, he was on his phone and made no comment on the accusations.

The Search. Captivity project is a coalition of human rights defenders, lawyers and volunteers working to locate and support missing and detained Ukrainians. Its co-ordinator, who asked to remain anonymous for security reasons, said that despite the arbitrary nature of the Russian judicial system, cases still required an investigation stage before being brought to trial.

"Around 95 per cent of these cases are fabricated at the investigation stage," the coordinator explained, adding that providing any legal support to detainees was extremely hard.

"Access to the occupied territories is limited: under Russian law, it is a 'special military operation zone'. It's difficult for independent lawyers to get there, although a few still operate within Russia, much like in the Soviet era."

The main role of these lawyers is to maintain contact between the defendant and their family, relay information, monitor detention conditions, try to mitigate the risk of violence and document violations for potential international legal proceedings. While their work does not guarantee an effective defence, it is critically important for maintaining communication.

Cases are being investigated in Ukraine, but mostly at the level of individual episodes — instances of torture or specific court rulings that violated the right to a fair trial.

A systemic approach that would allow the fabrication of cases to be classified as joint criminal activity of the entire repressive vertical — from investigation to judiciary — is only now taking shape.

One of the few national response tools remains trials in absentia, which Ukraine has applied since 2014 to individuals beyond the reach of justice.

However, their effectiveness is limited.

"Without proving the legitimacy of the procedure - in particular, compliance with the right to defence - other states may refuse to recognise such verdicts," Yakovliev noted. "In fact, none have been enforced, because Ukraine lacks the infrastructure to do so."

At the international level, accountability may be pursued through the ICC or through national courts of other states under the principle of universal jurisdiction. But these mechanisms also have significant limitations: the ICC does not issue verdicts in absentia, and universal jurisdiction is applied selectively and often depends on the physical presence of the suspect.

In the absence of a universal system for enforcing verdicts, even proven international crimes may go unpunished.

"It's like the Bible," Yakovliev continued. "The commandments exist, but the court is 'somewhere, someday.'"

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