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Ukraine: Torture, Ill-Treatment by Armed Groups in East

Grave Medical Concerns for Detained Women



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(Kyiv) – Russia-backed armed groups in eastern [Ukraine](#) are [torturing and ill-treating](#) people in custody, Human Rights Watch said today. Human Rights Watch has obtained new information about several women being held by the “Donetsk people’s republic” (or “DNR,”) on apparently fabricated charges of “espionage,” who are facing serious health issues.

One woman was pregnant when she was detained in May 2021, two others have serious medical conditions for which they have not received treatment, and the fourth was tortured and held incommunicado.

Their cases underscore grave concerns about the health and safety of all detainees held by armed groups in nongovernment-controlled parts of the Donetska and Luhanska regions in eastern Ukraine, as well as particular concerns

about a lack of appropriate medical care for women detainees, including sexual and reproductive health care. The de facto authorities should immediately release them and anyone else being arbitrarily detained.

“The torture and other ill-treatment by armed groups is epitomized by their cruel treatment of women in custody,” said [Yulia Gorbunova](#), senior Europe and Central Asia researcher at Human Rights Watch. “To our knowledge, many detainees are being held incommunicado, in appalling conditions, and without access to a fair legal process or proper medical care.”

Human Rights Watch spoke with the family members of four women detainees, human rights activists close to their cases, and people who had been in detention with them.

The de facto “DNR” authorities have arbitrarily held Oksana Parshina, who is pregnant, since May 14 on suspicion of “espionage.” Since July 2019, they have arbitrarily held Natalia Statsenko, a medical doctor who has a chronic and painful neurological condition affecting her spine for which she needs immediate medical attention. Elena Zaitseva, arrested in March 2019, has had severe bleeding episodes, possibly related to a gynecological condition, but has received no medical care in custody. Olga Mozolevskaya was tortured and spent four years in incommunicado detention before being transferred to another detention facility in May. None of these women have received appropriate medical care in detention, Human Rights Watch said.

Since the war began in eastern Ukraine in 2014, Russia-backed armed groups in Donetsk and Luhansk regions have detained hundreds of civilians, accusing them, among other charges, of “espionage,” “participating in sabotage reconnaissance,” or “state treason.” In many cases, the groups refuse to acknowledge the person’s detention or whereabouts, making the [detentions enforced disappearances](#).

A [July 2 report](#) by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, which documented arbitrary detention, torture, and ill-treatment, by Ukrainian state authorities and by Russia-backed armed groups, in the context of the armed conflict, concluded that “arbitrary detention remained a daily occurrence in territory controlled by self-proclaimed ‘republics’” and that the majority of people held there for conflict-related reasons had been subjected to torture and ill-treatment.

In a 2019 report, [the UN special rapporteur on torture](#) said he “received persistent allegations of torture and ill treatment at the time of arrest and during interrogation” by armed groups.

In many cases, the “DNR” accuses people of “espionage” – and the “Luhansk people’s republic” (“LNR”) of “state treason” because they or their family members are perceived to have pro-Ukraine views, or because they have family members who work in Ukraine’s law enforcement, Human Rights Watch said.

Estimates vary as to the number of people currently held on such politically motivated charges. [Media Initiative for Human Rights](#), a Ukrainian group that monitors unlawful detention by armed groups, estimates that at least 170 are being held, while Ukraine state security services [say there are](#) 268. The July 2 UN report said that the “DNR” and “LNR” are holding a total of between 300 and 400 conflict-related detainees, including non-civilians.

Ukrainian activists said that some of the men held there also have serious health problems, including as a result of torture, that prison authorities are ignoring. These include Vyacheslav Zasyupko, 44, who was severely tortured, including with electric shocks, since his detention in September 2018; Vitaly Atamanchuk, 70, who has been in custody since March 2018 and has a leg fracture and others.

With no legal process available, the detainees’ only hope for release is to be exchanged for prisoners or detainees held by the Ukrainian government. There have been [several such exchanges](#), the latest in April 2020. People released in previous exchanges [have given extensive accounts](#) of torture and other ill-treatment, including in the “Izoliatsiia” detention center in Donetsk, which is [notorious for torture](#) and [long periods of incommunicado detention](#).

Under international human rights and humanitarian law, people who are arbitrarily detained should be immediately and unconditionally released. While in custody, detainees have a right to be treated with humanity and respect for their inherent dignity, and that includes access to appropriate medical care. The de facto authorities should immediately provide urgent access to adequate medical care to all detainees.

The United Nations [Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners](#) and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders (the “Bangkok Rules”) addresses the distinctive needs of women in custody, including providing gender-specific health care and specific accommodations for pregnant and breastfeeding women.

“The de facto authorities have an appalling record of abuse of detainees that needs to stop,” Gorbunova said. “All those wrongfully held should be freed immediately.”

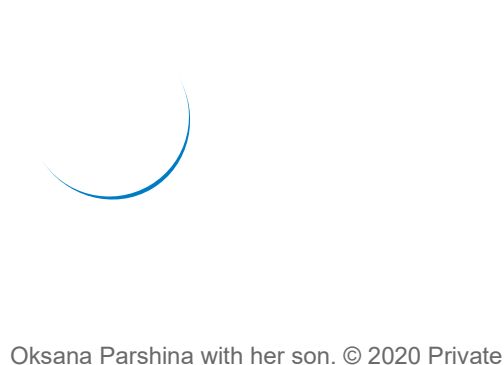
For additional details about the cases, please see below.

Oksana Parshina, 35

Parshina’s family told Human Rights Watch that she fled Donetsk in 2014, after shelling destroyed her house, and was living in a government-controlled area of the Donetsk region. On May 14, Parshina, ten weeks pregnant at the time, and her mother, who also lives in the government-controlled Donetsk region, traveled to Donetsk to visit Parshina’s sister and address some property issues. Because of Covid-19-related [travel restrictions](#), they had to enter the area via Russia. At the crossing point, members of the “DNR” armed groups detained Parshina but allowed her mother to continue to Donetsk.

Parshina’s relatives did not know her whereabouts for over 24 hours. The next day, “DNR” security services searched the apartment Parshina’s mother owns in Donetsk, seizing a computer and some religious literature. They told Parshina’s family that Parshina was being placed under “administrative arrest” for 30 days on suspicion of “espionage” but continued to hold her beyond that period.

Parshina, who was pregnant when taken into custody, was eventually transferred to a temporary detention facility, where she is currently held. Parshina was provided a lawyer, who, according to [Media Initiative for Human Rights](#), has done little more than tell her family to prepare for a trial. Parshina’s relatives reported her arrest to the Ukrainian authorities. Parshina’s sister said that she has no contact with Parshina and that the de facto authorities denied her requests to visit her in detention.



Natalia Statsenko, 43

Statsenko, a doctor from Makiivka, was arrested in July 2019 for “espionage.” [Stanislav Aseev](#), a journalist who spent 30 months in detention in Donetsk after having been arrested and later [convicted for espionage](#), said that he first met Statsenko at his own “court hearing,” as she was a witness in the case against him. Aseev has been raising Statsenko’s case since he was exchanged in December 2019. Statsenko’s father, Alexander, said that he was able to get updated information on his daughter’s health from her lawyer, who saw and spoke to her at a June 25 “court hearing” on her case.

Statsenko has a chronic spinal condition and is in constant severe pain, her father said. In June 2019, she underwent a medical checkup and was scheduled for spinal surgery that autumn but was arrested before she could get the treatment.

Statsenko’s father also said that in the past few months, his daughter started having seizures and that her right foot had recently become partially paralyzed. She is also experiencing stomach pain due to continued, protracted use of anti-inflammatory and pain medication she’s been taking for two years to manage the pain in her back and neck. Statsenko’s lawyer told her father that she had difficulty walking at the June 25 hearing.



Natalia Statsenko © 2015 Private

needs.”

She told her lawyer that she may not live to see the next hearing, scheduled for August 30. “She is exhausted and at the end of her rope from constant pain,” Alexander Statsenko said. “They have been holding her without even a trial or verdict in her case for two years, and not providing her with the medical help that she

Elena Zaitseva, late forties

Zaitseva was arrested in March 2019 while trying stop “DNR” security services from dragging her son away as he was being detained. A relative said that she spent at least a month in “Izoliatsiia” then moved to another detention facility in Donetsk. Tetiana Katrychenko, a human rights activists with [Media Initiative for Human Rights](#), said that Zaitseva has had repeated episodes of heavy bleeding,

most likely related to a preexisting gynecological condition and her health has rapidly deteriorated in recent months.

A former detainee who saw Zaitseva in “Izoliatsiia” in February 2019 confirmed this to Human Rights Watch. She also said that when she last saw Zaitseva, in August 2019 in another detention facility, she was frightened by Zaitseva’s gaunt appearance and that she looked like someone who “didn’t have long left.” At the time, Zaitseva told her that her condition was getting worse and that she was in severe pain and didn’t have any medicines. She has not received any medical care in detention. Zaitseva also told her family that cellmates were “pressuring” her. She was sharing a cell with five other women who are held on “non-political” charges.

Olga Mozolevskaya, 35



Olga Mozolevskaya. © 2015, Private

Olga Mozolevskaya’s husband, Vitaly, said that Mozolevskaya worked in a restaurant in Donetsk and regularly traveled there from her home near Avdiivka, in the government-controlled area. He said that one day in October 2017 his wife suddenly stopped answering her phone. After not hearing from her for two days, he

reported her missing to local Ukrainian police. He then traveled to Donetsk and reported her missing to the de facto authorities. He returned home to their son, who was 4 at the time, and received no further information about his wife’s exact whereabouts for several years.

Ukrainian human rights activists said that Mozolevskaya was held incommunicado in “Izoliatsiia” for four years – information that only became known after people previously held there were released in prisoner exchanges in December 2019 and April 2020 and contacted her husband. One former prisoner also identified her in a photo as someone they saw during their imprisonment.

A former “Izoliatsiia” detainee who met Mozolevskaya in detention said that Mozolevskaya was beaten and tortured early in her detention to coerce a confession.

They took her to a room with an investigator. The investigator would say: “Will you tell the truth?” She would reply “Yes, I will.” He would ask: “Did you do this or that [spy for Ukraine]? She would say: “No, nothing like that.” The investigator would leave the room and the security service agent would walk in, beat her, hit her on the face, smash her against the wall. Then the agent would leave, the investigator would walk back in and say: “Why is there blood on your face? Did you fall? Now will you tell the truth?”

The former detainee said that Mozolevskaya told her that she eventually “confessed” to everything the investigator asked of her.

Mozolevskaya’s husband said that his wife contacted him six weeks ago for the first time in four years to say that she was finally transferred to another detention facility. She told him that she could not share any details about her condition but asked for strong pain and anti-inflammatory medicines for her throat. Her husband said: “She’d also asked me to save money because she said she would need a lot of medical treatment [if and when released].”

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