

How Do We Establish the Truth?

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As of the morning of October 12, the Office of the Prosecutor General of Ukraine had registered 270,413 alleged violations of the laws and customs of war committed in the context of Russia's aggression against Ukraine. The figure, updated daily on [the Prosecutor General's website](#), includes crimes in occupied territories, missile strikes, the deportation of Ukrainian children, environmental crimes, and other violations. The actual number may be even higher.

When asked whether we know what is happening in Russian-occupied territories, the answer is clear: yes, we do. The challenge is different. Russia does not conceal its actions, but rather overwhelms us with the scale of crimes, leaving prosecutors unable to process every case, journalists struggling to investigate, and audiences increasingly desensitized. There is a painful contradiction: in legal proceedings, repeated crimes committed through similar methods strengthen evidence of systematic patterns. In journalism, the more frequently a crime occurs, the less likely another instance is to make the front page.

In March 2022, the [Public Interest Journalism Lab](#) (PIJL), a Kyiv-based Ukrainian organization, co-founded [The Reckoning Project](#), bringing together Ukrainian journalists, filmmakers, researchers, and international lawyers and analysts experienced in documenting crimes in conflict zones. Since then, PIJL has collected around 600 detailed testimonies that could potentially be used in court. Each is based on an in-depth interview with a direct survivor or witness of an alleged war crime, documenting events chronologically, neutrally, and in as much factual detail as possible. The testimonies are then analyzed by lawyers.

Almost half concern crimes in occupied territories, reflecting both a deliberate focus and PIJL's network of trusted local journalists, including regional editors who maintained contacts after Russian occupation. One researcher, Oleh Baturin, an investigative journalist from Kakhovka, was himself abducted in March 2022, beaten, and held for eight days. Through these networks, residents, village heads, and other contacts continue sharing information, including from areas beyond the reach of Ukrainian law enforcement.

Direct reporting from occupied territories is indeed extraordinarily dangerous. In 2023, Ukrainian journalist Viktoriia Roshchyna travelled there to investigate possible Russian military and Rosatom involvement in the abduction and torture of Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant employees. She was detained, transferred between Russian prisons, and reportedly tortured and severely beaten before her death. Her body was returned to Ukraine approximately five months after her family was informed of her death by the Russian Ministry of Defence.

However there are numerous ways to know. Millions still living under occupation maintain contact with relatives and friends elsewhere in Ukraine. Independent Ukrainian media operating in exile, including publications from Berdiansk, Melitopol, and Luhansk, continue reporting on occupied communities, building on the experience of outlets displaced from Crimea and Donetsk since 2014. Liberated territories also provide testimonies and visual evidence.

People escaping occupation through Russia and third countries provide strikingly consistent accounts. These sources reveal systematic patterns across occupied regions. Survivors from Chernihiv, Kharkiv, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia described similar detention and torture methods, including specific techniques of electrocution, in testimonies collected between 2022 and 2026.

Other sources provide further evidence. Our documentary [Special Operation](#), directed by Oleksiy Radynski, examines the Russian occupation of the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant entirely through CCTV footage, providing an extraordinary visual record of Russian military activities.

The nature of occupation also evolves. Initially, Russian forces sought to suppress resistance through intimidation and violence, while civilians struggled to access food, healthcare, and humanitarian assistance. Over time, Russian-controlled administrations took over schools, hospitals, and public institutions, extending control to the systematic regulation of everyday life. PIJL has also organized confidential, facilitated discussions with people from occupied territories now living safely elsewhere in Ukraine. Participants from different backgrounds shared their experiences, concerns, and views of the future, helping us understand the changing dynamics and pressures within occupied communities.

In many cases, Russia openly publicizes or glorifies its own crimes. In March 2023, the International Criminal Court issued [arrest warrants](#) for Russian President Vladimir Putin and Children's Rights Commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova over their alleged responsibility for the unlawful deportation and transfer of Ukrainian children. Yet Russian officials promoted these transfers on state television, encouraging Russian families to take in Ukrainian children.

While reporting from occupied Crimea before 2019, I witnessed another dimension: the growing militarization of Ukrainian children through the Young Army, a state-supported paramilitary youth movement. In the September 2026 Russian parliamentary elections, both Lvova-Belova and Vladislav Golovin, a Russian military officer heading Yunarmiya, appeared among the five leading candidates on the ruling United Russia party's federal electoral list. Rather than distancing itself from these practices, Russia elevated the officials associated with them.

Such public recognition can also help identify perpetrators. During the Russian occupation of [Yahidne](#), in the Chernihiv region, in spring 2022, 366 villagers, including children and elderly people, were confined for almost a month in a school basement under appalling conditions. Ten died. Although some Russian soldiers were known only by call signs, journalists from Ukraine's public broadcaster, Suspilne, identified military units and officers using publicly available information. Russia's practice of awarding and celebrating military personnel can provide investigators with additional leads.

Yet identifying individual perpetrators remains difficult. When PIJL began documenting torture and arbitrary detention, witnesses repeatedly described soldiers wearing balaclavas and using only call signs. This practice, repeated across regions and over time, suggests a system that enabled abuses while obstructing accountability.

Ukraine has experienced journalists, human rights defenders, and investigators, but its law enforcement and judicial systems are overwhelmed. International cooperation is therefore essential: supporting Ukrainian investigators and independent documentation while pursuing cases under universal jurisdiction abroad. Such proceedings should reinforce, not replace, Ukrainian investigations, preserve evidence, and open additional paths to justice.