

FEMALE PRISONERS

ANALYSIS OF TESTIMONIES OF WOMEN
FREED FROM RUSSIAN CAPTIVITY



2023



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INTRODUCTION

ON FEBRUARY 24, 2022 the Russian Federation launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The Russian army quickly captured a large area of the Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, Kharkiv, Zaporizhzhia, Kyiv, Chernihiv and Sumy regions. Since the beginning of the invasion, there have been reports of numerous taking of hostages the civilian population and capturing military personnel. Among the detainees, there is a large proportion of women

of various ages, some with significant health problems, some pregnant. Reports of improper detention conditions and cruel treatment of them began to appear almost immediately. Some women were kept in cells with men, not provided with food, drinking water, hygiene products, threatened with torture and tortured. DNA samples were also taken from women without their consent.

Prisoners of war are members of the armed forces of a Party to the conflict as well as members of militias or volunteer corps forming part of such armed forces, who have fallen into the power of the enemy. Once captured by the enemy, prisoners of war retain their status until their final release and repatriation. Should any doubt arise regarding the status of certain combatants, such persons shall enjoy the protection of international law until such time as their status has been determined by a competent tribunal. The Third Geneva Convention on the Treatment of Prisoners of War of August 12, 1949, is the primary legal act defining the legal status of prisoners of war. Both Russia and Ukraine are parties to this international agreement. Detention of combatants is not a war crime. However, the use of torture and inadequate conditions of detention of prisoners of war or their injury after they have laid down their arms and are in captivity constitute such a crime. The unjustified **detention, forcible transfer, and imprisonment of civilians as hostages are considered war crimes.**

FEMALE PRISONERS ARE LESS VISIBLE THAN MALE PRISONERS IN THE INFORMATION SPACE.

Among the key reasons for such conditional invisibility, two stand out.

1. Among prisoners, there are significantly fewer women than men. At the same time, conditions for keeping women in captivity are almost no different from the ones for men.

2. Despite the growing feminization of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU), where **41,000 women serve** as of December 2022 (their share is greater than the share of women in some armies of NATO countries), the image of a warrior and hero in Ukrainian society is still primarily associated with a man.

This affects the gender-sensitive coverage of war issues, particularly captivity. This also applies to civilian hostages detained in the occupied territories, who are often held in the same places as women prisoners of war.

It is impossible to name the exact number of detained women, as there is no 100% verified state or human right defenders list of prisoners of war and civilian hostages. However, it involves about several hundred.

According to the Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration of the Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine Iryna Vereshchuk, there were 1,700 servicepeople and civilians being held captive as at April 12, 2022 of which 500 were women. Later, one of pro-Russian Telegram channels published a series of photos of 80 women prisoners. The families recognized the women doctors of Mariupol military hospital No. 555, the servicepeople of the 36th and the 56th Brigades as well as a number of civilian prisoners. On August 11, Ms Vereshchuk further clarified that there were 131 female defenders of Azovstal being held captive – not only Azov Regiment members, but also those of the National Guard and the Border Guards.

The MIHR team has counted 161 female prisoners released from captivity since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion into Ukraine. For example, 86 Ukrainian servicepeople were returned home on April 1, 2022 including 15 women. It was during that exchange that Iryna Vereshchuk published the photos showing the women with their heads shaved by the captors. The Deputy Prime Minister later added that she was aware of the facts of intimidation and even rape of Ukrainian women prisoners. June 29, 2022 marked the largest exchange since February 24, 2022 although there was only one woman among the 144 Ukrainian servicepeople released on that day. That exchange was followed by another large-group exchange event of October 17, 2022 which was entirely focused on women.

Ukrainian authorities managed to arrange the return of 108 women from Russian captivity including 96 service members and 12 civilians. The oldest prisoner was 62 years old while the youngest one was 21.

This is a preliminary MIHR research on the detention and imprisonment of women in connection to the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. It aims to ascertain which detention practices implemented since 2014 the Russian Federation continues to apply after February 24, 2022, in the newly occupied territories and which new ones appeared, in particular, due to the deportation of Ukrainian citizens to the Russian territory. The analysis of these practices will contribute to the understanding of the intent and methods of Russia's war, particularly the elements of persecution. Studying these practices will also allow a better understanding of the specifics of victimization of victims and witnesses, their needs and preferences regarding the organization of criminal proceedings, reparations and other components of transitional justice. The analysis conducted in this study can be useful for establishing ongoing and effective psychological assistance for women returning from captivity. The sustainable applying a gender lens at all stages of this analysis will ensure greater sensitivity to this subject. This will improve the effectiveness of criminal and transitional justice for the benefit of victims and the sustainable development of Ukraine.

MIHR has experience in preparing similar researches. The report "Female Face of Donbas Hostages" was released in 2021, and MIHR intends to continue monitoring. The research we present today is based on the testimony of released civilian and military women, as well as prisoners of war family members and hostages, if they witnessed such detentions after February 24, 2022. Our MIHR experts conducted 23 interviews. We cannot name some of the interviewees' last names for their own and their relatives' safety.

DETENTION CIRCUMSTANCES

The first days of Russia's full-scale invasion into Ukraine led to a quick partial occupation of the northern oblasts – Kyiv, Chernihiv, and Sumy in the north and Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts in the south of Ukraine. Furthermore, Russian forces advanced in the previously occupied Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts.



The objectives of the occupation of the north, south, and the east of Ukraine were all different. In Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts the Russian army counted on the locals' support and did not expect any significant resistance — it even disregarded mass protests in support of Ukraine's unity. The occupation of the north of Ukraine was never an end in itself for the Russian army since gaining control over the northern oblasts paved way for advancing to Kyiv. However, the execution of the so-called "special military operation" in the east of Ukraine with the declared objective of protecting the allegedly oppressed people of Donbas was in fact intended to assist the leaders of the Russian-controlled "Luhansk People's Republic" (LPR) and "Donetsk People's Republic" (DPR) to expand their territories

all the way to the administrative borders of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts of Ukraine. Different approaches to occupation resulted in different treatment of the local population. While there weren't any mass arrests in the first weeks of the occupation of the south of Ukraine allowing the locals to protest in the streets, the local people of Kyiv, Chernihiv, and Sumy oblasts — men, women and children — were ordered to stay in basements irrespective of their age and state of health. Later, the occupiers resorted to mass arrests of activists in Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts whereas the civilians of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts were subjected to the so-called 'filtration'. As far as servicepeople are concerned, they were captured in the north, the south, and the east, both individually and in groups.

INDISCRIMINATE DETENTIONS

At the beginning of March, the Russian military entered the village of Yahidne in the Chernihiv region. On March 4, 2022, in the afternoon, Russians with assault rifles began to break into apartments and houses where people were hiding. They were taking them from everywhere to the local school basement. Russians kept explaining, «The village is bombed, and everyone will be safer there.»

*"They took me to the school grounds. In a car with a red cross. I saw three tanks in the yard. There was a commander's trailer, too. The Russian military personnel said that the commander lived there. All vehicles were marked with a tactical mark - a white circle. Soldiers had red bandages on their hands and legs" - says 24-year-old **Alina Sorokopud**, a local resident, civilian hostage.*

Everyone they brought to the school grounds was taken to the basement. On the first day, Russians gathered 15-20 people. Several dozens more the following day. In two or three days, according to the woman, everyone who lived in Yahidne at the time of the occupation was taken to the school basement.

“ THESE WERE 360 CIVILIANS: MEN, WOMEN, CHILDREN, AND THE ELDERLY. ALL OF THEM WERE KEPT IN THE SAME ROOM.

"Two drunken Tuvans (representatives of the Turkic people, who in particular live on the territory of the Russian Federation - MIHR) came down to us twice a night. To chat," recalls Alina. "One of them offered to give a child a grenade. Another pointed a machine gun at my female

neighbor asking, 'Will you drink vodka with me?' The woman managed to refuse."

Alina Sorokopud was released at the end of March 2022, when the Russian military left Yahidne.

DETENTION WITH THE AIM TO PERSUADE TO COOPERATE

About the occupation of the Andriivka village in the Chernihiv region speaks Tetiana Bezlyudna, village council member and principal of the local school.

At the end of March, 2022 Russian troops entered to this village and occupied the premises of the local school. Representatives of the occupying forces began to visit local authorities to persuade them to cooperate.

"The day Russians entered the village, they drove to my place, looking for me specifically. That is, they got a tip from someone. I wasn't hiding, I have nothing to hide," says Tetiana. "They tried to get me to cooperate with them. But at the end of the day, they brought me to the square in front of the school in the center of the village and let me go."

Olena Plaksina, a deputy of Tokmak City Council of the Zaporizhzhia region, recalls the occupation of the south, *"When Tokmak was occupied, in addition to Russian troops, representatives of the FSB entered the city. First, a former member of the Anti-Terrorist Operation disappeared in the city on March 19, and his whereabouts are still unknown. They came for me in two days - on March 21. I was the first woman in the city to be detained by the FSB."* The same day, at night, they kicked in the door of her apartment. *"I asked for a reason, but no one explained anything, I was told to get ready to go,"* recalls Olena.

That is how she ended up at the local district police department, at that time occupied by Russians. *"I was kept in the room where they had previously kept the ones detained for 24 hours. I was lucky they made me stay there just for a day,"* she adds in a conversation with MIHR. *"I spent the entire night without light and had a bag on my head. The next day, around noon, they took me for questioning. It lasted for around three hours. They did not do anything to me physically, but moral pressure was there. They asked about lists of the former ATO participants and about weapons. I told them almost nothing of what they wanted from me, and they let me go, brought me home. But they took away laptops and phones, nothing was returned."*

MIHR has also interviewed the female principal of one of the schools of the Kherson region. She and her several colleagues were detained in August. *"The occupiers believed that if we agreed to cooperate, then parents and children would follow us, they hoped to organize the educational process thanks to us. First, they gathered the principals together, then they were summoned one by one, then started threatening them. My position was clear - no cooperation,"* she says. *"An FSB officer accused me of having the Organizing Remote Learning group on my phone, saying that it is forbidden in Russia."*

ACTIVE CIVIC POSITION

Since the beginning of the armed aggression against Ukraine in 2014, Russia has been developing practices of persecution, suppression of dissent, targeting journalists, public activists, and other civilians with a pro-Ukrainian position. With the full-scale invasion, these practices intensified.

On March 26, 2022, Russians detained Zaporizhzhia journalist Iryna Dubchenko. She came to the village of Rozivka (the Zaporizhzhia region), which was quickly occupied by Russians, to take care of her sick grandmother. They detained her because the woman was hiding at her place a seriously wounded Ukrainian soldier. The woman believes that one of the locals ratted her out to occupiers. The military man was kidnapped from her house, and Iryna herself was taken prisoner for two weeks.

"One day, I was told to come outside – they wanted to talk. I left both my phone and my passport in the house. My grandmother who was ill and immobile stayed there, too. Electricity had recently been restored in our village, so the lights were on. I didn't even lock the door thinking I'd be back very soon", she recalls. Iryna was taken to the "commandant's office" in Nikolske settlement, Donetsk oblast 20 km away from Rozivka. She was later interrogated.

"I thought I was in for talk and then they would let me go". The "commandant" was calm. He asked if I smoked and offered me a pack of cigarettes to keep. I declined. It turned out he was well aware where I was being taken", adds Iryna.

The woman ended up in prison.

"They took my fingerprints and photographed me. They gave me a document to sign. I asked them to let me read it – what if, all of a sudden, I am signing my own death sentence, but they did not allow me to read it.

To be honest, from a psychological standpoint, it was difficult. They held me from behind, a machine gun pressed against my back. You have no idea what that supervisor is up to – could he just kill me like that?! Nobody knows where I am. For everyone, I simply disappeared. Then we went down to the first floor. They ordered me to take off my shoelaces. They opened the cell door. It was a room with bars on the windows.

“ AND THERE WERE 17 MEN
IN THE ROOM. AND I WAS
THE ONLY WOMAN, –

the former detainee told MIHR.

"When they put us on a bus to transport us to another place of detention, the soldier who was escorting me almost broke my arm when he heard that I was an Aidar member's wife, that's whom they thought I was, although it was not true. I said it hurt, and he replied, 'Does it hurt you? You shot our children in Donetsk.' Then I realized that talking to these people is useless," adds Dubchenko.

Iryna was released two weeks after the detention, she was exchanged for some Russian military men, and she does not disclose the details of the operation.

The same facts were recounted by another civilian hostage who ended up in an all-male cell.

The participants and organizers of pro-Ukrainian protests in the south were

targeted as well. In particular, our team became aware of the arrest of a female activist who took part in pro-Ukrainian protests in Berdyansk, her identity to remain undisclosed for safety reasons. Her daughter reported her arrest on social media on March 20.

Another female resident of Berdyansk was arrested in her house. She was arrested for the message that she had sent to a chat with her friends. The message was about the situation in the port saying it was quiet, no engines running – a quiet night.

"They checked the [internet browser – MIHR] history on my phone and discovered that I had looked up Berdyansk port. This enraged the man [one of the people who arrested her – MIHR] and he started shouting. They took a hatchet from my husband – you know, a small axe that he had always kept in his tool chest – and said that if anything bad were to happen [in Berdyansk port – MIHR] in the morning, they would drive it into my head".

The woman is confident that she was betrayed by one of the ladies on the chat where she had posted the message.

Representatives and organizers of pro-Ukrainian actions in the south were detained, too. **Olena Bubnova** from Kakhovka of the Kherson region also was detained at the pro-Ukrainian rally. On April 3, 2022, the Russian military surrounded demonstrators. They gave people 15 minutes to disperse. Olena Bubnova stood in the first row and started a dialogue with a representative of the Russian army, so that is why they detained her.

"They came, and there were so many of them. On armored personnel carriers, armored prisoner transport vehicles, just prisoner transport vehicles. They left the armored personnel carriers, aimed their guns at the crowd, snipers climbed out onto the prisoner transport vehicles roofs and took aim, too. They lined up in front of us with

machine guns, and someone was pulling a grenade launcher. We began to tell them that we stand on our land, will not disperse, have the right to gather here, and we will do so. And one tells us, 'I'm done talking, you have 15 minutes to leave.'"

Bubnova did not have time to hide the Ukrainian flag and leave, so they detained her for three days.

A resistance movement activist in Melitopol, Zaporizhzhia oblast, was arrested for her patriotic views – again, her identity is undisclosed for safety reasons. When the woman was brought to the police station in Chernyshevskoho Street, she was searched and locked in a container.

"I was searched by a blond woman who about one meter sixty. While searching, she grabbed my arm and then pulled my hair and said the container was going to be my future home", she recalls.

Yulia, another hostage, was arrested for taking pictures of the collaborationists and the Russians who were collecting votes for the referendum. After the publication of those photos on one of the resistance channels [on social media — MIHR], Russia military showed up at Yulia's place.

"They were a motley crew in various clothes, but they were all wearing half-face balaclavas. They arrived in two ex-Ukrainian police patrol cars. They knocked down my gate on their way in. One of them, a younger guy of Middle-Eastern descent, hit me on the head and then knocked me down – I hurt my head when I landed against a convector".

Civilian hostage **Maria Demyanchuk** from the town of Balakliya was identified and arrested for her pro-Ukrainian stand. The woman recalls being brought to a prison cell where 8 women were sitting on the only two beds. Maria was threatened with torture.

CHECKING AND THE SO-CALLED FILTRATION

Yuliia Prykhodko, a volunteer from Mariupol of the Donetsk region, was detained on March 29, 2022. She tried to free her son, who had also been detained at one of the checkpoints because of his transporting people from Mariupol as a volunteer.

"In the village of Nikolske (the Donetsk region), I ran towards the military men who had arrested my son. Asking, where they would take them, what they detained them for?" recalls Yulia. "They asked me who I was, I answered that I was the mother of one of the boys. They told me to go with them to check the documents. Without any suspicions, I took my documents from the car and followed them. As soon as we got inside, they immediately made us face the wall, feet shoulder-width apart, hands behind our backs, and then they threw us into a cell. No one checked any documents; they simply took them away, like all personal belongings. We were threatened, I tried to ask something, and they already attributed to me that I am a female sniper. They treated us very harshly, it was forbidden to talk to them [to the Russian military – MIHR]."

Yuliia Prykhodko was released in five days; they told her she had passed the filtration.

Mariia Vdovychenko, 17 at the time of her detention, became another victim of filtering. In the village of Manhush, which is 20 km from Mariupol, she and her parents stood in line for filtering for several days. The Russian military has set up a filtration camp here.

"We were forcibly detained in Manhush", says Mariia. "We spent several days waiting in the cold, without food and without the opportunity to go to the toilet. Getting out of the car was impossible, they would destroy you. I will never forget the conversation between two soldiers of the so-called DPR, 'What did you do with those who hadn't not passed the filtering?' 'I shot ten people, and then I stopped counting, it's boring'. I entered the room with five armed soldiers. I was there alone, and I was petrified. One of the soldiers, who was lying on the mattress, looked at me and said, 'Dislike. There will be more women ahead, we will find something'. They pushed me out. My father said that during the filtering he was asked, 'Should we cut your ear off?' When they saw that he had an empty phone, they started pushing him, and then they hit him over the head with something heavy. He lost his sight, rehabilitation is ongoing".

This evidence proves that Russian military arrested civilians without any legitimate reason and without any substantiated suspicion of committing a crime or under any specific charge. Most hostages were women arrested for their anti-occupation and pro-Ukrainian views. While being held hostage, the women were threatened physical abuse and subjected to inhumane conditions. Russian military do not keep records of arrested persons nor do they inform the hostages' families about the reasons for the arrests. Therefore, it would be safe to assume that such arrests may be considered taking of civilian hostages which is prohibited by international humanitarian law applied to international armed conflicts.

ON THE BATTLEFIELD

Senior Sergeant **Anastasiia Matrushchenko** was captured during the hostilities when Russians shot from tanks and artillery her military unit near Kyiv.

"A tank hit the bunker, where the next shift was stationed, several times. When the smoke cleared, grenades flew into the room. Then the Russian military came. Weapons, ammunition, bulletproof vests and mobile phones were seized from us. They tied our hands and put blindfolds on our eyes", says Matrushchenko.

Lieutenant **Oleksandra Tsybuk**, a liaison officer, was also captured in approximately the same way. On March 2022, she was captured in the Bucha district along with 66 military personnel.

In early March, several hundred women of the 36th Separate Marine Brigade were surrounded in Mariupol. By mid-March, the brigade was divided: one part went to Azovstal iron and steel works, the other – to Illich iron and steel works. Subsequently, some of the military men from both enterprises were captured.

"We left on April 12, 2022, at 4 am. When our people were already hanging white flags there, my husband, three other officers and I left the plant and tried to get out of the encirclement," says Olena from the 36th Brigade. "We wanted to get to the private sector first, sit there, wait, see what the situation would be like, how people would behave, where they would go for humanitarian aid, and try to follow them without attracting any unnecessary attention. We had no military uniforms and no weapons. We found a house, spent a night there, but its owner handed us over to the so-called DPR soldiers". Olena was captured on April 14.

Olena's colleague – **Karyna** – was captured two days earlier, on April 12. She says that

the military men had no other choice but to give up – they had run out of food, water, and ammunition.

"We were taken away by car; I don't know whose car it was. They brought us to the specified place. There was a Ukrainian speaking local collaborator, who escorted all of us. There were many women, more than 50. When we were brought to the filtering station in Sartana, the Donetsk region, they locked us up in a hangar there. Separately men, separately women. Seriously injured male prisoners stayed with female prisoners. Female medics provided assistance to the wounded. We spent a night there and the next day, at night, we were taken to the penal colony in Olenivka", she says.

On February 24, 2022, **Anna**, senior combat medic was on rotation in Mariupol. Her rear base was shelled by the Russian army, so she followed her unit on the night of February 25 to Illich Iron and Steel Works where she provided emergency medical treatment to the wounded members of her unit and other troops. Before transitioning to the iron and steel works, the women were offered evacuation, but Anna chose to stay with her unit as their medic.

Anna was taken prisoner on April 12, 2022. Her unit was processed by DPR military forces. The prisoners of war were transferred from Myrne settlement to Sartany in Donetsk oblast where they were kept for 4 to 5 days. This is Anna's testimony about the conditions of her detention:

"The place where they kept us in Sartany was not even a hangar – it was some half-ruined barn. The latrine, a simple bucket, was in the corner. During the entire time we were fed only a couple of times".

After the detention in Sartana, Anna and other female prisoners were transferred to Olenivka.



LOCATIONS & CONDITIONS OF DETENTION ↘

Some women were kept in facilities in the newly occupied territories, some were relocated to the areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, which had been occupied for a long time, and some were deported to the Russian Federation regions bordering Ukraine.

FROM BASEMENTS TO PENAL COLONIES

In the northern regions of Ukraine, women, like men, were kept in the basements of district police departments, administrative buildings, and on the premises of local enterprises, too. Some of them were later released, and **some were deported through the territory of Belarus to the Russian Federation**. For example, on March 25, the Russian military took away 25-year-old Math teacher **Victoriia Andrusha**. After the full-scale Russian attack on Ukraine, she came to her parents in Staryi Bykiv of the Chernihiv region. Russians accused her of passing information on their troops' movement to the Armed Forces of Ukraine. For two days, they kept Victoriia in the boiler room, from where she was taken on March 2022. As of the date of this report, Victoria has been released and is no longer being held hostage.

In the south of Ukraine, detainees are also kept in basements, in the penal colonies and pre-trial detention centers of the occupied territories.

Some of the civilians and military are taken to the occupied Crimea, occupied areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Conditionally old places of detention of persons detained due to the aggression of the Russian Federation have been preserved there, and new ones have been created, too. For example, in the Donetsk region, Russians keep female prisoners in Pre-trial detention center No. 5 of Donetsk. This location has been known as a place of illegal detention since approximately 2016. The former civilian hostages released in the exchanges of 2017 and 2019 told MIHR that there were 8-14 persons in each cell of the pre-trial detention center.

"They kept the lights on at all times. Our daily walk only lasted half an hour. There was only cold water in the tap. Hot drinking water was distributed in a sawed-off plastic bottle. We

used the water bottle as a makeshift shower for a quick wash over the old toilet" – says Donetsk resident **Halyna Tereshchenko**.

As we interview **Olha Politova** [both were arrested on the suspicion of espionage and collaboration with the Ukrainian military – MIHR], she shows nasty scars on her arm:

"This white stain is from a wound that cockroaches fed on as it rotted for over a month. After a rough and humiliating interrogation and a few sleepless nights, I fell asleep and did not notice the cockroaches. The conditions at the pre-trial detention center were horrible. Two-level bunk beds, thick metal plates, and a very thin mattress, that is, only the remaining mattress cover: when women had menstruation, all the cotton wool had been taken out a long time ago. But life goes on, physiological needs remain, so we slept on those metal plates. I ate what my relatives passed on to me. The food that we were served at the pre-trial detention center was absolutely inedible."

Olha Politova spent two years and three weeks in that pre-trial detention center.

The district police department in Kakhovka of the Kherson region is one of the locations of detention; another is the premises of the former passport office. Olena Bubnova who was arrested at a protest might have been kept there, too.

"I was kept in an eight square meter office, with a lock on the door. It was the first floor. The occupiers set cells there, fortified them", says the former female prisoner. She recalls that three other women were kept in the room with her. They were detained not for the first time.

"We were given sweatshirts and rags so that we could lie on the floor. That is how I spent five days. Girls did even more. One

of them had been living like that for 14 days when they brought me in. We slept on the floor, they gave us only one hour to go to the toilet. 15 people had to use a single toilet in the morning and in the evening, and they were given only an hour for that. They beat men up, and we could hear that. It was terribly hot, but we were not allowed to open the door to the corridor. Later they gave permission to do it, but only at night. We would go to the corridor to breathe, because there was a toilet bucket in the room, and there was no fresh air at all. Until Sunday, August 21, we were guarded by the military, mostly Buryats. On August 21, all the military men were unexpectedly lined up, large cars began to drive up and load everything that was in the police offices. First, the cars with cargo left, and then they loaded all the soldiers and left. At the police station, only Novokakhovka collaborators remained. In the evening, when they let us out for an hour, they were very happy to stay in charge and do what they want. Until August 21, the military fed us rice with smelly canned food, and after that they stopped giving us food altogether. Collaborators, gathered from alcoholics and criminals, allowed themselves various statements like, 'I want to open - and I will, I don't want to open - and I won't, if I want, I'll allow it, if I don't want to - I won't.' When I was taken prisoner, I was on injections, so I took the medicine with me. In captivity, I asked about a doctor, they told me there were no doctors. My colleague was giving me injections right there".

Another detention facility was set up in Starobesheve, Donetsk oblast. It was there that journalist Iryna Dubchenko and volunteer Yulia Prykhodko were brought to. "Each cells measured about 12 square meters. There were two metal beds and a metal table bolted to the floor. The mattresses were horrible, but the cells where the boys were being kept were infested with lice and bedbugs so we considered ourselves lucky", recalls the former prisoner. "A latrine, a wash-basin

and a surveillance camera with a clear view of the latrine. When I had just been brought it, there were three of us in the cell, but soon there were eight. Each three of us slept in the same bed, and one had to sleep on the table".

Iryna shared the cell with civilian women: some of them had been arrested for being married to Ukrainian servicemen while others – for volunteering. Luckily, they were spared from physical abuse.

In the city of Melitopol, civilian hostages were brought to the police station in Chernyshevskoho Street. It was there that the resistance movement activist, whose name remains undisclosed for safety reasons, was kept. Instead of a cell, she was put inside a container in the police station yard: a cubicle two meters long, two meters wide and two meters high. "There were wooden benches that I slept on for nine days. They looked similar to the ones you would normally see in children's playgrounds: wooden boards with large gaps in between. The nights were blisteringly cold, and in the daytime the container turned into a Dutch oven as it caught a fair bit of sun despite being in the shade of a tree. They escorted me to the toilets twice a day, in the morning and in the evening. I found two one-kilo buckets under a bench. There was a lot of water, but it smelled awful. I used those buckets as potties and emptied them into a crack under the door. For the first three or four days I didn't get any food at all. During the first four days I did not catch a single ray of light nor did I have a breath of fresh air. It was pitch-black".

The woman was later transferred to the pre-trial detention center near a green clinic in Melitopol. Many other hostages who had been kept at the police station in Chernyshevskoho Street passed through it, too.

Lyudmyla Mykytenko, a civilian hostage, was brought to a police station in

Berdiansk. They claimed that her daughter was sending intelligence on Russian vehicle movements to the SSU from abroad.

"There was a latrine, two beds, a table and two chairs, a useless wash-basin and a toilet. The door to the toilet opened toward the corridor, so anyone could take a good look inside at any time", recalls the woman.

She was kept hostage for 22 days. Her captors played Russian music from 6am till 11pm, and they often put on the Russian national anthem. The music was so loud that we could barely hear one another while talking in the cell. The hostages were fed once a day.

"The leaky toilet let out a stinking puddle on the floor one meter long and half a meter wide. Everything that went in spilled right out. We were given potable water in 1.5 liter bottles while non-potable water came in 5-6 l ones. There was no tap or drain in the cell. Used water could only go into the toilet where it spilled out into the cell floor and further into the corridor", recounts Lyudmyla.

In addition to the inhumane conditions of detention, Lyudmyla also suffered from the lack of hygienic items. When her period started, she asked for sanitary pads which she was only given three days later. They hardly ever got toilet paper, and when they did, each person was rationed 50 cm each. It was sometimes replaced by newspapers or A4 printer paper.

It should be stressed that the hostages were rarely provided medical assistance at the detention facilities — even when they asked for it. For example, Lyudmyla told us about excruciating pains in her stomach due to the inability to defecate for 18 days caused by her abomination for dirty toilets.

Her multiple requests for medical attention fell on deaf ears.

This is what Lyudmyla recalls about the medical assistance at the detention facility:

"There was a lot of dry blood under one of the beds in our cell. We also found clamp forceps and two glass vials, one of them with a painkiller, as well two syringes, a bandage and some plasters in the trash can. I believe that somebody had been given medical treatment there, but it must have been a real emergency, a matter of life and death".

In addition to inhumane imprisonment conditions, the women were subject to physical abuse and torture. Lyudmyla tells that she was beaten for thinking too long before answering the question.

"I speak Ukrainian, and every time they asked me in Russian, it took me a while to produce an answer in their language. Every time I took a moment to collect my thoughts, that mad dog of a guard who stood behind me hit me on the head, six times. However, he did it so as not to leave any marks or bruises on my face. He hit me on the back of my head, boxed my ears, pinched my nose and threatened breaking it. He said he would kick me so hard that I would pee myself".

One of the civilian hostages told us more about the horrible imprisonment conditions:

"The light in the cell, a bright LED bulb, was always on. I could not sleep at all in the first 24 hours. On the second day, my family managed to pass me a plaid blanket which I pulled over my head. When I used the toilet, the only way to hide from the camera was to squat, but it captured half of my body when I was standing upright".

THE PENAL COLONY IN OLENIVKA

The women are also held in penal colony No. 120 in Olenivka, the Volnovakha district, the Donetsk region.

Olena, who serves in the 36th Brigade of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, saw other women in a cell of the colony in Olenivka, to which she and the other female military personnel were brought by a KAMAZ truck.

"Girls were brought out and told to lower their heads, not to look in any direction, because the boys who came out were beaten with truncheons. The procedure was as follows: you go out, say your full name, position and rank. If a man is an officer, he gets the most hits. Women were taken to the nurse, and some other woman was there. We undressed, and the women conducted the examination. They fed us and took us to cells", she recalls.

The cells were in the building of disciplinary isolation ward (DISO) on the territory of the colony. It is called a prison within a prison. Karyna, who also serves in the 36th Brigade, describes her stay in such isolation cells:

"Women were locked in cells, they took away all our jewelry and shoelaces so that we 'wouldn't strangle yourselves with it,' as they told us. We were locked in a cell designed for two, but there were 17 prisoners who ended up there. We slept where we could. There was a bathroom, but the toilet was clogged. They refused to take us outside. They gave us cleaning products. Still, everything stank, and there was no air to breathe. As for means of personal hygiene, they gave us none of those".

In Olenivka, both female military personnel and female civilians are detained. **Hanna Vorosheva**, a volunteer from Mariupol, spent three months in Olenivka. They

brought her there in April 2022. She says that women were kept without a sufficient amount of potable water, medicines, and personal hygiene products. She remembers prisoners forced to sing the Russian national anthem every morning. Remaining silent was forbidden, and because of one person who would not sing the entire cell could be punished – left without water, for example.

"The nominal capacity of that pre-trial detention center based on the number of beds was only 100-115 people maximum, but there were as many as 700-800 prisoners there. There was no water to flush the toilet, and the toilet pit was never emptied. Sometimes the entire ground floor was covered with a seven-centimeter layer of slurry containing feces and urine. In that case the prisoners were ordered out of their cells to clear the blockages with metal ropes and bail feces from the floor. They were supposed to donate their clothes for rags". This was not an isolated case", said Vorosheva in a BBC interview.

Vorosheva recalls that the prisoners were forced to sing the Russian national anthem every morning. You were not allowed to keep silent: an entire cell could have been punished – for example, left without water – for one person's silence.

After DISO, women, like men, were transferred to barracks. In total, there were five of them on the territory of Olenivka. One of them is female.

According to Vorosheva, up to a hundred women were held captive in Olenivka

when she was there: some were brought in, others were taken out.

Combat medic Anna Olsen recalls her experience of being kept at that pre-trial detention center:

"Our cell was intended for six people, but there were 39 of us in it. There was no order of the day in Olenivka".

Natalia, a prisoner of war and another woman, also a military person, were brought to Olenivka with men prisoners of war. During the transfer to Olenivka, she was hit several times on the back by guards. One of them later said to another guard: *"There are two women there, be careful not to break their spine"*. Natalia says that the process of "receiving" the women in the colony was terrifying. The women were completely undressed and

the colony guards men stood and watched the women, mocked and humiliated them. The women had to quickly wash under the cold water that flowed from the pipe. The women were given men's clothes and oversized shoes. Natalia summarizes *"We were treated like cattle"*. She and 38 other women were held in a six-person cell. Hygiene products were not provided in normal quantities, and it was impossible to ask for toilet paper. Natalia also testified that she was beaten on her legs in the morning and evening.

It was Olenivka, where combat medic **Maryana Mamonova** was kept for a long time. In August 2022, the woman was seven months pregnant. On September 21, 2022, nine months pregnant, Mamonova was exchanged. She gave birth to a healthy baby in Luts'k.

DONETSK PRE-TRIAL DETENTION CENTER

Olga, a prisoner of war, was first brought to Novoazovsk, Donetsk oblast. According to open sources, there is a Russian filtration facility operated on the premises of a former district police station where prisoners of war and civilian hostages are brought to.

They used torture to interrogate Olga.

"I was ordered to take my shoes off, and then he [Russian military] removed my socks. My feet were placed in a basin and they started torturing me with electric shock. I begged them to stop. I later spoke to the boys, and they said the Russians had used electric shockers to torture them. Their screams still ring in my ears. They tortured me like that for 20 minutes: first they ordered me to talk and then they would hit me with electricity".

Olga was later transferred to the local UBOZ (organized crime control headquarters) in

Donetsk. When she was thrown into the back of the vehicle, it was so packed that there were three layers of bound prisoners including those who were wounded. *"I realized that I had landed on somebody – it was completely full. There were some border guards who howled and wailed like animals. It was very difficult to keep my head cool. They said that we were about to be shot"*.

When the prisoners and the hostages were brought to the UBOZ, they were threatened with execution.

"They told us to put our heads down. We weren't allowed to look up. They said they would shoot us. They reloaded their assault rifles and started shooting. Luckily, they weren't aiming at us, but there was no way we could see. I am not ashamed to say that we all peed ourselves. Some of the

boys, the conscripts, emptied their bowels, too. The Russian soldiers laughed at them. One of them tore off a piece of fabric from one of the boys' ragged uniform and said 'Here, eat it!'. After two days in Novoazovsk, I spent one day in the UBOZ. After that we were taken to some hospital for X-ray fluorography. Once we were done, they transferred us to a pre-trial detention center for a day. And, finally, we ended up in Olenivka". The woman was kept in Olenivka till May 5, 2022.

On May 5 she was transferred to Donetsk pre-trial detention center where she was locked in a 10-person cell with 22 other people. The servicewoman recalls that although the plank bed was very narrow, each one was shared by two inmates while the other two slept on the floor.

"As soon as we arrived, they started beating us - we crawled and they would hit us. One time they came into a cell before the anthem time and started beating everyone left and right. All the cells opened, and we were supposed to sing the Russian anthem as loudly as we could so that our singing would drown out the screams".

Olha also recalls the day of disgrace at the bath.

"We were taken to the bath together with the men, completely naked. They shaved the men's heads clean, and then it was our turn, but we started crying and they had mercy on us".

One of the female prisoners who was kept with Olha was ordered to wipe a patriotic tattoo off her skin with a stone.

PRYMORSK PENAL COLONY NO.145 IN BERDIANSK

Berdyansk correctional facility No. 77 was renamed into Prymorsk maximum-security correctional facility shortly before Russia's full-scale invasion into Ukraine. This facility had a notorious reputation for inhumane conditions of detention. When Russian occupation forces took control of the town, the penitentiary turned into a merciless torture chamber. There are both men and women prisoners kept in the correctional facility. Most of the inmates are residents of the occupied territories of Zaporizhzhia oblast — Berdyansk, Melitopol, and Prymorsk in particular.

Conditions in the colonies in the south of Ukraine were also inhumane. A female resident of Berdiansk, who was detained, tells about it.

"My cell was designed for one person, and there were three of us. Even if I were there alone, I wouldn't lie down, because it was scary. The cell is small - 2.5 meters by 3 meters, about 6 squares meters in total. Its bed is on chains. I don't know how old

the mattress is. There was no pillow. In the evening, the escorts, who were males, brought me a blanket. I sat down on the floor like I was, fully dressed. No, I didn't sit down on the bed. Because the bed in that cell was so high that I couldn't reach" - she recalls.

The woman was taken for questioning. At first, they tried to persuade her to take the occupiers' side, and then tortured her.

“ THEY TOOK TWO BOOKS AND STARTED HITTING MY EARS FROM BOTH SIDES. ASKING, ‘ARE YOU UKRAINIAN?’ AGAIN, HE HITS ME ON THE HEAD, ‘ARE YOU STILL UKRAINIAN?’ THEY ORDERED ME TO PUT MY ARM ON THE TABLE. THEY HIT MY FINGERS WITH A BOOK. THEY DIDN’T BREAK MY FINGERS – she recalls.

In addition to physical, psychological tortures were also used.

“One soldier came at night, and I resisted. He forced me to strip to the waist. Fully. He started abusing me. There was no rape, but there was moral pressure. He left the cell. He came for the second time in two hours and forced me to undress again. He looked at me, and tried to twist me. He started talking, like, should he bring me alcohol? He tried, and I fought back. It wasn’t very persistent”, she adds.

The woman was tortured by administration of electric shocks. That is how she describes it,

“ FIRST THEY TOOK THREE FINGERS OF ONE HAND, THEN OF ANOTHER. THEY START TORTURING, INTENSIFY. I CRY, SCREAM, OF COURSE. DURING PAUSES, THEY WERE BEATING ME IN MY FACE, I HAD SPLIT LIPS. I GAVE UP WHEN THEY ATTACHED THE ELECTRODES TO MY EARLOBES. I DON’T KNOW WHETHER THE ELECTRICAL CURRENT WAS THAT STRONG, BUT IT SEEMED TO ME THAT THE UPPER PART OF THE HEAD SEPARATED AND FLEW UP SOMEWHERE.

Berdiansk central police station in 3 Hretska was also converted into a detention facility. It was there that one of the civilian hostages was kept. The woman was tortured with electric shock during the interrogation.

“The interrogation lasted an hour and a half. They brought a neat black box into the room and asked: ‘Do you know what it is?’. I replied that I might have some idea. And then they took two wires from this device, tied them to my legs and started torturing me. They would turn it on, and then off. They asked the same questions again and again: ‘What is your call sign? Who was your contact? Which of the prisoners belongs to your group?’ – that is, the same questions, over and over. I said I didn’t know anything. They would turn it on, then they would turn the power up for some 30 seconds and then turn it down”.

After the time at the police station, the woman was transferred to Prymorsk correctional facility No. 145.

THE TERRITORY OF RUSSIA

After the full-scale invasion, thousands of Ukrainian citizens were taken to the territory of Russia (we say thousands, because only in the pre-trial detention center in Novozybkov, the Bryansk region of the Russian Federation, according to the calculations of civilians who returned because of exchanges, more than 500 Ukrainian citizens were immediately detained). Most of them were put in detention centers in the regions bordering Ukraine. According to Russian sources, Russians vacated these premises even before the start of the full-scale invasion in order to keep Ukrainian citizens there. According to the testimony of the released women, Russians most often hold female prisoners in the pre-trial detention center of Kursk (1 Pirogov Street), the pre-trial detention center of Taganrog (175 Lenin Street) and, probably, in colony-settlement No. 3 in the Bryansk region (Russia, the city of Surazh, 3 Lesnaya Street), which is also called the SIZO by former prisoners. In these institutions, mostly military service men or civilian women from the northern regions of Ukraine are held.



For example, head of the village **Hanna Havrylina** from Hremyach (the Chernihiv region), was kept in Kursk. Some former prisoners call this place a living hell because of the terrible conditions of detention and torture.

"They accused me of being an informant. They said that they were the brothers who came to free you. I asked what was the good of them, who called them to come here? They immediately put me on a chair and gave me a short haircut. Then - to the bath with cold water, next - to the cell. There were four girls: three of them were our border guards and one from Chornobyl. Then some girls were exchanged, we were left alone. That girl tried to hang herself on the sheet. After she tried to hang herself, they took sheets and towels from us. I don't know what happened to her after that, I left, and she stayed. She is not a military person either, she said she was a correspondent," recalls Hanna.

Natalia, who also spent one month in a pre-trial detention center in the Kursk region, talks about moral humiliation. Women were forced to learn the Russian national anthem and sing 15 times a day. They also had to learn Russian poems and recite them during 200 sit-ups.

Olena from the 36th Brigade was taken to the pre-trial detention center in Taganrog after the colony in Olenivka in the uncontrolled territory.

"The SIZO there is small, right at the entrance to the city. We were led from one corridor to another, passed from one escort to another, we always moved in an L-shape pattern and with our heads down. We were interrogated, they took our DNA. They took off all our clothes, gave us some other. One can say they washed us - they put us under a cold shower. We got dressed and were taken to the cell. It was extremely cold there, and we had light clothes. They didn't give an

additional blanket, although the girls asked for it. We were so cold there that we couldn't even fall asleep. Some of the girls cell had large holes between the windows. I had holes in my windows, too," says Olena.

She recalls that in Taganrog women were given feminine pads, a toothbrush and laundry soap. They did not get a short haircut, but it was forbidden to comb or braid it, because it seemed that something dangerous could be hidden in the braided hair. Every day the woman had to wake up to the anthem of the Russian Federation. They constantly conducted searches in the cells and the women are convinced that it was done to put the moral pressure on them.

Anna Olsen, a combat medic and a prisoner of war, was taken to the pre-trial detention center in Taganrog. This is what Anna recalls about the admission:

"Our DPR escorts wished us all the best and opened the doors to the pre-trial detention center. We were met by their FSIN [Federal Penitentiary Service of the Russian Federation — MIHR] in balaclavas. We were ordered to get on all fours, I curled into a ball. They order you to run, but you don't understand where to and then they hit you on the head and bark a command to follow their voice and run. You run blindly. First, they crammed us into a tiny cell, probably a solitary, but there were a dozen of us. Then they ordered us into the corridor in our underwear and started cutting our hair and nails off, taking DNA samples, questioning and examining for tattoos and scars. Once they collected our answers, we were treated to a cold shower and sent to our cells".

Anna also recalls a complete lack of privacy since the women were watched by men while taking a shower and the cell had an open-view latrine.

"I only washed twice in 35 days, and I could barely do it within three minutes under cold water. There were men staring at you as you

undress and try to wash yourself with that ice-cold water. There was a washbasin in the cell, but the water was so rusty that we couldn't drink it. There was an opening in the solid door used to pass food, and the guards working each shift peeked through it all the time. The light in the cell was never ever off. I was always being watched, and when one was out of sight they would ask 'Where is she?' and the person was supposed to respond or show herself. Inspections were held twice a day. The guards at the detention center especially enjoyed the 'stretching' routine: they would order you to spread your feet as widely as possible and put your arms up with your palms toward them. If they didn't like something, they would just beat you on the legs causing you to fall. My legs and my buttocks were completely blue from the bruises as I could not keep my balance and would fall all the time which they hated. It was the female guards who would beat us on the legs. However, my experience with the detention center staff is a whole separate story. The biggest problem was that

THEY HAD NO IDEA ABOUT THE EXISTENCE OF THE GENEVA CONVENTION AND WHAT IT IS ABOUT.

Anna recalls her experience of being tortured with electric shockers and physical force:

"The shockers were the easiest part. Once they drained two batteries while hitting me during one session. That was the least of my problems in Taganrog. During my entire time in captivity, the guards at the Taganrog facility were by far the cruelest. They were extremely angry and bitter. On one occasion, they broke two PR sticks [rubber batons — MIHR] while beating me".

The cruelty and extreme abuse were caused by the fact that she was a servicewoman.

The guards at the detention facilities grumbled that women must be pregnant, wear hair curlers and cook for the men.

To make the inhumane conditions even worse, the hostages and prisoners of war were badly fed and sometimes even kept hungry for days.

"They would give us sourkraut and a piece of herring which was extremely salty - I have never eaten anything saltier, even when I was pregnant. After a couple of those meals my pancreas started to hurt so badly that I couldn't stand up. When we called for a medic because I was feeling so badly, they beat me up and said 'we don't care if you live or you die'".

According to the prisoner of war, some women did not have time to eat because each mealtime lasted no more than 5 minutes.

Another prisoner of war, Natalia, who was held in the same detention center, testified that women were forced to sign some documents without being allowed to read them. Some women were pressured to take Russian citizenship. During her captivity, in which she spent six and a half months in total, Natalia was transferred to different places of detention, but the worst was the detention center in Taganrog. When the women were brought there for the second time, many of them burst into tears because they were afraid to return. During interrogations, women were humiliated.

Later, Anna was transferred to female correctional facility No. 9 in the town of Valuiki, Belgorod oblast, the Russian Federation. The prisoners of war were

forced to work at a garment factory to earn such bare necessities as toilet paper, toothpaste and other basic hygienic items. The women would ask for medical assistance, but nobody came. "If you die, you die", said the medical officers. Female prisoners of war were forced to sign letters of cooperation, but all the signatures were collected under the threat of battery. During the entire time in detention the women were only allowed to send one letter to their families. The letters were scrutinized by the guards before being sent. You were not allowed to write anything bad about the experience or complain about the conditions.

The women were made to learn Russian songs and sing their national anthem. Later, Anna and other female prisoners of war were transferred to Kursk.

"During the month of staying there we were taken to the showers, 5 minutes each time, but there was no soap or anything else", recalls Anna.

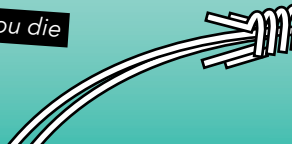
Natalia, a prisoner of war, also tells about her detention in the same female correctional facility No. 9 in the Belgorod region. She was tortured with a shocker there.

Anastasiia Matrushchenko, who serves in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, was kept in the SIZO near Bryansk. The woman says that they were completely undressed and forced to squat in the front of men. Humiliation was continued by cutting or shaving the hair on the head. After their release, they had very short hair, which can be seen in the photo published by Minister Iryna Vereshchuk.

we don't care

if you live

or you die

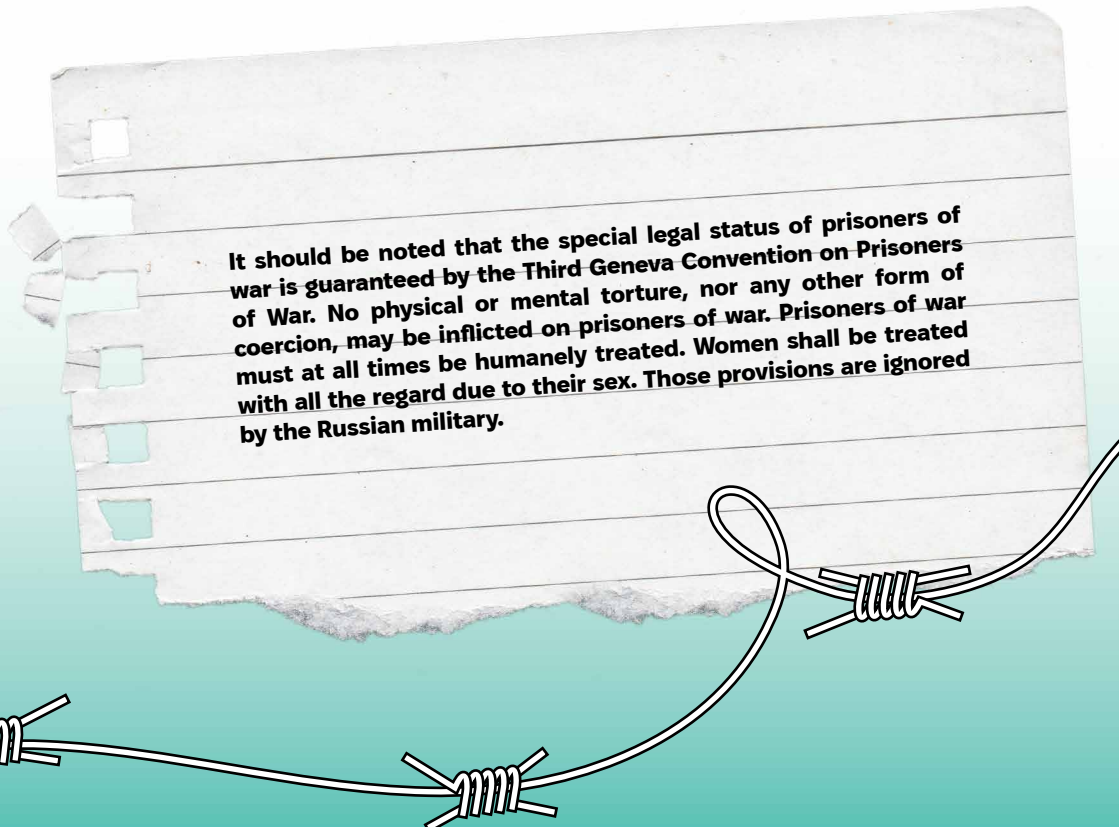


"Prison guards lined us up and tried to break our spirits," says Anastasiia. "Some prison boss shouted in my face several times, 'Glory to Russia!', probably, waiting for some kind of response to such greetings. The jailers responded to our silence with torture," Matrushchenko recalls.

Often, the material conditions – bedding, clothes, medicine, water containers, hygiene products, and recreation facilities – that the Russians provide to Ukrainian prisoners in places of detention are inadequate and insufficient to meet basic needs. Detainees, therefore, rely on the support of family members or international governmental and non-governmental organizations, including the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). However, representatives of international

humanitarian organizations do not have access to most places of detention. Therefore, no one controls the proper treatment of prisoners and compliance with the Geneva Conventions about them, especially women.

Since monitoring international organizations are almost never allowed to visit captives, it is extremely difficult to get a holistic understanding of the treatment of female hostages. Women themselves often do not want to tell outsiders about any cruel or inappropriate treatment they have experienced. Therefore, it is very important that women who are in captivity have the opportunity to talk to someone who is not part of the detention authorities in order to prevent violence against them. All interviewed women told MIHR that they no one gave them an opportunity like that.



It should be noted that the special legal status of prisoners of war is guaranteed by the Third Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War. No physical or mental torture, nor any other form of coercion, may be inflicted on prisoners of war. Prisoners of war must at all times be humanely treated. Women shall be treated with all the regard due to their sex. Those provisions are ignored by the Russian military.

RELEASE ↘

According to MIHR, at least 161 women have been officially released since February 24, 2022 through the prisoner exchange procedure. Also, there are known cases where the exchange was negotiated outside of this main process.



Journalist Iryna Dubchenko was released on April 11, 2022.

"I have made lots of friends among the military since 2014. We treated them to a meal of varenyky stuffed with cherries and corn on the cob. After my detention, my sister turned to them for help trying to locate me. And so they did. I was finally exchanged", says she.

It should be noted that the terms of imprisonment for women vary a lot. Some are imprisoned for months while others may be released after a few days in detention.

"They took me to Donetsk where I threw a fit. I screamed that I had a 12-year-old child at home who had no idea where mommy was. I went on screaming that my elder son and I had left for just one day, but never came back. My son Oleh and I waited all day while they ran all kinds of checks. The operative finally said that I was to be released while Oleg was being arrested. They took all the money I had on me – 30 thousand hryvnas. After that, they finally let me go", says a Mariupol volunteer Yulia Prykhodko.

Olena Bubnova was imprisoned for three days. That was promised freedom after she speaks to some journalists.

"Once the interviews were over, they told me to face the cameras and left. So I just sat there thinking: 'Are they going to let me walk free or not?' I don't know how long I waited, but it seemed like an eternity. When my captors returned, I sprang to my feet. I saw one of them holding some documents. I asked him if those were my release papers. He confirmed that they were. He ordered me to remove my spectacles and put them into the bag. We were blindfolded and put into a car, one by one. I felt somebody sit next to me and heard a weapon clatter. We set off and I thought they were going to shoot us", she says.

It turned out that Olena and three other men were driven to Kakhovka city center, told to sit on some benches and count to 100. After that, they had half an hour to get home before the curfew.

Yulia, a civilian hostage, recalls the day of her release:

"I was sentenced to 'banishment from the Russian Federation'. They told me to turn round and said that I was looking at our grave. There were some trenches, and I truly believed it was indeed a grave. I started to pray very loudly. The Russians burst out laughing and then asked why I hadn't prayed before. They played videos on their smartphones and shoved them into our faces: 'Look! This is what your fellow Ukrainians did!'. I asked if they were going to kill us. 'I can't care less about what happens to you! You aren't even worth a bullet! Go back to your stinky Ukraine!'. We were told that if they see our backs after 25 minutes, they would shoot at us. So we walked off and then started running. Suddenly, we heard them yell: 'Don't run or we shoot'. So we stopped and then walked away slowly".

When the released women were following the road in the direction shown by the Russian military, they waved down a minibus.

"The lady at the wheel asked where we were headed and we said that we had been deported – banished from Prymorsk. We said that the Russians had told us to go straight on. The driver gasped and said that if we had gone any further in that direction, we would have been blown to bits in a minefield", says Yulia.

"One October morning, a prosecutor came to visit me and asked if I was ready to take a breath of fresh air. He ordered to collect my belongings. They returned my passport, but kept my phone. He told me to put a bag on my head and helped me into a big car", –

recounts a Melitopol activist who was held hostage. The woman was transported with a bag on her head which was only removed at the final destination where she was finally allowed to breathe freely.

"I heard the military talk behind my back: 'Why don't we put a bullet through her brains and get done with it?'"

Once the military took a video saying that the woman had a bad influence on the local residents and was to be deported, they let her go free. According to her testimony, when she was passing a road block manned by the Russian troops, they wanted to keep her as a sex slave.

"I heard them talking about it and kept walking. Then they asked me if I was good at blowjobs. I said 'No'. One of the men said he hadn't had sex for 80 days. I asked how that concerned me", recalls the woman.

The arrested Berdyansk woman who had been kept hostage for 83 days was released the last. Her fellow prisoners had been released earlier. She did not get any of her belongings back. Despite her pleas, the captors kept all her money, gadgets, documents and clothes – her prized traditional embroidered dresses and jewelery.

This is what Lyudmyla Mykytenko remembers about the day of her release:

"At about 10am on September 27, 2022, they put a bag on my head, put me in a car, drove for a while, then switched cars and headed towards Zaporizhzhia. They said that I was about to be shot. Once we

passed Melitopol, they removed the bag. It was obvious that executing me wasn't their plan. The military said they were taking me to Vasylyovka and that I was going to be deported to mother-Ukraine. They dropped me off, put me next to the Russian flag and ordered to say 'Glory to Russia' which I declined to do. They read the official verdict on my deportation for interfering with the operations of new government and sabotaging the referendum. They said 'Mother-Ukraine is over there - off you go!'. As I was walking away, I heard them talk. 'Not too humble, is she? A grenade will make her swallow her pride', another guy responded 'How about a quick burst?' and the third one said 'Forget it - she might be too slow to duck, just let her go!'

Olena, a member of the 36th Brigade, was lucky enough to get on the exchange list. She has no idea why she was released while the others were not.

"One day, a detention center officer walked into my cell and ordered me to pack. Nobody explained where or why I was being taken. The prisoners with their hands tied and blindfolds over their eyes were transferred to a local airstrip and then flown to a military airfield in Sevastopol in the occupied Crimea. Then they were taken to an undisclosed location in the back of a KamAZ truck. Later, they realized that they had been brought to a barracks. When they untied our hands and removed the blindfolds, they told us that it was a temporary POW detention center, and we would be treated in a respectful manner. We were washed, fed and issued a fresh change of clothes. Nobody brutalized or humiliated us there. Just like before, we

They said that

I was about to be shot.



were ordered to keep our heads down and hands behind our backs while moving outside the cells. We had already got used to this part of the procedure. We were also kept behind bars. However, we were allowed to watch TV with only Russian news on and given books to read. The food was also very good. They guards talked to us and brought the boys cigarettes every day. The boys said they had been visited by the Red Cross representatives and Russian journalists, so it was quite unlike our previous experience. We waited for the exchange. It happened quite unexpectedly: one night we were woken up at 4am. Once we got changed, they told us to collect all our belongings. We realized that we were going to be exchanged from the way the Russian military spoke to us. They said that this place was usually the last stop before an exchange", she recalls.

Karyna's description of the release process sounds very similar:

"I was ordered out of the cell and instructed to take off all my clothes. There was a woman from the detention center staff who took a video of me completely naked. I don't know what for – probably, to prove that there were no signs of beating or torture. She asked if I had any complaints, and, of course, I said 'No'. I was returned all the clothes I had been wearing when they had captured me. Once we landed in Sevastopol, we were put into a tilt-covered truck. We made just one stop where they ordered us out, untied us, called our surnames and put us into another vehicle. They told us not to make any funny moves, and that we would be home in a few hours if everything goes to plan. Our

vehicle was escorted by a Russian 'Tigr' armored vehicle with a machine gunner at the ready: if anything had gone wrong, we would have been shot on the spot".

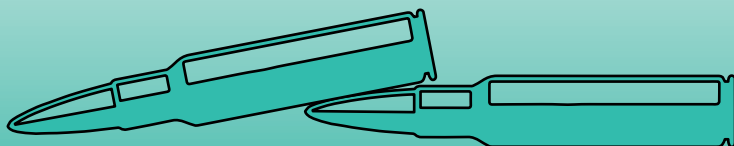
The testimony contained in this report gives evidence to significant physical and psychological traumas sustained by the women during their Russian imprisonment. Some of them have acknowledged the need of counseling while others have remained silent. However, it seems perfectly appropriate to offer psychological counseling to all the people who were released from captivity, military and civilians alike, and set up rehabilitation centers for the former prisoners.

When Olena Plaksina, a member of Tokmak City Council was released, she stayed in for ten days too afraid to leave the safety of her home and worrying about her children.

"The Russians started texting me on Telegram asking for my assistance. They called all the time, they flooded me with text messages, they asked me to take part in their humanitarian activities and so on. So I ditched the SIM card and we left town. Later, the neighbors told me that some Russians had paid me a visit".

Combat medic Anna Olsen was one of the 108 women exchanged in October 2022. She admits certain changes following the imprisonment. In particular, she talks about her psychological state and her responses to certain situations:

"Staying in a tiny space with the boys sometimes makes me feel quite uneasy".



THE DETENTION FACILITIES USED FOR KEEPING CIVILIAN HOSTAGES AND PRISONERS OF WAR:

UKRAINE:

- 1. Village of Yahidne,** Chernihiv oblast, basement on the school grounds
- 2. City of Balakliya,** Kharkiv oblast, police station basement
- 3. Village of Andriyivka,** Chernihiv oblast, square in front of the school
- 4. Village of Hremyach,** Chernihiv oblast, military compound
- 5. City of Tokmak,** Zaporizhzhia oblast, district police station
- 6. City of Berdyansk,** Zaporizhzhia oblast, commandant's office (former city police department prior to the occupation (3 Hretska Street))
- 7. City of Berdyansk,** Zaporizhzhia oblast, Prymorska Correctional Facility No. 145 (former Berdyansk correctional facility No. 77)
- 8. Settlement of Rozivka,** Zaporizhzhia oblast, commandant's office
- 9. City of Melitopol,** Zaporizhzhia oblast, police station in Chernyshevskoho Street
- 10. City of Kakhovka,** Zaporizhzhia oblast, district police station
- 11. City of Kherson,** Kherson Oblast Directorate of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Kherson Oblast Council
- 12. Settlement of Starobesheve,** Donetsk oblast

- 13. Settlement of Mahnush,** Donetsk oblast, filtration camp
- 14. Settlement of Sartana,** Donetsk oblast, filtration facility
- 15. City of Novoazovsk,** Donetsk oblast, pre-trial detention center
- 16. City of Donetsk,** UBOZ
- 17. City of Donetsk,** pre-trial detention center
- 18. Settlement of Olenivka,** Donetsk oblast, correctional facility No. 120

BELARUS:

- 19. City of Narovlya,** Gomel oblast

RUSSIAN FEDERATION:

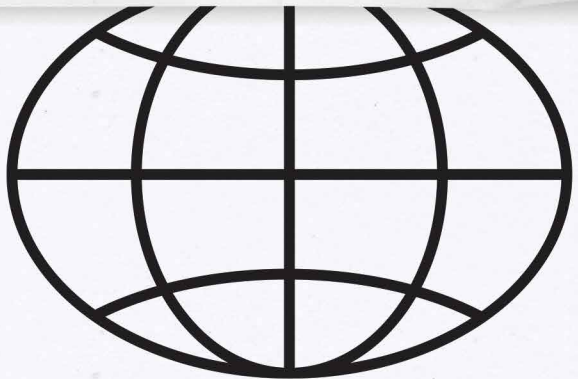
- 20. City of Taganrog,** pre-trial detention center (175 Lenina Street)
- 21. City of Valyiki,** Belgorod oblast, female correctional facility No. 9
- 22. City of Kursk,** Kursk oblast, pre-trial detention center (1 Pyrohova Street)
- 23. City of Surazh,** Bryansk oblast, penal settlement No. 3 (3 Lisova Street)
- 24. Settlement of Mala,** Sudzha district, Kursk oblast, Loknya, 6 Kubaryeva Street, VK-11



RECOMMENDATIONS ↘

INTERNATIONAL PARTNERS OF UKRAINE SHOULD CONSIDER THE POSSIBILITY OF:

- ☐ Taking a proactive part in demanding that Russia provide regular lists of prisoners, with clarifications regarding civilian and military women, as well as ensure as much as possible the proper humane and gender-sensitive conditions of detention of prisoners.
- ☐ Increasing sanctions pressure on Russia due to improper treatment of prisoners.
- ☐ Redirecting frozen assets of Russia and its key political, military and propaganda figures to provide individual reparations for victims of violations related to the armed conflict.
- ☐ Supporting Ukraine on the way to the earliest possible ratification and implementation of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, related documents, the reform of national criminal and criminal procedural legislation to improve relevant national criminal proceedings.



INTERNATIONAL NGO'S AND THE CIVIL SOCIETY OF THE UKRAINE'S PARTNER STATES SHOULD:

- ☐ Take an active part in setting up special psychological counseling centers for female prisoners of war and civilian hostages released from detention.
- ☐ Share experience with Ukrainian psychological counseling centers on best practices of examining and documenting psychological traumas related to imprisonment.
- ☐ Take part in developing experience exchange programs for medical staff on the standards for documenting torture and physical traumas sustained by women in detention.
- ☐ Assist in the integration of women who suffered from violence in detention into the daily life following their release.
- ☐ Share experience relevant to ensuring gender equality in security and defense.
- ☐ Take account of the existing limitation in the access to prisoners of war (including women) by Russian authorities and the ICRC and instead focus on finding mechanisms for enforcing the provisions of the Geneva Conventions on Russia.

UKRAINIAN CIVIL SOCIETY SHOULD:

- ☐ Harmonize documentation initiatives with representatives of criminal justice agencies of Ukraine, international and foreign investigative teams.
- ☐ Document and communicate various aspects of captivity and release in a sensitive, non-retraumatizing manner, with an integral gender lens and following the key principle of «do no harm».
- ☐ Provide gender-sensitive analytics on conflict-related violations, including captivity issues, to the International Criminal Court and other countries that conduct or may conduct proceedings under the principle of universal jurisdiction regarding the Russian-Ukrainian armed conflict.



Media Initiative for Human Rights is a Ukrainian NGO established in September 2016. The goal of the organization is to combine awareness raising, analytics, and advocacy towards detecting and responding to human rights violations.

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