

# **War crimes against persons with disabilities in Ukraine: deportation, terror, and systematic violations of rights**

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## Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has caused a sharp increase in widespread violations of the rights of persons with disabilities. Even in peacetime, this community must constantly defend its dignity and right to a full life. The war added more than another challenge. It turned everyday life into a struggle for survival. Dehumanizing practices are especially harsh in institutional settings and temporarily occupied territories.

According to official data from the Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine, as of June 2025<sup>1</sup>, the total number of people with disabilities in Ukraine had surged to approximately 3.4 million. The situation is most dire in the temporarily occupied territories (hereinafter referred to as TOT), where urgent human rights violations are rampant. As stressed by the head of the Luhansk Regional Military-Civil Administration, Oleksiy Kharchenko: *"74.5% of persons with disabilities, namely 169,000 people... three out of four may be deprived of pension or social benefits by the occupiers."*<sup>2</sup> This practice is a grave violation of basic social rights and poses an immediate threat to survival.

The scale of documented war crimes against persons with disabilities is alarming. In 2024 alone, the Office of the Prosecutor General of Ukraine recorded 672 criminal offenses under Article 438 of the Criminal Code ("Violation of the laws and customs of war") against persons with disabilities, and 647 in the first ten months of 2025. These figures point to systematic violence. Additionally, two criminal proceedings established cases of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV – this term will be discussed in more detail later) against persons with disabilities.

Meanwhile, the 2024 annual report of the Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights highlights critical security issues in institutional facilities. It recommends, in particular, *"to intensify efforts to equip shelters and protective structures in social protection facilities."* However, this urgent need for security exists alongside systemic human rights violations in these institutions. A human rights-based approach requires that spending on maintaining such institutions should not be an end in itself. In other words, "creating appropriate conditions" must be part of a comprehensive deinstitutionalization strategy that guarantees people with disabilities the right to live in the community, as set out in Article 19 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The war has exposed another critical reality: ensuring the safety and preserving the lives and health of hundreds of people in boarding establishments during shelling is virtually impossible. As Fight For Right experts point out, it is not possible to guarantee the safety of 300–400 residents

1 Ministry of Social Policy (2025). Volodymyr Vasylenko: "The state provides rehabilitation services in accordance with the needs of each person" [Video]. YouTube. June 25, 2025. Timestamp: 00:00:45. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1sqhJW63XUw>

2 Luhansk Regional Military-Civil Administration (Kharchenko O.). Post on the Telegram channel *luhanskaVTSA*. August 2, 2025. Available at: <https://t.me/luhanskaVTSA/28790>; <https://t.me/luhanskaVTSA/28790>

simultaneously under these conditions.<sup>3</sup> Urgent action is needed to protect these individuals and accelerate reforms away from institutional care.

Challenges related to security and forced displacement are confirmed by specific cases. A letter from the Health Department of the Cherkasy Regional Military-Civil Administration confirms that in late 2022, 20 residents of the Kherson Psychoneurological Residential Care Home—located in temporarily occupied territory—were hastily relocated to medical facilities in Cherkasy before being transferred to regional psychoneurological residential care homes. Alarming, as of November 2025, four evacuees from this institution remain isolated in the Cherkasy Regional Psychiatric Hospital, unreachable by representatives of the public organization Fight For Right.

Available data show that systematically collecting information and documenting crimes against persons with disabilities remains extremely difficult or, at times, does not happen at all. The absence of a unified registry, severely restricted access to evacuees, and persistent communication barriers with victims create a critical, immediate gap in recording the true scale of war crimes. These pressing issues not only hinder efforts to bring those responsible to justice but also gravely affect humanitarian aid planning.

This material, prepared by the non-governmental organization Fight for Right in partnership with the International Partnership for Human Rights, aims to shed light on the systematic war crimes, forced deportation, and terror committed by Russia since the start of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The report documents vital testimonies from victims with disabilities to ensure justice and hold those responsible accountable.

<sup>3</sup> Majumdar O. Boarding homes worth billions: how much does the state allocate to people with disabilities in institutions and how to change the system. ZMINA. November 3, 2025. Available at: <https://zmina.info/articles/inter-naty-za-milyardy-skilky-derzhava-vydilyaye-na-lyudej-z-invalidnistyu-v-zakladah-i-yak-zminyty-systemu1/>

## War crimes and persons with disabilities

All individuals have the right to access justice and have their stories heard and recorded. However, persons with disabilities are often overlooked, particularly in documenting war crimes.

Building on this concern, systematic attacks and disregard for the safety of persons with disabilities constitute a gross violation of international law.

This disregard is evident in recent findings by human rights organizations. Their reports state that at the start of the invasion, at least 6,000 people remained in residential care homes in occupied or surrounded territories<sup>4</sup>. At least 20 residential care facilities (geriatric, psychoneurological, social) remain in territory controlled by Russian forces or cut off from Ukrainian control. The fate of 5,000–6,000 people with disabilities in such institutions in the TOT remains unknown<sup>5</sup>. This evidence shows that occupying forces deliberately targeted civilians and destroyed the care system.

The most common documented crimes include attacks on civilians, inhumane treatment, extrajudicial executions, and destruction of civilian property. In addition, when focusing on persons with disabilities, these crimes are compounded by unlawful deportation and forcible transfer (Article 8 of the Rome Statute), inhuman conditions of detention, and medical neglect (Article 32 of the Fourth Geneva Convention). In these situations, disability becomes a factor that the aggressor systematically exploits as a tool of manipulation and coercion. Furthermore, conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) is also a common type of crime. CRSV is defined as any sexual act or attempt to commit a sexual act using coercion that has a temporal, geographical, and causal link to armed conflict. In the context of war, sexual violence is used to demoralize the civilian population. It is a brutal violation of human rights and falls under the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court without a statute of limitations.

The documentation of war crimes should be based on the “Nothing about us without us” approach. Every person with a disability has the right to decide for themselves whether to participate in the documentation process, and documentarians should ensure personal participation by creating accessible conditions and reasonable accommodations. When communicating with a survivor of violence, it is important to remember that only the perpetrator is to blame. Survivors should not be forced to talk about their experiences; instead, they should be listened to carefully, reassured,

4 At least 6,000 residential care home dwellers remain in the occupied territories. Expert Center for Human Rights. 2022. Available at: <https://ecpl.com.ua/news/shchonaymenshe-6-tysiach-pidopichnykh-internativ-zalys-haiutsia-na-okupovanykh-terytoriiakh/>

5 Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine. (2024, November 13). The Ministry of Social Policy has developed resolutions that allow for the relocation of residential institutions and the provision of social support in accordance with new standards – Ulyana Tokareva. [Press release]. Available at: <https://www.msp.gov.ua/press-center/news/minsot-spolityky-rozroblylo-postanovy-yaki-dozvoliyayut-relokuvaty-internatni-zaklady-ta-nadavaty-sotsialnu-pidtrymku-za-novymy-standartamy-ulyana-tokaryeva>

and offered basic comfort (e.g., water). It is strictly forbidden to disclose any information about the person or their story without their prior consent. Victims have the right to assistance and services that reduce physical and psychological risks. Within 72 hours of the incident, it is critically important to seek medical attention to prevent potential consequences.

At the same time, after returning to territory controlled by Ukraine, residents of boarding facilities face new, equally serious challenges: psychological trauma, stress, difficulties in adapting, and medical complications. A former representative of the Ombudsman's Office said: *"People who have survived the occupation need not just a place to live, but comprehensive assistance—medical, psychological, and social."* This requires a comprehensive approach to recovery from the state and civil society, including the creation of specialized support and adaptation programs, increased funding for medical care, and the development of community care. To return people from the TOT, it is necessary to involve organizations of people with disabilities, identify responsible authorities, and create a single register of people with disabilities and older people in institutions in the TOT—as a critical tool for effective evacuation and further support.

### **Where to go for help and documentation?**

Organizations are calling on anyone who has witnessed or has information about war crimes committed against persons with disabilities to help document these crimes. If you or your loved ones have been affected, or if you have information about possible war crimes against persons with disabilities, take immediate action using the contacts provided below.

- To document war crimes against persons with disabilities, please contact: [office@ffr.org.ua](mailto:office@ffr.org.ua)
- National Police of Ukraine: 102 or 0 800 500 202
- Government hotline: 1547
- Office of the Prosecutor General: send information to the email address [office@gp.gov.ua](mailto:office@gp.gov.ua)
- Online crime reporting: [warcrimes.gov.ua](http://warcrimes.gov.ua) or to the International Criminal Court at [otp.informationdesk@icc-cpi.int](mailto:otp.informationdesk@icc-cpi.int)
- Request free legal aid, including consultations and court representation, at 0 800 213 103.
- Psychological assistance: National Domestic Violence Hotline – 116 123 or 0 800 500 335; 24-hour helplines 1500 (from a landline) or 044 272 15 00 (from a mobile phone)

- For support (medical, legal, psychological), please contact [info@ffr.org.ua](mailto:info@ffr.org.ua).

Even if the crime occurred a long time ago or you have doubts about its classification, it is important to give people the opportunity to tell as much of their story as possible, without focusing solely on whether it “fits” the formal criteria. Every story is important for international justice, and your voice matters in this process.

## Stories from missions and hotline support

The experiences of people with disabilities during the occupation and shelling expose Russia’s systematic war crimes. These testimonies are not only personal tragedies but also serve as direct evidence of Russia’s deliberate effort to dismantle the social protection system. Collected by human rights defenders, these narratives form compelling documentation for international justice.

These cases reveal the invisible struggle for survival of people with physical and psychosocial disabilities in two key wartime settings: living under occupation and enduring an active combat zone. The testimonies show that people with disabilities face double discrimination. The enemy uses this deliberately to deepen terror and breach international humanitarian law and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities<sup>6</sup>. These actions especially violate rights to life, dignity, medical care, and protection from inhuman treatment.

Testimonies from Volodymyr (Kupyansk), Margaryta (Kherson region, name changed), and Svyatoslav (Kostyantynivka) clearly illustrate serious breaches of international humanitarian and criminal law. These violations, as detailed in their stories, may constitute war crimes under Article 8 of the Rome Statute<sup>7</sup> and the Fourth Geneva Convention<sup>8</sup>.

6 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Adopted by Resolution 61/106 of the UN General Assembly on December 13, 2006. Information from the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine. Available at: [https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/995\\_g71#Text](https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/995_g71#Text)

7 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. Adopted at the Diplomatic Conference of Plenipotentiaries under the auspices of the UN in Rome on July 17, 1998. Available at: [https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/995\\_588#Text](https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/995_588#Text)

8 Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War (Fourth Geneva Convention). Adopted on August 12, 1949. Available at: [https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/995\\_154#Text](https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/995_154#Text)

- Violations of Articles 31 and 32 of the Fourth Geneva Convention: the use of physical or mental coercion and brutal treatment by both civil and military authorities.

Volodymyr (70 years old, disability group 2), who has struggled with the effects of polio all his life and can only walk with the aid of a cane, was a victim of systematic psychological terror during the occupation of Kupyansk. His chronic condition, exacerbated by heart problems, high blood pressure, and already significant debts for eye lens replacement surgery, made him defenseless against the pressure of the occupation administration. The terror was aimed at destroying Ukrainian identity and establishing complete control, as evidenced by Volodymyr's recollection:

“ There is a representative of the occupying authorities in the administration who said: ‘Forget everything Ukrainian, we are here to stay.’”

The occupying administration even attempted to legitimize its power by committing crimes against the civil registry: *“Newborns were registered as being from Kupyansk, Belgorod Oblast, Russian Federation.”*

Volodymyr saw total fear when a 40-year-old woman was arrested for volunteering. Constant stress and fear, together with an information blockade and lack of medical care, led to physical decline that can be considered severe damage. *“My eyesight deteriorated. My legs wouldn't obey me.”*

Volodymyr's physical decline painfully demonstrates how psychological terror shattered the lives of persons with disabilities. He bears witness to the relentless cruelty of the occupying security forces (FSB), who invaded neighboring homes, spreading fear and devastation. Over 30 civilians desperately escaped from police basements after a shell struck a nearby house. After de-occupation, the Ukrainian military rescued Volodymyr and brought him to Kharkiv, where he now endures harsh living conditions in a dormitory, struggling with worsening health, persistent financial hardships, and the absence of state support.

- Violation of Articles 16, 55, and 56 of the Fourth Geneva Convention: the obligation to provide the population with food and medical care; to maintain the functioning of medical facilities; to promote special protection for pregnant women and persons with disabilities.

Margaryta, a person with a disability group 2, survived the occupation while seven months pregnant. Her story demonstrates comprehensive neglect and medical blockade. Despite needing urgent hospitalization and hormone therapy, she was denied treatment because the hospital was reserved for Russian soldiers, a direct violation of Article 56 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which bans diverting medical resources from civilians. Even calling an ambulance became futile: *“We called an ambulance and waited an hour and a half for it to arrive.”*

The destruction of infrastructure and financial blockade caused exhaustion and starvation. A woman testifies:

“ I lost weight from 52 kg to 42 kg. My family had to share a loaf of bread for three days, and the lack of water forced us to stand in line at the church for half a day to get some.

Margaryta’s testimony illustrates the deliberate targeting of vulnerable groups—pregnant women, people with disabilities, and children—through deprivation, fear, and violence. The psychological trauma to her daughter and the systematic neglect suffered by the family reinforce the central finding: these actions constitute orchestrated war crimes that heighten risks for mothers and children.

Pension withdrawals were subject to a 10% commission, which is a form of financial terrorism. The woman’s family lived in constant fear of searches and violence. Margaryta witnessed how *“one man was taken away, and I never saw him again.”* The most shocking consequence of the crimes was the psychological regression of her daughter (aged 2), who, after the horror she experienced, *“stopped talking, turned off the lights, and lay down on the floor to sleep,”* confirming that the cruel treatment of the occupiers causes severe psychological trauma in children. Margaryta’s case is irrefutable evidence of complex war crimes that deliberately increase the vulnerability of pregnant women and persons with disabilities, endangering the lives of mothers and children.

- Violation of Articles 32 and 53 of the Fourth Geneva Convention: prohibition of destruction of property, protection from violence and brutal treatment.

Svyatoslav (61, physical disability group 3, visual impairment) lived on a pension and suffered a direct fire injury when a Russian missile destroyed his house. According to him, *“there were no military targets on our street.”*

The most serious consequence of the missile strike was that the blast wave threw Svyatoslav onto the rocks, resulting in a broken hip. This secondary, critical injury, when combined with his primary disability, is a direct outcome of the indiscriminate attack that caused severe suffering and health damage. Due to frequent shelling and a lack of communication, electricity, and water, Svyatoslav’s isolation increased, which further exacerbated his suffering. His forced evacuation and intention to leave the country—because *“I don’t want to be homeless”*—demonstrate how the attack deprived him of autonomy and outlook on the future.

These three stories, collected in different regions and under different conditions (from total occupation to the front line), confirm that the situation of people with disabilities is deliberately used by the occupying authorities as an instrument of control and coercion, which is evidence of a war crime. The crimes documented in these cases are systemic: they involve the deliberate deprivation of medical care and food, psychological pressure, and the destruction of homes.

The most brutal manifestations of these crimes have been recorded in institutions where people with disabilities are under the full care of the state and have no opportunity to resist. The following section details the crimes committed by the occupying authorities against residents of a social care facility in the Kherson region.

## **Residents of the Kherson Psychoneurological Boarding Establishment: Experience of Occupation and De-occupation**

An investigation conducted by Tetyana Katalevska as part of the Fight For Right and IPHR project revealed systematic and gross violations of international humanitarian law committed by Russia against residents of the Kherson Regional Council’s communal facility, the Kherson Psychoneurological Boarding Home—an inpatient social and medical institution for women with disabilities and psychoneurological disorders. At the start of the full-scale invasion, there were 394 people in the boarding establishment, located in the village of Komyshany.

Under the occupation, people were subjected to inhumane conditions, which is a war crime. In early July 2022, former director Borys Shutikov defected to the occupiers, and the Russian military used the territory of the facility to place their weapons, turning a civilian facility into a military one. As a direct result of these conditions, 41 people died in the Kherson Regional Psychoneurological Boarding Home during the occupation (from February 24, 2022, to November 11, 2022). Former deputy director S.S. Shulga reported a critical shortage of food, electricity, and water, and that *“it was very difficult with medicines”*.

The evidence gathered by the researcher reveals deep shock and inhumane conditions: the evacuees were extremely exhausted and thin, women hid bread in their pockets, and for another 2–3 months, *“walked around with bottles of water because they were afraid there would be no water.”* Natalia (name changed), a resident of the boarding home, reported that the occupiers often came to the facility, mocked them, and suggested that they bring *“their fools.”* At the end of the occupation, during preparations for forced relocation, the senior nurse, at the request of the Russians, *“showed the girls who allegedly agreed to move,”* which is evidence of objectification and forced selection. Another resident, Kateryna, also confirmed the psychological terror: *“Russians with machine guns walked around the wards and frightened the residents of the boarding home.”* Olena said that for six months, there was not enough bread, and *“for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, there was a small roll instead of bread.”* She also confirmed that the staff were forced to cook over the fire on *“kabychkas”* (small stoves) because there was no electricity. Tamara, a resident of the boarding home, said they experienced *“heavy shelling,” “sounds louder than thunder rang out.”* Often, they would hear *“Moscow is speaking”* on the radio. Many people could not withstand the horrors of the occupation, and the mortality rate was rising.

In addition, residents were forced to participate in a so-called referendum. Tonya said that *“burly men with machine guns”* forced them to mark their answers on the ballots. One of the residents also testified about this pressure: *“A Russian pointed his finger at ‘yes’ and said, ‘You have to sign here.’”*

The most serious crime was the forced displacement of civilians, which is a war crime under Article 8 of the Rome Statute of the ICC. Fifty-four women with mental and intellectual disabilities were forcibly removed from the Kherson Psychoneurological Boarding Home. They were sent to the annexed Autonomous Republic of Crimea, to the Chervonohvardiysky Psychoneurological Boarding Establishment. On May 25, 2024, the director appointed by the occupying authorities was notified of suspicion under Part 1 of Article 111-2, Part 2 of Article 28, and Part 1 of Article 438 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine. The indictment was sent to the court. Special proceedings are ongoing.

However, the scale of the crimes is much broader: a pre-trial investigation is ongoing into the forced displacement of residents of seven other boarding establishments in the Kherson region, including the deportation of 294 people from the Kairsky Psy-

choneurological Residential Care Home and 84 residents from the Oleshky Boarding Home. Following numerous appeals from the parent of a boarding home resident, with the assistance of the Ukrainian Red Cross Society, one woman, Olga Volodymyrivna Okul, was returned from Russia in 2025. However, the overall fate of the other forcibly displaced persons remains uncertain. Deputy Head of the Kherson Regional Military-Civilian Administration Yevhen Ignatenko reported that there was no contact with the heads of most of the occupied institutions, which made it impossible to track the exact number and whereabouts of all forcibly displaced persons with disabilities, especially those who were taken to the territory of the Russian Federation and the Autonomous Republic of Crimea.

Following the de-occupation of Kherson, numerous shelling incidents forced the Kherson Regional Social Services Center to suspend activities. Three hundred residents were evacuated to similar institutions in Mykolaiv, Cherkasy, and Ternopil regions. One resident, who survived the air raids, noted the December 22, 2022 evacuation took place under “*very competent supervision.*” However, ongoing threats and security decisions meant people were repeatedly moved between institutions in other regions, according to employees. The complex chain of relocations has left their exact whereabouts unknown, making it harder to monitor their condition and protect them. It is also impossible to determine the number and locations of forcibly displaced persons with disabilities deported to the Russian Federation and the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. In the report’s conclusion, researcher Tetyana Katalevska stresses the critical need to continue searching for victims and monitoring the progress of pre-trial investigations.

## **Fight For Right: advocacy and the importance of the project for protecting rights**

People with disabilities are often overlooked by human rights defenders documenting Russia’s war crimes. Fight For Right, together with the International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR), aims to address this gap by ensuring that the voices and experiences of victims with disabilities are fully documented and included in accountability efforts. The main aim of the project, “Coordinated Civil Society Action to Ensure Justice, Accountability, and Ongoing Support for Victims of Sexual Violence in Ukraine,” is to strengthen the investigation and documentation of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) cases, with a focus on people with disabilities, in close coordination with the Ukrainian government.

Based on its own research and consultations with experts, the advocacy team has developed a specialized methodology for documenting crimes in cases where the witness or victim has a physical, intellectual, and/or psychosocial disability. To ensure comprehensive support for victims, the organization provides psychological and legal assistance and, if necessary, humanitarian support through other projects.

Documentarian Tetyana Katalevska investigated crimes against residents of the Kherson Psychoneurological Residential Care Home and documented the forced deportation of 54 women to Crimea.

Fight For Right director Yulia Sachuk participated in a humanitarian mission to the Kharkiv region. Simultaneously, a mission to Chernihiv revealed another vulnerability: boarding homes and psychiatric hospitals faced severe food shortages and lacked clear evacuation plans. Project coordinator Viktoriya Telechuk notes that this situation “*highlighted the danger of people with disabilities staying in institutions*” during the war.

Fight For Right is joining forces with partners—IPHR, Truth Hounds, and Blue Bird—to document crimes and bring those responsible to justice, using all available tools.



*Our experience in the project shows that documenting war crimes against people with disabilities is both extremely difficult and critically important,” said Viktoriya Telechuk. “We face limited access to evacuees, the inability to track their whereabouts, and serious communication barriers—especially when people have experienced occupation, are in a difficult psychological state, or are afraid to speak. Despite these challenges, our main task is to continue identifying victims, documenting crimes, providing psychological and legal support, and collaborating with partners and the state to ensure no crime is forgotten. We want every voice heard and every case recorded, as this forms the foundation for future justice.*

## Conclusions

The study confirms the obvious: Russia's war against Ukraine is a war against the dignity, freedom, and very existence of people. Under such conditions, disability becomes a factor of double vulnerability and a target of deliberate terror.

The crimes documented in the cases cited are systematic in nature: they include attacks on life and health, humiliation of human dignity, intentional deprivation of liberty, and the most serious war crime—forced displacement and deportation of the civilian population. Taken together, these actions indicate a deliberate policy of terror against persons with disabilities as a particularly vulnerable group.

Crimes against persons with disabilities are an integral part of the evidence of this terror and require increased attention from the international community, as well as the recognition of disability as an aggravating circumstance. The principle that *“every voice must be heard”* must underpin all efforts to restore justice and protect the rights of persons with disabilities in Ukraine.

