



# Arbitrary detention and torture:

Balakliia under  
Russian Occupation

3 March to 8 September 2022

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## Preface

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee (NHC) is a Norway-based, internationally oriented human rights organisation that works for states to respect and protect international human rights, democratic principles, and the rule of law. We are engaged globally, but particularly in Europe and Central Asia.

The main goal of our work is to equip local human rights groups to promote human rights and document violations. We form networks to hold perpetrators accountable through legal processes, Magnitsky (targeted) sanctions, and other measures.

This report is part of a series of fact sheets, policy briefs, and reports based on the NHC and partners' comprehensive documentation of core international crimes in Ukraine.

The aim is to present accurate accounts of war-related events and violations of international law to influence decision-makers and facilitate justice efforts. The NHC has long held the view that impunity for grave human rights crimes feeds further crimes and leads to the brutalisation of conflicts. National, transitional, and international justice is needed to overcome this legacy. However, such justice efforts are not possible without extensive and credible fact-work.

The NHC collaborates with partners to collect evidence, interview victims and witnesses, and build databases based on the I-DOC technology developed by the Centre of International Law Research and Policy Department Case Matrix Network (CILRAP-CMN).

In partnership with local and international organisations, the NHC runs documentation projects in the North Caucasus (organised as the Natalya Estemirova Documentation Centre, NEDC) in Ukraine in collaboration with the 5 AM Coalition, and in several other conflict situations with relevant local groups.

This work is conducted by the NHC Documentation and Accountability Hub (DAH) and led by Lene Wetteland.

Ana Pashalishvili drafted this report based on information collected by the Truth Hounds and from open sources. Gunnar M. Ekeløve-Slydal edited it.

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*Berit Lindeman*  
*Secretary General*

*Oslo, 14 August 2025*

## Introduction

The report describes and analyses core international crimes committed by the Russian Federation's armed forces and other Russian institutions since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. International crimes refer to war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide, and crimes of aggression, which are defined in international criminal law.<sup>1</sup> The offences described in this report are part of broader patterns of crimes committed by Russian forces in Ukraine. The UN, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and other organisations and news outlets have reported extensively that Russia's invasion resulted in war crimes and crimes against humanity being committed on a large scale.

The report analyses the situation in Balakliia, a town in the Izium (or Izyum) region of Kharkiv Oblast with a pre-war population of around 27,000. It highlights the Russian forces' operational methods and their impact on the civilian population during the occupation. When the Russian troops entered, many fled while others hid. Military units from the self-proclaimed People's Republics in the Donbas moved into the town with tanks, personnel carriers, and rocket launchers.<sup>2</sup>

Near Izium, a city located 50 kilometres away, investigators found a mass grave in a forest with the bodies of 445 civilians. In a nearby location, the corpses of 17 Ukrainian soldiers have been found. Some showed obvious signs of torture. Investigators say that they have discovered 10 torture sites in the recaptured cities, towns, and villages of the region. One is in Balakliia and is described in this report.<sup>3</sup>

Balakliia, as the subject of a case study, is significant for several reasons.

First, this town was among the first targets of Russian occupation during the invasion. The evidence indicates that multiple crimes were committed, exhibiting patterns and a scale that raises reasonable suspicion to proceed with an investigation.

Second, similar acts and criminal incidents have been documented across Ukraine, suggesting that this research may supplement documentation of broader patterns of crimes in other occupied territories.

Third, the town's liberation after more than six months of Russian occupation provided investigators with direct access, facilitating comprehensive documentation of the crimes. The documentation conducted by *Truth Hounds*, a Ukrainian non-governmental organisation and partner of the NHC, provides extensive, reliable evidence. The organisation systematically recorded events, interviewed victims and witnesses, and collected video and photographic materials, maps, and detailed descriptions of detention sites.

The Balakliia situation provides insights into the Russian forces' *modus operandi* and helps describe the broader consequences of the war on Ukrainian society.

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<sup>1</sup> The main treaty defining the current state of international criminal law is the 1998 International Criminal Court (ICC) Statute (The Rome Statute of the ICC) (<https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/27d3ca/>).

<sup>2</sup> Alexander Sarovic and Mazim Dondvuk, "The Torture Chambers of Balakliya", *Spiegel International*, 27 September 2022 (<https://bit.ly/44LZQCU>).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* Ukraine I-DOC Database, witness testimony, document ID: 5771 and document ID: 20097.

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## Methodology

The report's primary sources of information consist of materials collected by Truth Hounds during their field visits to Balakliia following its liberation by the Ukrainian army on 8 September 2022.

A Truth Hounds team conducted investigations at multiple locations across Kharkiv Oblast. They visited all known detention sites used by Russian forces during the occupation, interviewing survivors, witnesses, and families of victims who had been detained or suffered otherwise during the occupation. Interviews were conducted by following best practices for civil society organisation documentation, including the do-no-harm principle and using informed consent for gathering statements. The materials include victim testimonies, witness interviews, photographs, multimedia evidence, GPS coordinates, maps, and descriptions of crime scenes and weaponry.

The documentation was entered into the Ukraine I-DOC Database, which allows materials to be stored, systematised and analysed legally. Truth Hounds analysed the information (265 documents) using the I-DOC Database technology developed by the Centre for International Law Research and Policy Department Case Matrix Network (CILRAP-CMN).<sup>4</sup>

The analysis followed a structured process to map available information and analyse and assess potential crimes. Each material was carefully examined to determine data such as location, nature of the crime, timeframe, affected victims and witnesses, and possible responsible individuals or organisational units.

Once these elements were identified, the material was subjected to legal analysis to evaluate the nature and severity of the crimes.

Testimonies were reviewed alongside other available evidence to establish a timeline of events. Information was then grouped into clusters based on patterns such as location, type of crime, and individuals or units involved. The clusters were built by systematically linking related pieces of information into a structured narrative. Following this, suspects and organisational units were mapped to visualise the connections between individuals, command structures, and detention sites.

At each stage, findings were cross-referenced to ensure consistency and accuracy, allowing for the construction of a comprehensive and coherent account of the events. This method facilitated a thorough examination of the material and supported the legal assessment of the violations.

In addition to Truth Hound's findings, the NHC conducted open-source research to complete the picture. This research drew on publicly available data from Ukrainian, international, and Russian sources.

According to the statistics generated in the I-DOC Database, at least 321 individuals were subjected to arbitrary detention, while 286 people were tortured or ill-treated, with the majority (276) being civilians. There

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<sup>4</sup> The Investigation Documentation System (I-DOC) is a tool for working on facts relevant to serious violations of international human rights and criminal law, including analysis, investigation, case preparation, trial, and later proceedings. I-DOC can catalogue documentation and evidence, criminal incidents and contextual facts, suspects and institutions involved, victims and witnesses, and protected property and objects. For more information, see the CILRAP-CMN website (<https://www.casematrixnetwork.org/cmn-knowledge-hub>).

are reports of 10 victims of alleged sexual violence, along with information on eight victims – both identified and unidentified – who were killed during the occupation of the town. These figures reflect only the cases reported by Truth Hounds and analysed in the I-DOC Database. The number of human rights violations and war crimes is likely significantly higher.

## Applicable law

The report refers to the law of armed conflict or international humanitarian law, international human rights law, and international criminal law. Under certain conditions, all these bodies of international law may apply in an international armed conflict, such as in Ukraine. Customary international law is binding on all states, while treaty law is applicable depending on which treaties the states involved in the conflict have ratified. According to customary international law, *serious* violations of international humanitarian law constitute war crimes.<sup>5</sup>

International humanitarian law aims to limit the effects of armed conflict. It distinguishes between two types of conflict: *international* armed conflict, which occurs between two state armed forces, and *non-international* armed conflict, in which at least one of the parties to the conflict is an organised armed group. In the current case, the rules of international armed conflict apply.

One of the core principles of international humanitarian law is *the principle of distinction*, which states that parties to an armed conflict shall always distinguish between combatants and the civilian population (or protected persons) and objects and shall never make civilians or civilian objects the target of attack, “unless and for such time as they take a direct part in hostilities”.<sup>6</sup> This principle is stipulated by the Fourth Geneva Convention,<sup>7</sup> which focuses on protecting civilians, and further protections are encoded in the Protocol Additional I (relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts) in Part IV.<sup>8</sup> The principle is, however, recognised as customary law and binding on all states.<sup>9</sup>

While Russia remains a party to the First Additional Protocol, on 23 October 2019, it withdrew a declaration by the Soviet Union that recognised the competence of the International Fact-Finding Commission under Article 90(2) of the Protocol. Thus, Russia ended its obligations under the Protocol to let the Commission inquire whether Russia have committed grave breaches or serious violations of the Conventions or the Protocol.<sup>10</sup>

Combatants are considered legitimate military targets who can be lawfully attacked or arrested. Combatants have an obligation to distinguish themselves from the civilian population, who may not be attacked nor directly participate in the hostilities.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> ICRC, International Humanitarian Law Database, Rule 156: “Definition of War Crimes” (<https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v1/rule156>). The ICC Statute defines war crimes as, *inter alia*, “serious violations of the laws and customs applicable in international armed conflict”. (Article 8)

<sup>6</sup> Protocol (I) Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the protection of victims of international armed conflicts, 1977, Article 48(1) (<https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/d9328a/>). The quotation is from Art. 51(3): “Civilians shall enjoy the protection afforded by this Section, unless and for such time as they take a direct part in hostilities.”

<sup>7</sup> Geneva Convention (IV) Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War of August 12, 1949 (<https://legal-tools.org/doc/d5e260/>).

<sup>8</sup> Protocol (I).

<sup>9</sup> ICRC, International Humanitarian Law Database, Rule 1, “The Principle of Distinction between Civilians and Combatants”, (<https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v1/rule1>). The principle was first stated in the 1868 St. Petersburg Declaration, which underlines that “the only legitimate object which States should endeavour to accomplish during war is to weaken the military forces of the enemy.”

<sup>10</sup> Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol 1), 8 June 1977: Russian Federation ([IHL Treaties - Russian Federation Additional Protocol \(I\) to the Geneva Conventions, 1977 Declaration](#)).

<sup>11</sup> Geneva Convention (III), Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War of 12 August 1949, Article 4(A)(1)-(3) and (6). (<https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/365095/>). Protocol (I), Article 44 (3).

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International law of occupation is a branch of international humanitarian law that governs a foreign power's control and administration of occupied territory. According to the 1907 Hague Regulations,<sup>12</sup> a territory is considered occupied when placed under the authority of a hostile army. This means that the occupying power has established and can control the area, such as the Russian Federation in the case of Balakliia described in this report. The occupying power does not acquire sovereignty over the occupied territory and is obligated to respect, as far as possible, the existing laws and institutions of that territory.<sup>13</sup> The primary legal instruments governing occupation are the 1907 Hague Regulations, the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949 and Protocol Additional I to the Geneva Conventions. These documents outline the rights and responsibilities of the occupying power and the protections afforded to the civilian population.

Arbitrary deprivation of liberty is prohibited under customary international humanitarian law.<sup>14</sup> The Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols include provisions that protect individuals from arbitrary detention. The Fourth Geneva Convention specifies that a civilian may only be interned or placed in assigned residence if "the security of the Detaining Power makes it absolutely necessary" (Article 42) or, in occupied territory, for "imperative reasons of security" (Article 78). Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions requires humane treatment of all people who are not actively participating in hostilities, which includes prohibiting arbitrary detention.

International humanitarian and human rights law includes a comprehensive body of rules for the prohibition and punishment of acts of torture and other forms of ill-treatment. Torture may be a war crime and a crime against humanity, depending on the context. The absolute prohibition of torture protects everyone, irrespective of their status or nationality.

Torture is defined in the UN Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. It amounts to any act that intentionally inflicts severe physical or mental pain or suffering, carried out for specific purposes such as obtaining information or a confession, punishing, intimidating, or coercing the victim or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination, and with the involvement of a public official.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Convention (IV) respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land and its annex: Regulations concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land*, The Hague 1907 (<https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/fa0161/>).

<sup>13</sup> *Convention (IV)*, Section III and *Protocol (I)*, Article 69.

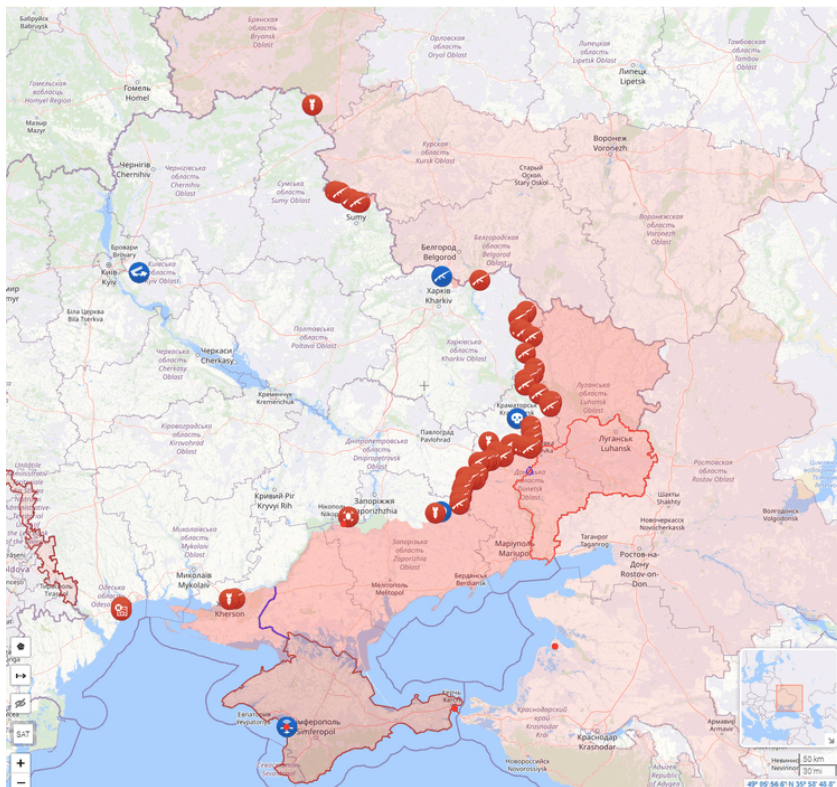
<sup>14</sup> ICRC, International Humanitarian Law Database, Rule 99, "Deprivation of Liberty" (<https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v1/rule99>).

<sup>15</sup> Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, Article 1: "For the purposes of this Convention, the term 'torture' means any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity. It does not include pain or suffering arising only from, inherent in or incidental to lawful sanctions." (<https://bit.ly/44Mbttty>).



## The occupation of Balakliia

Balakliia is in the Kharkiv Oblast, approximately 90 kilometres south of Kharkiv city.<sup>16</sup> The Kharkiv Oblast borders Russia and was a strategic target of the invasion, along with the Donbas region and southern Ukraine.



Source: <https://liveuamap.com/> as of 4 August 2025.

When Russia launched its invasion, the Kharkiv Oblast quickly became one of the conflict's key battlefields due to its proximity to the Russian border. Balakliia was among the first towns to fall under Russian occupation. Its strategic significance stemmed from its location along key transport routes, making it valuable for Russian military logistics.

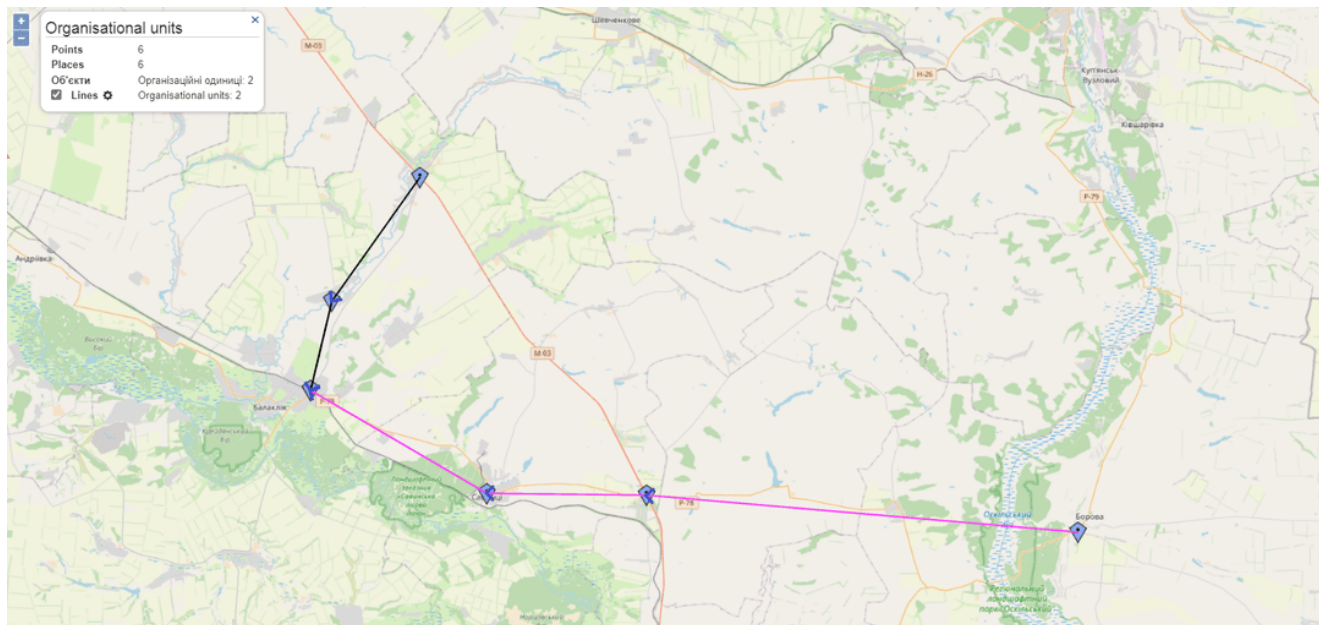
During the invasion, the direction of movement of the columns of Russian Armed Forces equipment during the period from 24 to 28 February 2022 was as follows:

1. The 64th Separate Guards Motorised Rifle Brigade, as part of the 35th Combined Arms Army, moved from the city of Kupiansk, the village of Volokhov Yar, and the village of Iakovenkove along the R78 highway to the town of Balakliia. In March 2022, the Brigade's service members participated in the large-scale Russian invasion, operating in the Kyiv direction. In particular, they occupied the village of Andriivka, Buchanskyi district, where the service members committed mass murders. After that, they moved to the city of Bucha. In

<sup>16</sup> A Reuters special report, *Abandoned Russian base holds secrets of retreat in Ukraine* (<https://bit.ly/3GKFOke>).

April 2022, they were redeployed to the Kharkiv direction, in particular, they participated in the occupation of Balakliia.

2. The 4th company, as part of the 4th battalion of the 202nd Motorised Rifle Regiment of the so-called Luhansk People's Republic (LPR), moved from the villages of Borova, Vesele, and Savyntsi along the T2110 highway to the town of Balakliia. They directly participated in the occupation of Balakliia and controlled the district of the village of Verbivka.



An analysis, using the capabilities of the I-DOC database, has established the connections shown on the map.

Balakliia is connected to a railway network that links it to major cities and regions across Ukraine.<sup>17</sup> This railway can transport personnel and military equipment. The town is located approximately 40 km northwest of Izium at the intersection between the regional (P78) and territorial (T2110) highways, approximately 18 km southwest of the E40 international highway (designated as M03 in Ukraine) and the P78 highway.<sup>18</sup> The E40 highway extends from Donetsk and the Russian border in the east to Lviv and Poland in the west, connecting Kharkiv and the Sloviansk-Kramatorsk territory (the administrative centre of the Ukraine-controlled portion of the Donetsk oblast).<sup>19</sup>

Balakliia housed large stockpiles of ammunition for the Ukrainian armed forces. In 2017, an explosion at the arms depot occurred, which Ukrainian officials suspected was an act of sabotage. How much of the storage was restored and operational as of 2022 remains unknown.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Henry Foy, Sam Joiner, Sam Learner, and Caroline Nevitt, "The 90km journey that changed the course of the war in Ukraine", *Financial Times*, September 28, 2022 (<https://bit.ly/4f3VDPO>).

<sup>18</sup> Institute for the Study of War, "Russian Offensive Campaign assessment, September 4, 2022" (<https://bit.ly/4f1wPru>).

<sup>19</sup> Christian De Vos et al., *Destruction and Devastation, One Year of Russia's Assault on Ukraine's Health Care System*, p. 21. Physicians for Human Rights, 21 February 2023 (<http://bit.ly/45j4ZCP>).

<sup>20</sup> BBC News, "Ukraine munitions blasts prompt mass evacuations, 23 March 2017 (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39363416>).

On 26 February 2022, Russian troops advanced toward Balakliia. According to available sources, over 60 units of Russian military equipment, marked with the letter “Z” and tricolour symbols, moved toward the town. On 2 March 2022, Russian forces entered Balakliia.

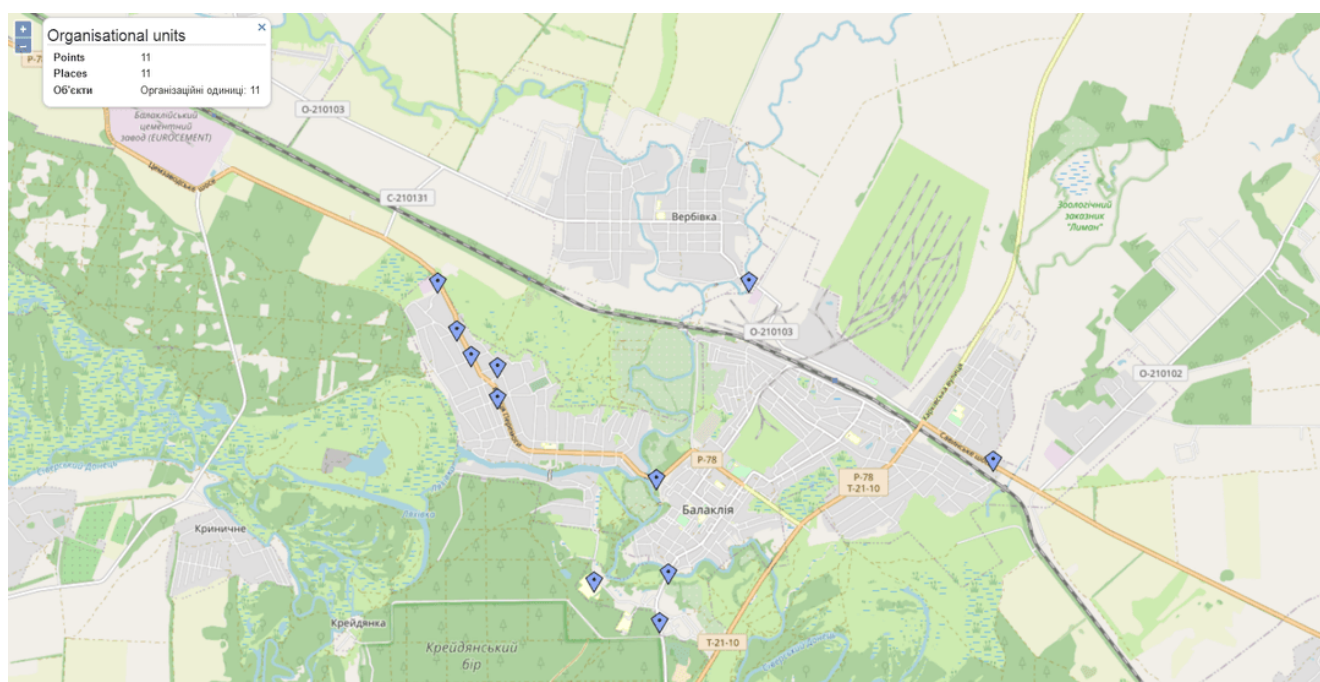
The occupation of Balakliia began on 3 March 2022 and lasted for more than six months. During this period, the Russian military established control over the town’s infrastructure, imposed martial law and engaged in actions that amounted to war crimes.

The Ukrainian Kharkiv counteroffensive began on 6 September 2022, and Balakliia was fully liberated on 8 September. This allowed Ukrainian authorities, including local investigators, to access the town and uncover evidence of human rights abuses and war crimes committed by Russian forces.

## Life under occupation

Life was highly challenging for those who remained in Balakliia during the occupation. Immediately after seizing control of the town, Russian forces restricted movement in and out, establishing checkpoints, such as one near the music school, alongside roadblocks throughout the town. Regular street patrols were conducted, strict movement controls were imposed, and only a few individuals were permitted to leave their homes, even for medical treatment. Additionally, the occupying forces obstructed the delivery of medical supplies.<sup>21</sup>

At these checkpoints, residents were required to present their passports and undergo searches. Young men, especially, faced heightened scrutiny, with some detained based on “suspicious” tattoos. In some instances, individuals detained at these checkpoints disappeared.<sup>22</sup>



*The layout of the Russian Armed Forces checkpoints in Balakliia shown on the map, was created using the capabilities of the I-DOC database.*

Stories of those who remained in the town suggest that the newly installed administration sought to reinforce Russian narratives about the invasion and assert authority over the region by brutal means, creating an atmosphere of fear.

Information available in open sources indicates that as part of propaganda, the administration distributed a newspaper titled *Kharkov Z*. This name combined the Russian spelling of the Kharkiv Oblast with the “Z”

<sup>21</sup> Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine, 1 August 2022–31 January 2023*, 24 March 2023, pg. 21, para. 74 (<https://bit.ly/4oelac7>).

<sup>22</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, document ID: 3519.

symbol, which has become widely associated with the Russian invasion.<sup>23</sup> Communication with the outside world was restricted, as cellular service was frequently unavailable. At the central market, propaganda materials depicted Ukrainian authorities as “Nazis,” “Ukronazis”, and figures associated with Stepan Bandera, accusing them of “oppressing” the population.<sup>24</sup>

Overall, the information flow remained tightly controlled. Residents had access only to one radio station, alternating between Russian and foreign music. Between songs, directives were issued instructing civilians on how to behave under occupation. The broadcasts also included messages directed at Ukrainian soldiers, providing specific instructions on how to surrender, such as lying face down with their hands behind their heads. The use of the Ukrainian language was discouraged, with Russian becoming the enforced means of communication. Internet and television signals were jammed, leaving residents with limited access to information beyond the town. Meanwhile, basic utilities, including water and electricity, were intermittently disrupted for extended periods, further exacerbating the dire living conditions.<sup>25</sup>

Security measures included frequent home searches and inspections of personal mobile phones. Carrying a phone became particularly dangerous, as any evidence of anti-Russian sentiment, such as pro-Ukrainian messages or contacts, could lead to detention.

The town remained under constant surveillance, with soldiers from the so-called Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) playing a significant role in maintaining control. However, some Luhansk soldiers reportedly expressed reluctance about their deployment.<sup>26</sup>

The humanitarian situation for the civilian population began to deteriorate in June 2022. According to some sources, Russian forces declared Balakliia part of Russia's Belgorod region.<sup>27</sup> However, there have been no official statements from the Belgorod regional authorities regarding the annexation of Balakliia. According to an alternative account, the Russian military administration in Balakliia likely spread rumours about the town's annexation.<sup>28</sup>

By 8 September 2022, Ukrainian troops had successfully entered Balakliia, ending Russia's occupation of the town.

During their escape, the Russian military left a flash drive with secret information and data of service members involved in the commission of war crimes in the town.<sup>29</sup> Due to the rapid counteroffensive and the hurried retreat of the Russian soldiers, documents and evidence were left behind. The traces left by the

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<sup>23</sup> “They stole everything. They slaughtered one horse. They got drunk and shot at other Russian soldiers”. The occupation through the eyes of Olena, a resident of Balakliia, which was under the control of Russian troops for six months” (translated from Russian), Meduza, 17 September 2022 (<https://bit.ly/4m5YsSx>).

<sup>24</sup> Stepan Bandera (1909-1959) was a Ukrainian nationalist killed by Soviet intelligence agents in West Germany.

<sup>25</sup> Anastasia Shepeleva, “Ukrainians describe life under Russian control”, *Deutsche Welle*, 26 September 2022 (<https://bit.ly/4luyCHY>).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Anna Tsomik, “The mayor's betrayal, the torture chambers of the invaders, and pancakes for the liberators: a chronicle of the occupation and liberation of Balakliia in the Kharkiv region” (translated from Ukrainian), *Suspilne Kharkiv*, 8 September 2024 (<http://bit.ly/4lFDEBE>).

<sup>28</sup> Internal communication with the Truth Hounds.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

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occupation revealed that widespread human rights abuses had taken place. In addition, witnesses and survivors told stories of torture, unlawful detentions, kidnappings, and killings.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to the humanitarian toll, the occupation, and subsequent battles substantially damaged infrastructure, including buildings, bridges, railway lines, and other critical facilities. Throughout the occupation, residents of Balakliia faced significant looting by Russian forces.

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<sup>30</sup> Human Rights Centre ZMINA, *Torture and ill-treatment of civilian population in Ukrainian territories that were under Russian occupation*, Analytical Report, April 2023. pp. 6-9 (<http://bit.ly/3GQnnKW>).

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## Arbitrary Detention

Individuals who remained in Balakliia during the occupation faced numerous violations of international humanitarian law, including arbitrary detention, inhuman and degrading treatment, torture, rape, enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings at the hands of the occupying forces.<sup>31</sup>

Arbitrary detention was widespread. It refers to depriving a person of liberty without their free consent, legal justification, or due process.<sup>32</sup> Both international human rights law and humanitarian law prohibit arbitrary detention, which is a fundamental principle aimed at ensuring the humane treatment of individuals during armed conflicts.

Torture centres discovered in and around the town, as well as a mass grave in the city of Izium,<sup>33</sup> suggest egregious violations in the treatment of the population.

The Russian troops conducted mass searches of homes and private properties, often followed by the detention of residents. The primary targets remained those suspected of “collaborating” with Ukrainian forces. According to numerous testimonies, the occupying troops targeted local politicians, current or former members of the Anti-Terrorist Operation or Ukrainian Armed Forces, their close family members, state employees, and ordinary citizens suspected of supporting Ukraine. These actions created an atmosphere of fear and oppression within the occupied territories.<sup>34</sup>

At the start of the invasion, when the internet was still accessible, some individuals filmed Russian soldiers or military equipment in the town and posted these videos on social media without turning off their geolocation. A week or two later, they would be visited at home. Their phones would be confiscated, and they could be “thrown into the pit”, which referred to the basement of the police station, where mistreatment of detainees took place.<sup>35</sup>

The occupying power appeared well-informed about pro-Ukrainian citizens, particularly those who had previously served in the Donbas war. One survivor explained that the Russian military likely had access to specific information about the local population even before the occupation. This included details such as residents’ addresses, their financial status, whether they had served in the military, and their support for Ukraine.<sup>36</sup>

In some cases, residents referred to as “collaborators” informed Russian troops about targets and their whereabouts. The collaborators worked with the occupying forces and regularly provided information about

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<sup>31</sup> Geneva Convention IV, Article 32 (<https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/d5e260/>).

<sup>32</sup> For a definition of arbitrary detention, see the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights website, “About Arbitrary Detention” (<https://bit.ly/450mckc>).

<sup>33</sup> Alexander Sarovic and Mazim Dondvuk, “The Torture Chambers of Balakliia”, *Spiegel International*, 27 September 2022 (<http://bit.ly/46T0r8n>).

<sup>34</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, document ID: 3456.

<sup>35</sup> *Op. Cit.*, Meduza, 17 September 2022 (see note 11 above). “Balakliia. Life After the Russian Occupation”, *Ukraine World*, 9 October 2022 (<https://bit.ly/3UrMqXH>).

<sup>36</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, document ID: 3502.

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their fellow citizens. Collaborators could be anyone, including neighbours, colleagues, or even family members.

Based on interviews with survivors, a consistent pattern has emerged regarding the methods of arrest. Arrests were not confined to specific locations; they could occur anywhere, including temporary checkpoints and private homes. Individuals could be arrested in the street,<sup>37</sup> at a market, in a park, or any other public place.<sup>38</sup>



*Entrance to the basement on the territory of the car park, where detainees were held, Balakliia, April 3–10, 2022. Photo Credit: Truth Hounds.*

Some victims were arrested and held at detention centres due to their sons' service in the Ukrainian military.<sup>39</sup> For instance, a testimony recounts the story of a man whose house was searched and who was subsequently detained after Russian forces discovered his son's uniform, which indicated his service with the General Staff of Ukraine.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Op.Cit., Meduza 17 September 2022 (see note 11 above).

<sup>38</sup> "Balakliia. Life After the Russian Occupation", Ukraine World, 9 October 2022 (<https://bit.ly/3IRYLIs>).

<sup>39</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, document ID: 5545.

<sup>40</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, document ID: 3379.

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Survivors also described how a married couple were detained after the Russian military discovered a Ukrainian flag at their premises during searches of their house.<sup>41</sup> Another survivor was detained after he talked negatively about and cursed Putin while Russian soldiers were checking his documents.<sup>42</sup>

One of the survivors recalled that during his arrest, Russian soldiers did not explain the reason for the arrest, put a dark bag on his head, wrapped his hands with tape, shoved him into a car and asked: *“Do you love Ukraine?”* They then punched him in the chest.<sup>43</sup>

Geneva Convention IV allows for the internment of civilians only if it is absolutely necessary from a military point of view. It can never be used as a form of punishment. The analysed information does not provide grounds to assume that the detentions were in line with the principles of international humanitarian law.

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<sup>41</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, documents ID: 3559 and ID: 3560.

<sup>42</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, document ID: 4768.

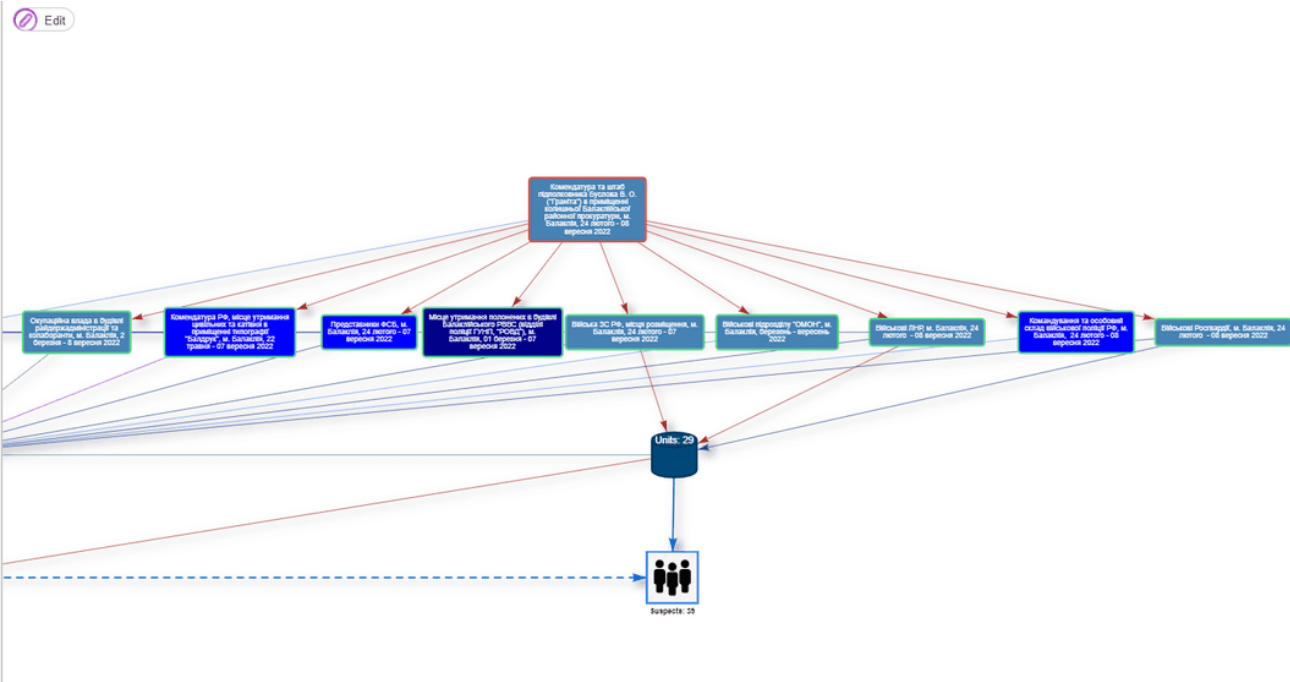
<sup>43</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, document ID: 3542.

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Detention centres

Russian forces took control of various buildings, including Ukrainian government facilities.

In particular, a scheme of organisational relations of the occupation authorities was established under the leadership of Lieutenant Colonel Buslov V. O. (“Granite”), who was located in the premises of the former Balakliiskyi District Prosecutor’s Office.

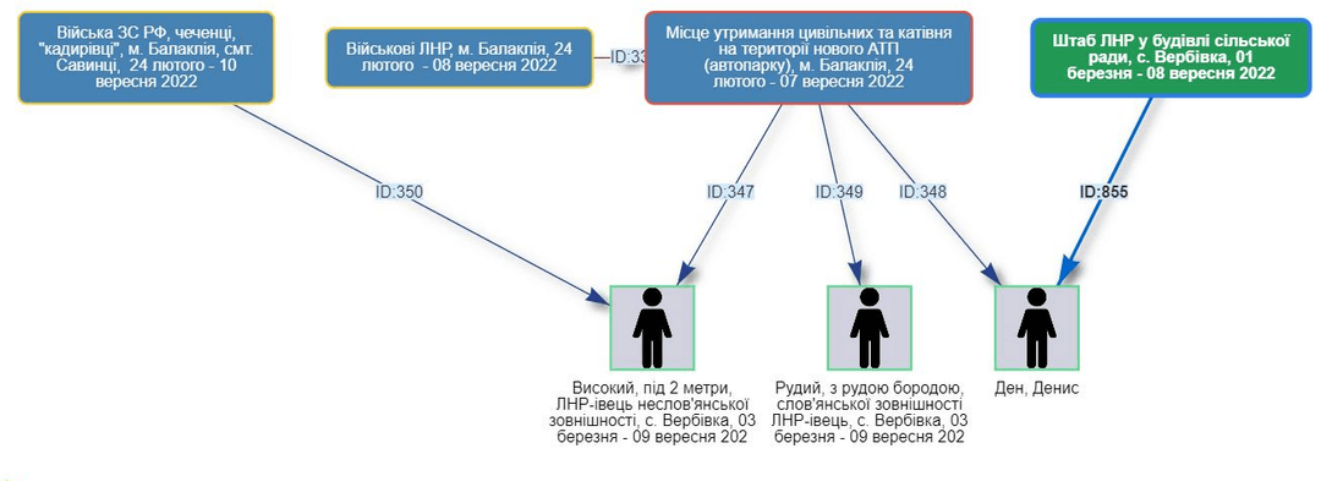


The buildings were repurposed as military bases and used for the detention and torture of captured civilians. The repurposed buildings included schools, a car park (“Autopark”), basements, police stations, and prosecution offices.





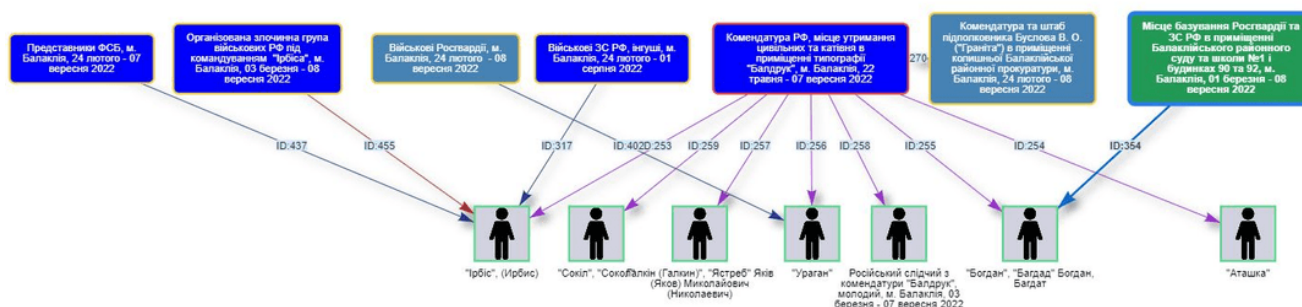
Basement on the territory of the 'new' car park where civilians were held, Balakliia, April 3–10, 2022. Photo: Truth Hounds



A place of detention of civilians and a torture chamber on the territory of the new ATP ("Autopark").

One such building was the BalDruk publishing house (coordinates 49.452285 and 36.842880) located opposite the police station, near the monument of the national poet Taras Shevchenko (1814-1862). Russian forces established a base within the building and used it as a detention centre. The repurposed building was

called “the commandant’s office”, and approximately 40 prisoners were detained there at all times. Detainees were tortured in its basement.<sup>44</sup>



*The Russian Commandant's Office, a place of detention of civilians and a torture chamber in the premises of the “BalDruk” publishing house.*

One of the infamous detention centres, described in this report, was the Balakliia police station, located across the street, also occupied by the Russian troops. Reports from residents and investigators indicate that the building was extensively used for detention and torture.<sup>45</sup> According to a victim, arbitrarily detained residents were held in detention cells in the basement.<sup>46</sup>

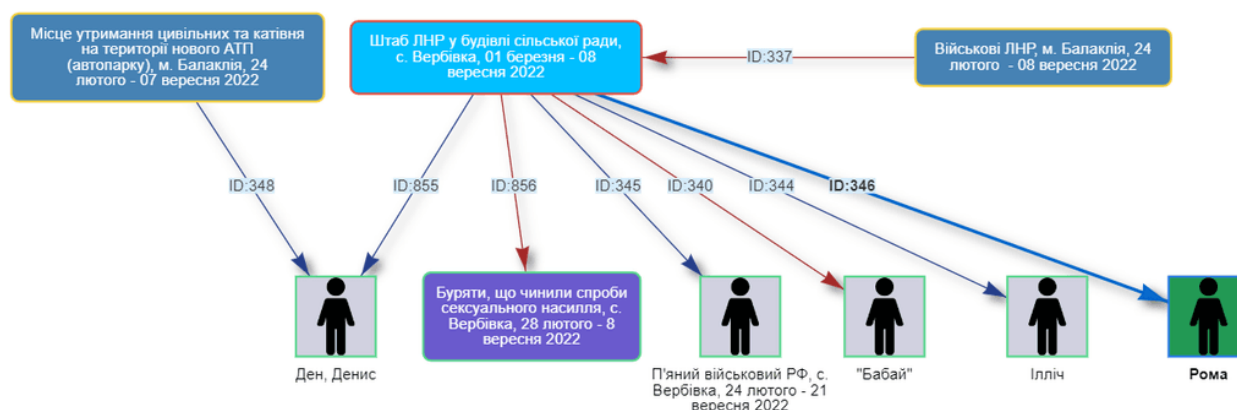
A similar pattern was observed in the village of Verbivka, where Russian forces seized key buildings, including the local school and the village council. These sites were not only used as operational bases but also repurposed as detention and torture centres.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>44</sup> B. Petruniok, O. Hnatiuk, T. Pechonchik, *Torture and ill-treatment of civilian population in Ukrainian territories that were under Russian occupation (on the example of Kyiv, Kharkiv, Kherson regions): analytical report*, ZMINA Human Rights Centre, April 2023, p. 30 (<https://bit.ly/4IN3KTd>).

<sup>45</sup> Alexander Sarovic and Mazim Dondvuk, “The Torture Chambers of Balakliia”, *Spiegel International*, 27 September 2022 (<https://bit.ly/45aX1wI>).

<sup>46</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, document ID: 5404.

<sup>47</sup> Mari Saito, Mario Tsvetkova and Anton Zverev, “Abandoned Russian base holds secrets of retreat in Ukraine: A Reuters Special Report”, *Reuters*, 26 October 2022 (<https://bit.ly/4nW25fp>). Ashley Westerman, “Their town now freed from Russian occupation, Ukrainians feel shock and joy”, *npr.org*, 14 September 2022 (<https://bit.ly/44DCFMb>).



### *LPR headquarters in the village council building of Verbivka.*

The Balakliia police station, or ROVD, was at 33 Zhovtneva Street (coordinates 49.4522624 and 36.8431992). It served as the central place of internment. Detainees, including men and women, were brought from Balakliia and neighbouring settlements, such as Verbivka, Neftianykyv, and Savyntsi. The station was staffed mainly by officers from the self-proclaimed Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics, Chechnya, and Federal Security Service (FSB) officers.<sup>48</sup> Russian soldiers also resided at the station.

Individuals were typically brought to the station with bags over their heads. The practice was referred to as “the invisible hat” by the station’s personnel.<sup>49</sup> Many detainees recalled being forced to wear a bag over their heads and pushed into a vehicle during their arrest. The car used to transport victims to the station, often described as a military “Tigr” (Tiger), drove for extended periods around the town before stopping near the building. Survivors believed this was a tactic to disorient them, preventing them from identifying the locations where they were held. One of them recalled that before he was taken to the police station, soldiers conducted a search of his house, pressured him to confess, beat him with truncheons and inflicted cuts on his ear.<sup>50</sup>

Detainees were held at the station for varying periods, lasting from a few days to several months. Some victims were released by station personnel; others were held until Ukrainian forces liberated the town. Others disappeared without a trace. Several victims testified that they were taken from the detention centres to the checkpoint located at Henkel (325 Peremohy street, in Balakliia) and then “deported” to the area controlled by Ukraine via the checkpoint at the cement plant (coordinates 49.492288 and 36.753728).<sup>51</sup> According to these testimonies, before being allowed to cross to the Ukrainian-controlled territory, they were forced to record videos in which they had to discredit the Ukrainian military and provide false statements about their opinions.<sup>52</sup> These videos were likely created for Russian propaganda purposes, aiming to manipulate public perception and undermine support for Ukraine’s military forces.

<sup>48</sup> The Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB) is Russia’s principal security agency and the main successor to the Soviet Union’s KGB. Its immediate predecessor was the Federal Counterintelligence Service, which was reorganised into the FSB in 1995.

<sup>49</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, document ID: 3666.

<sup>50</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, document ID: 3494.

<sup>51</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, documents ID: 3559, ID: 3666 and ID: 3733.

<sup>52</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, documents ID: 3666 and ID: 5442.

The police station continued to operate as a detention site until the Ukrainian army fully liberated the town. When Russian officers fled, a detainee found a crowbar and used it to unlock the cells. Upon leaving their cells, the detainees discovered a room where their documents had been stored. One of the victims found his documents in a bag labelled with his name.<sup>53</sup>

The station served as a site for interrogations, which involved measures amounting to torture according to international law, *i.e.*, officials inflicting severe physical and psychological pain to extract information or punish the detainees. The Balakliia police station is particularly notable for the severity of the violations inflicted on detainees, including by FSB officers.

Subsequent sections of this report will emphasise key findings, excerpts from interviews, and statements detailing the conditions and treatment within the detention facility.

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<sup>53</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, documents ID: 3494, ID: 6128, ID: 6522, ID: 6875, ID: 9026, ID: 9677, ID: 29428.

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## Conditions

The most brutal torture primarily targeted former Ukrainian service members, anti-terrorist veterans, or individuals who resisted the occupation by participating in partisan movements, often coordinating their actions with official Ukrainian military units.

However, the local population not belonging to these categories who were arbitrarily detained also endured a range of serious violations. In addition to the inhumane conditions in the detention centres, victims were subjected to degrading treatment, with some enduring torture. There are credible allegations of rape and the killing of detainees.

The occupying power operated five detention cells for male detainees and one cell for women in the Balakliia police station. The cells for men were located on the same floor, numbered 0 through 4, while the female cell was located on a different floor in a separate area.<sup>54</sup>

The police station had at least four separate interrogation rooms. Police department offices occupied the second and third floors. The second floor was likely used for living quarters, as the sound of moving beds was heard above the cells.<sup>55</sup>

The overall conditions in the cells were deplorable, with most of them having no light, water, or toilet facilities. Even though the cells were small, up to 2 meters wide and 3.5-4 meters long, several people were held together. There was no ventilation or electricity in the cells, and no light bulbs. Some detainees were provided with candles for illumination. Some cells had two wooden bunks, a window with 5 mm thick glass above the door, reinforced with armoured glass or film, and a light bulb outside.

Some survivors report that the washbasin and toilet were depleted of water, so they were taken outside to the bathroom twice a day. Other victims said their cells had a toilet and washbasin, but the sewer was clogged, so detainees requested a bucket to flush dirty water. A 150 cm high partition separated the toilet from the rest of the cell.<sup>56</sup>

The following are selected excerpts from interviews detailing the conditions.

A survivor, who was held in cell no. 2 together with six other people, described the conditions as follows:

“The cell was 4x2 meters and had a table, a toilet, and a washstand. Sometimes, there was water in the washstand. The partition separating the toilet from the rest of the cell was approximately 120 cm high. Books and candles were stored in the wall cabinet, which hung on the wall opposite the door and above the table. There was no electric light, and a window above the door faced the corridor. The cell door had a “feeding trough” window that was constantly open. Ventilation in the cells was turned on very rarely. The cell was furnished with two trestle beds made of reinforcement and chipboard. There was a Ukrainian Armed Forces

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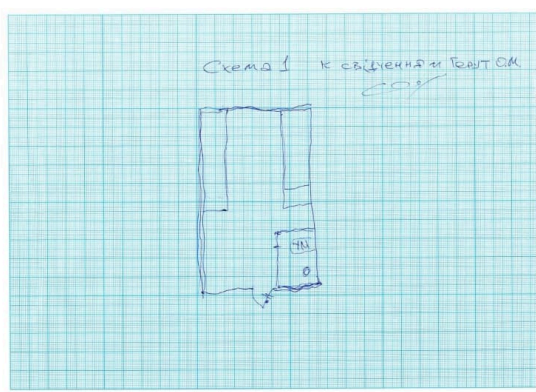
<sup>54</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, documents ID: 3739, ID: 5404, and ID: 5545.

<sup>55</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, documents ID:29397, ID: 5401 and ID: 7713.

<sup>56</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, document ID: 4588.



uniform in the cell – two jackets, one covered in blood. And civilian clothes left over from other detainees. They were used to sleeping on. Two slept on the trestle beds, the rest on the floor.”<sup>57</sup>



*Diagram of cell No. 2 in the Police Station, Balakliia, April 19-20, 2022. Photo: Truth Hounds*

One of the witness testimonies provides:

“The cell was for two persons, 1.5 by 2-3 meters in size: two bunks on the sides and a passage between them of about 50 cm. There was a toilet, but it was completely clogged with garbage. Instead of a functioning toilet, a bucket was covered with a rag. There were no mattresses, no light, no windows. Above the door hung a glass block – all the light. In this cell, the guards did not feed or give me water. They did not take me to the toilet either. My hands turned blue from the zip ties and were untied three hours later when I got through to the guards. I burned the zip ties with a lighter. A litre of water a day for three people and no more.”<sup>58</sup>

Another survivor reported:

“There was no water in the sink or toilet. They took me outside in the morning and evening. We asked for water. You had to ask, and only then did they give it to you.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, document ID: 3733.

<sup>58</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, document ID: 3742.

<sup>59</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, document ID: 5404.

Some victims describe being provided with food and drinking water in buckets and containers.<sup>60</sup> Those detained there were fed three times a day. Two captured Ukrainian soldiers carried out the food deliveries and cleaned the station.<sup>61</sup> One of the survivors recalls:

“We were fed buckwheat twice a day without any additional food. Without the support of the relatives who provided us with extra food, we would have faced severe hunger. The Russians allowed such “food transfers”.<sup>62</sup>

The women’s cell was located separately and included a camera in the ceiling.<sup>63</sup> The soldiers would tell detainees: “We see everything here”.<sup>64</sup> A female detainee held for four days in August 2022 described conditions as follows:

“They brought me to the cell with a bag on my head. I was kept in a cell with two beds. The cell was approximately 3x2 meters in size, and there were eight people in the cell. We had to sleep on a mattress on the floor. My cell also had a washbasin and a toilet, although practically no water was available. Buckets were provided for water collection, and when water was available, it was gathered in bottles. When there was no water for a long time, the guards brought it. The window was high on the wall, and we had no light. We were given food three times a day. It wasn’t very good.”<sup>65</sup>

Detainees in this cell were permitted to bathe; a notable provision compared to the conditions described elsewhere. Witnesses indicated that women were occasionally taken from this cell for interrogations.<sup>66</sup> According to the testimony, interrogations at night were conducted by “Chechens”. In contrast, during the daytime, interrogations were conducted by Russians.<sup>67</sup> “There were three guards in total. They were from the self-proclaimed Luhansk and Donetsk republics.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, document ID: 3378. Some detainees recalled they received food three times a day, while most said it was given only twice.

<sup>61</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, document ID: 3733.

<sup>62</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, document ID: 4588.

<sup>63</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, document ID: 3739.

<sup>64</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, documents ID: 3666 and ID: 3559.

<sup>65</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, document ID: 3378.

<sup>66</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, document ID: 5401.

<sup>67</sup> These conclusions were made by the witnesses based on the accent of the personnel.

<sup>68</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, document ID: 3559.

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*Women's cell in the Police Station, Balakliia. Photo: Truth Hounds*

The woman who gave this testimony was captured together with her husband because, during searches of their house, the Russian soldiers found a flag of Ukraine. They were accused of their children serving in the armed forces of Ukraine. They denied it. The husband was detained and kept in cell no. 4 and released on 12 July 2022.

As for medical care, while the information is limited, one of the survivors stated that after being detained and severely beaten in the police station, he was transported to a clinic's basement for treatment, where he remained for 10 to 15 days. He testified that he received some injections, and his arm was placed in a cast without prior X-rays.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, document ID: 5363.

## Accounts of torture

The detainees were often interrogated in the Balakliia police station, and it appears that torture was routine. The four interrogation rooms were located on the same floor of the right wing of the police station.<sup>70</sup> A woman who was held in the women's cells said she could hear what was happening in the interrogation rooms at night. She recalls that there were constant screams during interrogation.<sup>71</sup>

In the collected testimonies, the female survivors did not report being subject to torture or mistreatment. However, some witnesses testified that women were interrogated, assuming that interrogations may have included mistreatment and possible sexual violence.<sup>72</sup> Further investigation is necessary to conclude on this issue.

A survivor recalled a soldier named Murat, who would come at night and intimidate women.

“He was wearing a black plastic mask with small holes and no slits for his eyes and mouth. He was an actor: he could speak both pure Russian and with a Caucasian accent so that no one would recognise him. He always came to the cell in this mask or balaclava, but only at night.”<sup>73</sup>

One of the survivors recalled that the interrogation or torture chamber looked like an ordinary office, with a window and a desk. There were three soldiers in the office. One with a stun gun, a buff or collar pulled down on his face.<sup>74</sup>

A survivor said the same person referred to by his colleagues as the “investigator” asked questions during interrogations. Each group of interrogators had its investigator, who came on specific days. An FSB officer called “Robinson” could also be present at the interrogations, asking questions and functioning as the investigator.<sup>75</sup>

The questions concerned the detainee's connection with the Ukrainian armed forces or other residents who were suspected of such connections.<sup>76</sup> As torture tools, the Russian soldiers used electric shocks with a so-called tapik (TAPYK or TA), which is a military field telephone. It is a dynamo machine with a manual drive that generates voltage for the device. Bare wires were connected from the tapik to the person's fingers or genitals.

Another survivor reported that he was taken out for interrogation three times during his detention. The interrogation was conducted by an FSB officer wearing a balaclava and glasses. The uniform was light green with dark spots and looked like French camouflage. Two wires that came from the tapik were attached to his fingers:

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<sup>70</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, document ID: 5401.

<sup>71</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, document ID: 3559.

<sup>72</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, document ID: 5401.

<sup>73</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, document ID: 3559.

<sup>74</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, document ID: 3700.

<sup>75</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, document ID: 3733.

<sup>76</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, document ID: 3733.

“They hit me on the thighs with a police baton, in the ribs. They hit me on the back with a rifle butt. They tied my hands behind my back, threw my head back to the floor and stepped on my feet with boots. If you were not screaming or moaning, they made it even more painful. They tortured me with a stun gun. An FSB officer with the call sign “Robinson” was present at the third interrogation.”<sup>77</sup>

Another torture survivor recalls:

“It was after lunch, closer to the evening. They took us to an interrogation with bags over our heads. We could pull the bottom of the bag down to see where we were going. We were taken out of the cell to the right through a small corridor and to the left into the interrogation room. They took us to the same office. They took us past the dining room, then the shower. I could tell by the smells from the dining room and the humidity from the shower. All this was on the same floor.

In the interrogation room, the bag was pulled even lower. They gave me two wires, one with a ring that they put on my finger, the other, bare, had to be held with the other hand. When I took them, they asked my name and where I worked. I felt an electric shock – 5 seconds. One wire fell out. The current was supplied from a field telephone (tapik). I guessed by the sound since there is one in the unit. To my left, there was a man who beat me with a police baton. He handed me the wire: “If you drop it, we will beat you.”<sup>78</sup>

Another victim kept and tortured at the same station, told:

“A bag was put on my head, and I was taken to the first floor. I walked up the stairs, not far from the main exit. I was taken to an office on the left along the corridor, the windows facing the yard. After that, the guard left. Two FSB officers wore black uniforms and black masks in the office. They wore no gloves and no machine guns. However, they had pistols. One man was tall, about 185 cm, the other about 175-176 cm.”<sup>79</sup>

The victim was beaten with a baton in his arms and legs and tortured with an electric shocker, being accused of being a spotter (“korrektirovshchik”). He survived but testified about the torture of another man, who was later reported as deceased, while being held at the station.

According to the testimony, an FSB officer had used an electric shocker and a baton during the interrogation of the other victim, striking him several times on his body and legs. An officer took the man outside with a bag over his head. When the officer returned alone, he was carrying the same bag. Later, other detainees were told that the man had hanged himself by unbuttoning his sweater and hanging it on the door of the cell.<sup>80</sup> They were, however, convinced the man died because of the torture.

Another survivor told how four guards brought a person to his cell. The person was thrown to the concrete floor. He was beaten, but the handcuffs were not removed. He moaned for an hour and a half, asked for water, and took some sips. Twenty minutes later, he wheezed and died.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, document ID: 3379.

<sup>78</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, document ID: 3733.

<sup>79</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, document ID: 4588.

<sup>80</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, document ID: 4588.

<sup>81</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, document ID: 3742.



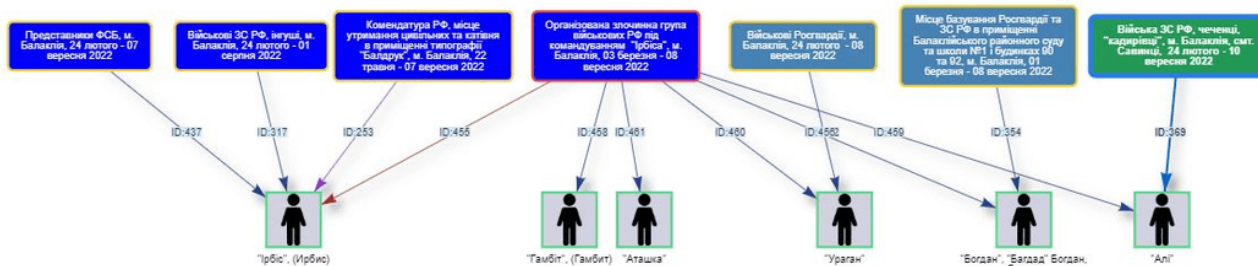
The methods described above are just some of the examples of torture inflicted upon residents during the time of occupation of Balakliia.

## Military units allegedly responsible for the crimes

While the responsibility of specific military units is not the main focus of this report, we will briefly review information analysed by the Truth Hounds.

A group of officers under the command of “Irbis” (callsign) particularly stood out among the military leadership. This group was engaged in the targeted search and detention of civilians who were enterprise managers, property owners, and holders of significant financial assets. Under torture, they forced these individuals to transfer property and enterprise assets to proxy persons, and to transfer funds from accounts to a designated person residing in Donetsk.

The organisational chart below reveals that this unit operated within a complex command structure, with multiple subordination lines, connecting various operational groups and individuals with callsigns including “Irbis”, “Gambit”, “Atasha”, “Uragan”, “Berkut”, “Bogdan”, “Batia”, and “Aist”.



This group operated not only at the police department on Zhovtneva Street but also at the Baldruk printing house. Notably, later, the Russians themselves “eliminated” two members of this group. According to witness testimony:

“Later, Berkut, Atasha, and Uragan were held at Baldruk [It is assumed this happened somewhere at the end of June]. Atasha hanged himself there, which many people confirmed to me.”<sup>82</sup>

Regarding Gambit, it was said that he was also detained and transferred to another location.

The command structure shown in the diagram indicates a systematic approach to these criminal activities, with clear hierarchical relationships and operational coordination between different units involved in the occupation and exploitation of civilian assets.

Analysis of available information reveals the involvement of multiple Russian military formations and paramilitary groups in the documented crimes. The 64th Separate Guards Motor Rifle Brigade, operating as part of the 35th Combined Arms Army, participated in the large-scale Russian invasion in March 2022,

<sup>82</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, document ID: 6863.

conducting operations in the Kyiv direction. This brigade notably occupied the village of Andriivka in the Bucha district, where service members committed mass killings before subsequently relocating to the city of Bucha.

Additionally, the 4th Company of the 4th Battalion of the 202nd Motor Rifle Regiment of the so-called Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) was deployed in the village of Verbivka. The 126th Regiment of the Russian National Guard was also identified as participating in operations. Paramilitary reconnaissance and sabotage groups included DRG "Chibis" and DRG "Volk". Furthermore, Rosgvardia units operated under various callsigns, including "Baghdad", "Aro", and "Uragan". In contrast, the identified OMON representative operated under the callsign "Koba". This diverse composition of regular military units, territorial formations, and specialised paramilitary groups indicates a coordinated multi-agency approach to the occupation and subsequent criminal activities in the affected territories.

The reviewed testimonies indicate that one of the key detention sites, the Balakliia police station, was run mainly by officers from Luhansk, Donetsk, and Chechnya, as well as by FSB officers. Many survivors recognised Luhansk and Donetsk accents among the staff. One of the victims explained that, for instance, officers from Luhansk were forbidden to communicate with the detainees and even transfer cigarettes from a small window.<sup>83</sup> This may have been a measure to avoid identification.

Torture survivors reported that FSB officers often conducted torture. Among the Russian soldiers stationed at the police station who tortured victims, there were some known for their cruelty. Such was an officer known as "Iakut", allegedly from Donetsk.<sup>84</sup>

According to Reuters' investigation, Colonel *Ivan Popov* commanded the Russian military force operating from Balakliia. Many of his senior officers belong to the 11th Army Corps, part of the Russian Navy's Baltic Fleet. The Colonel also has experience from the armed conflict in Chechnya and the 2008 war in Georgia.<sup>85</sup>

The Guardian confirms that Balakliia forces included FSB agents and military commanders. According to this information, *Lt Col Buslov*, known to his troops and victims by the nom de guerre of "Granit", was responsible for keeping the local civilian population in check. He oversaw at least one interrogation centre where civilians were beaten and questioned using electric shocks, according to six former detainees and Ukrainian officials.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>83</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, document ID: 5404.

<sup>84</sup> I-DOC Database, witness testimony, document ID: 5401.

<sup>85</sup> Mari Saito, Mario Tsvetkova and Anton Zverev, "Abandoned Russian base holds secrets of retreat in Ukraine: A Reuters Special Report", 26 October 2022 (<https://bit.ly/46f6l3q>).

<sup>86</sup> Lorenzo Tondo, "Electric cables, hammers and guns: Ukrainians tell of Russian torture", the Guardian, 23 October 2022 (<https://bit.ly/3lDqyWO>).

## Conclusion

The report describes and analyses abuses that include core international crimes and human rights violations. It sheds light on the gravity and intensity of the Russian occupying force's misconduct in Balakliia. Their actions had a severe negative impact on the civilian population. The systematic nature of the crimes indicates that they intended to instil fear and obedience among the civilian population.

The findings point to further investigations and accountability for those responsible for the crimes. International attention must be paid to prevent further atrocities and uphold the principles of international humanitarian law. While efforts to end the war with a peace deal based on international law and with security guarantees for Ukraine must be supported, the evidence presented in this and many similar reports calls for a strong justice component of any sustainable peace agreement.

While this report does not detail specific military units' responsibility for the crimes, the findings still suggest a pattern of abuses linked to particular units.

Further investigations are necessary to establish accountability and ensure justice for those affected.

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