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THE KREMLIN'S OCCUPATION PLAYBOOK: COERCED RUSSIFICATION AND ETHNIC CLEANSING IN OCCUPIED UKRAINE





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A woman holds a child next to Russian soldiers in a street of Mariupol on April 12, 2022, as Russian troops intensify a campaign to take the strategic port city, part of an anticipated massive onslaught across eastern Ukraine, while Russia's President makes a defiant case for the war on Russia's neighbour. - *EDITOR'S NOTE: This picture was taken during a trip organized by the Russian military.* (Photo by Alexander NEMENOV / AFP) (Photo by ALEXANDER NEMENOV/AFP via Getty Images)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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THE KREMLIN'S OCCUPATION PLAYBOOK: Coerced Russification and Ethnic Cleansing in Occupied Ukraine

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THE KREMLIN'S OCCUPATION PLAYBOOK:

Coerced Russification and Ethnic Cleansing in Occupied Ukraine

Executive Summary

Russia seeks to persuade Ukraine and its supporters that Moscow's control of occupied Ukrainian territory is irreversible. The Kremlin seeks to create the perception that the Ukrainian territories it has unlawfully occupied are permanently lost to Ukraine, discouraging Kyiv from seeking their liberation and dissuading Western support for such efforts, even though their irreversible occupation will take a considerable amount of time. Russia is now implementing the same occupation playbook in the lands Russia has taken since February 24, 2022 that the Kremlin has used in Crimea and Donbas since 2014. The Kremlin has employed that playbook successfully enough that all discussions of the Russian full-scale invasion treat the lands Russia illegally seized in 2014 differently from the rest of Ukraine. Western leaders regularly question whether Ukraine should even try to liberate Crimea and parts of Donbas even though the actual status of these lands under international law is the same as that of any other part of sovereign, independent Ukraine. Russia intends to achieve the same effects in the lands it has occupied since February 24, 2022 and will be more likely to succeed in that effort the longer that it is allowed to hold that territory. The liberation of these strategically vital Ukrainian lands is thus urgent. Delay powerfully advances Russian objectives to the detriment of Ukraine and the West.

Introduction

The war in Ukraine is primarily a war for control of people, not land. Russian President Vladimir Putin has invaded Ukraine twice not mainly because he desires Ukraine's land, but rather because he seeks to control its people. Putin's project, explicitly articulated in the 2021 article he published justifying the 2022 full-scale invasion, is the destruction of Ukraine's distinctive political, social, linguistic, and religious identity.¹ Putin seeks to make real his false ideological conviction that Ukrainians are simply confused Russians with an invented identity, language, and history that a small, Western-backed minority is seeking to impose on the majority of inhabitants. He sees language as one of the primary determinants of ethnicity—Russian speakers, he claims, must be Russians regardless of the state they

live in.² The Russian Federation has claimed special rights to protect Russians in the former Soviet states since the 1990s, although the Kremlin did not act on those claims until Putin became president.³ Putin's aim to destroy Ukrainian identity, language, and culture is thus one of the primary objectives of his entire enterprise.

The stakes of this war thus transcend hectares of land. They include the lives, freedom, and identities of nearly five million Ukrainians currently living under Russian occupation, the nearly five million more whom the Kremlin has illegally deported to Russia and the additional millions who have fled their homeland to other parts of Ukraine or abroad.⁴ Dry, abstract, "realist" discussions

about pressuring Ukraine to make “concessions”—to “trade land for peace”—ignore the reality of the war. This war is about people as well as land, and Western leaders cannot dismiss the consequences of the policies they pursue and demand.

Russia first experimented with its occupation playbook in 2008 when it invaded Georgia and occupied the Georgian territories of the South Ossetia and Abkhazia “republics.”⁵ Russia further developed means and methods of occupation in Ukraine after it invaded and seized Crimea and parts of Donbas in 2014. The international community denounced the 2014 invasion, refused to recognize Russia’s claims to these areas, and heavily sanctioned involved Russian actors.⁶ The international response, however, failed to discourage Russia from continuing its occupation of Ukraine and setting conditions for the 2022 full-scale invasion. Russia succeeded in forcing the international community to accept and internalize the 2014 occupation enough that many even in the West now view the 2014 territories as different from the rest of Ukraine.

Russia is now applying these means and methods of occupation on an expanded scale in the Ukrainian territories it occupied since the full-scale invasion that began on February 24, 2022. The Kremlin’s occupation design aims to eliminate Ukrainian identity by forcibly integrating occupied Ukraine into Russia socially, culturally, linguistically, politically, economically, religiously, and bureaucratically. Moscow ultimately seeks to persuade Kyiv and its supporters that the forced integration of Ukraine into Russia, and the resulting elimination

of Ukrainian identity, are permanent and irreversible so that the Kremlin can fully subjugate these territories and people for its own gain.

Putin also seeks to use Ukraine as a source of mobilizable manpower in part to address Russia’s demographic issues. Russia has been struggling since the beginning of the 1990s with a demographic crisis, caused by declining birthrates, an aging population, low life expectancy (particularly amongst males of working age), and high levels of emigration.⁷ The war has somewhat exacerbated Russia’s demographic challenges because 800,000–900,000 Russians fled the country after the start of the war, including up to 700,000 who ran after Putin ordered

partial mobilization in September 2022.⁸ Russian Federal State Statistics Service (Rosstat) data shows that Russia’s labor shortage amounted to 4.8 million people in 2023, a problem that has reduced Russia’s economic output.⁹ Rosstat also estimated in 2023 that Russia’s population will decline naturally at a rate of more than 600,000 people per year until 2032.¹⁰

Rosstat reported that the Russian population was 146 million as of January 1, 2023.¹¹ Five million Ukrainians living in Russian-occupied areas, plus the 4.8 million Ukrainians whom Russia has deported into the Russian Federation, thus comprise about 7 percent of the current Russian population. Russian efforts to control Ukrainian land and seize its people are therefore in part intended to offset Russia’s population decline and workforce shortages.

Dry, abstract, “realist” discussions about pressuring Ukraine to make “concessions”—to “trade land for peace”—ignore the reality of the war.

Russia succeeded in forcing the international community to accept and internalize the 2014 occupation enough that many even in the West now view the 2014 territories as different from the rest of Ukraine.

Russia's Pre-2022 Occupation Playbook

Russia first used its occupation strategy on a smaller scale in Crimea and parts of Donbas starting in 2014 and its occupation playbook has changed Western discourse about those areas. The West routinely discusses Crimea and parts of Donbas differently from the territory Russia has occupied since 2022, and some of Ukraine's allies periodically suggest that Ukraine should abandon hopes of liberating these areas. Ukrainian public opinion surveys have also found that Ukrainians make a "clear differentiation" between territories occupied in 2014 and those seized after 2022 when it comes to domestic discussions of how Ukraine can reintegrate its lands and people.¹² Yet the status of all occupied Ukrainian territory under international law is the same. The entire international community (including Russia) recognized Ukraine in its 1991 territorial boundaries, including Crimea and all of Donbas, when Ukraine became independent.¹³ The Russian Federation, the United States, and United Kingdom not only reaffirmed that recognition but also committed not to infringe on Ukrainian territory as part of the 1994 Budapest Agreement by which Ukraine surrendered its Soviet-era nuclear arsenal to Russia.¹⁴ Those agreements contained no carve-outs for Crimea or any other part of Ukraine. Neither has any international body or significant group of states recognized Russia's claims to have annexed any of Ukraine's territory. The Russian occupation and the information operations surrounding it have thus succeeded in creating a public discourse completely at odds with the actual legal situation.

Crimea:

Pro-Russian president of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovich fled Kyiv along with elements of his government in February 2014, after months of protests known as "Euromaidan" that began in late 2013 after Yanukovich refused to sign an association agreement with the European Union. The Euromaidan movement and Yanukovich's subsequent flight from Ukraine, which Ukrainians call the Revolution

of Dignity, challenged the Kremlin's influence in Ukraine, and Russia immediately began inciting pro-Russian protests throughout the country. Crimea was the center of many of these pro-Russian manipulations because Russia already had a significant military presence on the peninsula. The Soviet Black Sea Fleet had always been based at Sevastopol, and Ukraine permitted it to continue to do so after independence by lease. Yanukovich signed the Kharkiv Pact with Russia in 2010, in which Ukraine agreed to lease Crimean naval facilities to the Russian Black Sea Fleet until 2042 without derogation of Ukraine's sovereignty over Crimea and Sevastopol.¹⁵ The Kharkiv Pact forbade Russia from sending military forces to Crimea other than those assigned to the Black Sea Fleet.¹⁶ After the Revolution of Dignity, Russia breached the Kharkiv Pact by quickly deploying non-Black Sea Fleet elements to Crimea, which enabled the swift Russian annexation of the peninsula. This action violated not only the Kharkiv Pact but also the 1994 Budapest Memorandum.¹⁷ Russian-backed protesters clashed with Ukrainian protesters in Crimea in the days following the Revolution of Dignity, culminating with pro-Russian gunmen breaking into the Crimean parliament building on February 27, 2014.¹⁸ The Crimean parliament called an emergency session while the pro-Russian gunmen occupied the parliament building and voted to replace Prime Minister Anatolii Mohyliov with Russian Unity Party member Sergey Aksyonov.¹⁹ Ukrainian news outlets reported at the time that it was unclear how many Crimean parliamentarians were actually in the building and participated in the vote and noted that the gunmen blocked building communications and confiscated the phones of the parliamentarians who were present.²⁰

Russia's violation of the Kharkiv Pact was followed by the rapid militarization of the peninsula in the weeks after Aksyonov's forcible installation as Prime Minister. Pro-Russian elements of the new Crimean parliament held a referendum on Crimea's "accession" to Russia on March 16, 2014, and Russia officially annexed Crimea the following

day.²¹ The international community overwhelmingly refused to recognize the annexation, passed resolutions affirming support of Ukraine's territorial integrity, and heavily sanctioned involved Russian actors. Russia developed its occupation playbook in Crimea, however, despite these international responses to the invasion and annexation. The Kremlin staged a sort of legal theater, engaged in widespread passportization efforts, weaponized census data, artificially altered demographics, and manipulated Crimea's sociocultural and linguistic environment to persuade Ukraine's supporters and Kyiv itself that Crimea was entirely divorced from Ukraine by the time Russian troops launched their full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Russia used the illegal accession referendum to stage a theater of legality and justify the annexation of Crimea by covering its illegal actions with a "legal"-sounding veneer.

Legal theater:

Russia used the illegal accession referendum to stage a theater of legality and justify the annexation of Crimea by covering its illegal actions with a "legal"-sounding veneer. Russian state media claimed that 96.77 percent of voters voted in support of "the reunification of Crimea with Russia with all the rights of a federal subject of the Russian Federation."²² The Ukrainian government and international organizations denounced the referendum as staged and illegitimate because Russia held it under nearly a month of intensified Russian militarization in Crimea, without independent international observers present, and with likely falsified attendance statistics and manipulated ballots.²³ The Kremlin nevertheless used the invented and manipulated 96.77 percent statistic to claim that it had widespread public support and that the illegal occupation of Crimea was therefore legitimate.

Passportization:

Russia used Crimea as a petri dish for passportization between 2014 and 2022. Russia first weaponized the issuance of Russian passports as a means of spreading influence during the 2008 invasion of Georgia, where Russian authorities used the mass issuance

of Russian passports to Georgian citizens before the Russian attack as a purported *casus belli* for the invasion and to claim that Georgia, therefore, did not have a legitimate claim to its own territories.²⁴ Passportization fits into the Kremlin's wider ideological construct of "compatriots abroad" whereby Russia vaguely defines ethnic Russians, Russian passport holders, Russian speakers, and those with any cultural, religious, or historical ties to the Russian Federation and any of its historical predecessors as Russian "compatriots" over whom the Russian Federation has special rights regardless of the country in which they reside.²⁵ Russia started passportization immediately upon annexing Crimea in 2014—Russian Federal Migration Service Crimean occupation head Petr Yarosh claimed that over 1.56 million people received Russian passports in the first nine months of the Russian occupation of Crimea.²⁶

Russian occupation authorities likely coerced large portions of the population to receive Russian passports. The entire 2014 passportization effort took place in the inherently coercive conditions of a Russian military seizure of the peninsula followed by a Russian military occupation of it. A 2023 report by the Yale Humanitarian Research Lab's Conflict Observatory project additionally found that Russian occupation authorities denied employment, mortgages, school enrollment, and healthcare to those without Russian passports to coerce people into obtaining Russian documents.²⁷ Russia used its Crimean passportization campaign to claim that the majority of the population were legally Russian "compatriots abroad," an assertion that the Kremlin used to justify its illegal absorption of Crimea and undermine Ukraine's claims for its continued sovereignty rights.

Weaponization of census data:

Rosstat conducted a census in occupied Crimea in October 2014.²⁸ The Russian census data showed that of the roughly 2,248,000 residents of Crimea, 68 percent identified their nationality as Russian;

15.7 percent as Ukrainian; and 10.6 percent as Crimean Tatar.²⁹ The relative numbers of those who self-identified as Russian or Ukraine had changed markedly from the 2001 All-Ukrainian survey of the 2,033,700 residents of Crimea at that time: 58.5 percent had identified their nationality as Russian; 24.4 percent as Ukrainian; and 10.6 percent as Crimean Tatar.³⁰ Part of the increase in Russian-identifying residents and of the decrease in Ukrainian-identifying residents may reflect the psychological impact of the Russian occupation—Ukrainian sociologist Iryna Bekeshkina noted that the increase in the Russian-identifying population likely resulted in part from the belief that it is better or safer to identify as Russian in Russian-occupied Crimea.³¹ Russia has long used these statistics combined with its assertions about “compatriots” as evidence that the majority of Crimeans are in fact “legally” Russians even though ethnic identity is neither a *de jure* nor *de facto* international standard for determining citizenship.³²

Demographic alterations:

Russia also began efforts in 2014 to materially change the population makeup of Crimea to force its deeper integration into the Russian Federation. Former Ukrainian Commissioner for the Affairs of the Crimean Tatar People Mustafa Dzhemilev stated in May 2018 that Russia “imported” up to 500,000 Russians to occupied Crimea between 2014 and 2018, but cited information from unidentified Crimean partisans that this number may be closer to between 850,000 and one million.³³ Chairperson of the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People Refat Chubarov also stated in 2018 that, although Ukrainian officials cannot confirm the exact number of Russians who arrived in occupied Crimea from Russia between 2014 to 2018, the number is likely “hundreds of thousands.”³⁴ The Ukrainian Helsinki Union on Human Rights—an organization composed of 26 human rights-focused nongovernmental

organizations (NGOs) – reported on December 6, 2023 that Russian authorities have resettled up to 800,000 Russian citizens in occupied Crimea and forced around 100,000 Ukrainian citizens to leave Crimea since 2014.³⁵

Russian authorities have cultivated an artificial increase in the number of Russian nationals in Crimea since 2014 in a variety of ways, according to Ukrainian and Russian sources.³⁶ Part of this Russian strategy centers on the Russian military footprint in the occupied peninsula—Russian population increases have resulted partially from an influx of 20,000–60,000 Russian servicemembers and law enforcement agents and their families, according to Ukrainian estimates.³⁷

Russia also imported civil servants, judges, teachers, and healthcare workers to staff occupation administrations and build out civil society institutions.³⁸ Russian real estate statistics also show that there has been an influx of up to 100,000 Russians, including pensioners, who relocated to Crimea to take advantage of its warm coastal climate.³⁹ Ukrainian sources reported a parallel outflow of 40,000–50,000 Ukrainians and Crimea Tatars from occupied Crimea to mainland Ukraine immediately following the 2014 annexation, a movement that in part accounts for the decrease in residents self-identifying as Ukrainian.⁴⁰ Occupation head of the Crimean Federal State Statistics Service Olga Baldina estimated that the population of Crimea had increased by 20,000 people due to immigration from Russia by 2020.⁴¹ **The reported massive increase of Russian nationals in Crimea has fundamentally altered the demographic makeup of the peninsula and facilitated Russian information operations using population statistics as fabricated evidence that Crimea is historically, naturally, or intrinsically Russian. Those information operations, in turn, support the Kremlin’s false assertions that historical claims trump internationally recognized sovereign borders.**

Russian authorities have cultivated an artificial increase in the number of Russian nationals in Crimea since 2014 in a variety of ways.

Sociocultural and linguistic manipulations:

The Russian-controlled education system and absence of Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar language instruction in occupied Crimea is an example of the coerced sociocultural and linguistic transitions and forced Russification of the Crimean population since 2014. Occupation authorities have presented the façade of “choice” in occupied Crimea by maintaining that Ukrainian and Crimean-Tatar language courses are *available* to schoolchildren, but official Russian statistics paint a different picture. The Crimean occupation Ministry of Education reported that in the 2018-2019 academic year nearly 39,000 children studied in their native chosen languages, including 10,600 children who studied Ukrainian.⁴² This figure includes and is likely inflated by children who took native languages as electives or extracurriculars rather than as the primary language of school instruction. The Crimean occupation Ministry of Education noted that 97 percent of children in Crimea receive Russian-language instruction, with only 3 percent of children receiving exclusively Crimean Tatar instruction, and 0.2 percent receiving exclusively Ukrainian-language instruction.⁴³ There was only one Ukrainian-language school in the entirety of occupied Crimea by the 2020/2021 academic year.⁴⁴ The occupation administration-controlled Crimean Institute of Postgraduate Pedagogical Education stated in its 2022 report that a total of 214 students (or 0.1 percent) received Ukrainian language education in the 2020/2021 academic year.⁴⁵ Predominantly Russian-language school instruction has the effect of setting multigenerational conditions to make the Russian occupation of Crimea appear permanent as generations of Crimean children will be brought up within the Russified school system with limited access to native language instruction. Russian speakers also fit into the Kremlin’s wider “compatriots abroad” ideology and allows the Kremlin to falsely align itself with the Crimean population on

Russian speakers also fit into the Kremlin’s wider “compatriots abroad” ideology and allows the Kremlin to falsely align itself with the Crimean population on the basis of language.

the basis of language. The Kremlin respects and, indeed, demands respect for the linguistic preferences of Russophones but not others—a fact that is unsurprising considering that Moscow rejects the existence of a Ukrainian identity or language distinct from Russian.

Donbas:

Russia’s 2014 occupation of areas of Donbas—the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics (DNR and LNR)—followed a framework similar to the occupation of Crimea. Pro-Russian factions in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts held their own sham referenda under similarly coercive circumstances resulting from intense Russian militarization, referenda that were similarly denounced as illegitimate by Ukraine and the international community.⁴⁶ DNR and LNR officials stimulated demographic changes in occupied Donbas by importing Russians to serve in military and law enforcement functions and to staff occupation administrations.⁴⁷ Demographic shifts happened at a lower rate than in Crimea, however, because casting landlocked, industrialized Donbas as a desirable destination was a harder endeavor than convincing Russian citizens to relocate to Crimea. Occupation authorities started a passportization campaign in occupied Donbas, coercing residents to obtain Russian passports in return for the provision of basic social services.⁴⁸ Russia claimed that as of early 2022, 860,000 residents of the DNR and LNR had received Russian passports, an assertion that was used as part of the *casus belli* for the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine just as it had been used in part to justify the 2008 invasion of Georgia.⁴⁹ The DNR and LNR have made Russian their official and exclusive state language and restricted access to Ukrainian history and language lessons in schools.⁵⁰

The LNR abolished the teaching of Ukrainian history in schools entirely starting in 2015.⁵¹

Russia's 2022-2023 occupation strategy in Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhia, and Kherson oblasts

Russia is now applying various pseudo-legal and bureaucratic, sociocultural, linguistic, economic, and administrative control strategies to the territories it has illegally annexed since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 in a way that generally resembles the 2014 Crimea-Donbas framework, but at an escalated rate to accomplish political and informational effects. Such tactical day-to-day efforts are meant to set conditions for the multigenerational integration of occupied Ukraine into Russia along multiple vectors in tandem with the overarching strategic Russian objective of eradicating Ukrainian identity.

Legal theater:

Russian authorities in occupied parts of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhia oblasts completed sham and internationally rejected referenda on September 28, 2022 that implausibly claimed that 99.23 percent of voters in occupied Donetsk Oblast, 98.42 percent in occupied Luhansk Oblast, 87.05 percent in occupied Kherson Oblast, and 93.11 percent in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast voted in favor of Russian annexation.⁵² Russian President Vladimir Putin then announced the illegal annexation of the four occupied territories on September 30, 2022, even though Ukraine controlled (and still controls as of 2024) significant portions of all four of the oblasts that Russia was claiming to annex.⁵³ The 2022 referenda and subsequent annexation were used as evidence of widespread grassroots support for the integration of Ukrainian territories into Russia, just as Moscow had used the 2014 Crimea and Donbas sham referenda.

Passportization:

Russian authorities have been pursuing a broad passportization campaign in occupied Ukraine since the early days of the invasion, utilizing passportization practices from 2014 on a larger scale and at a more rapid rate. Putin signed a decree in May 2022 simplifying the procedure for obtaining a Russian

passport in Kherson and Zaporizhia oblasts, expanding the previous 2019 decree simplifying the passportization procedure in the DNR and LNR.⁵⁴ Putin signed another decree in April of 2023 entitled “On the Peculiarities of the Legal Status of Certain Categories of Foreign Citizens and Stateless Persons in the Russian Federation,” which defined residents of occupied areas of Ukraine who refuse Russian passports as “foreign citizens and stateless persons” subject to administrative discriminations under Russian law.⁵⁵ The April 2023 decree also stated that “foreign citizens and stateless persons” can live in occupied territories until July 1, 2024, suggesting that individuals without Russian passports may be subject to mass deportation following this date.⁵⁶ ISW has long assessed that Russian occupation authorities systematically withhold basic services, medical care, and access to critical medicines such as insulin, from those who refuse to get Russian passports.⁵⁷ Forced passportization has also helped the Kremlin identify residents of territories occupied since 2022 as Russian “compatriots” and support its ideological claims to the occupied areas in the same manner as it did Crimea and Donbas in 2014.

Co-optation of the education system for sociocultural and linguistic control:

Russian occupation authorities are engaging in deliberate efforts to weaponize the school system and access to education in occupied areas of Ukraine to eliminate Ukrainian language, culture, and history and consolidate social control of these areas.⁵⁸ These efforts notably target school-aged children and youth. Russian occupation authorities are co-opting the school system with the spurious justification of bringing occupied schools up to the “Russian standard,” meaning that Russian occupation authorities are overhauling curricula to replace Ukrainian history lessons with Russian history lessons, replace Ukrainian literature with Russian literature, and replace Ukrainian language instruction with

Russian language instruction.⁵⁹ Putin announced on August 2, 2023 that the Russian government will provide 2.5 million books to libraries and schools in occupied Ukraine to integrate these areas into the “all-Russian cultural space.”⁶⁰ Russian Education Minister Sergey Kravtsov also stated on August 2, 2023 that Russian authorities are “carrying out systematic work” to integrate Ukraine into the Russian educational sphere “as quickly as possible,” and emphasized that 10th and 11th graders in occupied Ukraine will receive new standardized history textbooks that teach the “reunification of Crimea” and the “course of the special military operation.”⁶¹ The Kremlin is thus institutionalizing its rewritten version of Ukrainian history in Ukrainian schools.

The Ukrainian language is a target and casualty of these education reforms. Russian authorities claim that students in occupied areas of Ukraine have the “option” to continue to learn Ukrainian but that the majority of students choose not to. And indeed, the Russian authorities have gravely disincentivized the study of Ukrainian. This informational line has the intended effect of creating a false impression of popular support for Russian-language instruction and education in occupied schools that resembles the situation in Crimea following 2014. Zaporizhia Oblast occupation head Yevgeny Balitsky noted that if children decide to study in Ukrainian, they will be able to study Ukrainian for a maximum of three hours a week.⁶² Zaporizhia Oblast occupation Education Minister Elena Shapurova stated in March 2023 that Ukrainian language will no longer be compulsory in schools in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast, which means that parents nominally have the option for their children to learn Ukrainian, but that if parents choose Russian instruction their children will not receive *any* Ukrainian language education.⁶³ The façade of choice once again allows Russian occupation officials to claim that residents “support” the Russian occupation and are making their own choice to forgo their Ukrainian identities and defines Ukrainians as “Russian speakers” abroad to whom the Kremlin has an ideological and pseudo-legal claim.

The Kremlin is also using the Russian co-optation of the Ukrainian school system to militarize Ukrainian

youth and prepare them to fight against their fellow Ukrainians. Russian curricula are meant to instill “military-patriotic” values in Ukrainian children and youth, and often involve events and speeches held by active duty Russian servicemembers and veterans to “teach” Ukrainian children about Russian patriotism and “military greatness.”⁶⁴ Russian occupation authorities also use schools as a way to funnel children and youth into military-patriotic youth programs. Three Russian organizations form the backbone of this effort—Yunarmia, Young Guards of United Russia, and the new “Movement of the First” group.⁶⁵ All three organizations operate throughout occupied Ukraine and are meant to instill pro-Russian and hyper-militarized ideals in Ukrainian children through basic military training, classes on Russian military history, and youth participation in law enforcement and military-based community service actions. Yunarmia is particularly meant to prepare Ukrainian children for service in the Russian military upon reaching conscription age.

Social services as a multigenerational poison pill:

Russian occupation authorities are using the provision of basic social services to generate dependencies on local occupation administrations and the wider Russian occupation structure. It will become more difficult for Ukraine to reintegrate its people back into its own social benefit system as these dependencies grow over time. Russian occupation officials are using the issuance of birth certificates, pensions, state payrolls, and maternity capital payments to force residents of occupied areas to become reliant on occupation administrations while simultaneously furthering efforts to Russify occupied areas. Parents in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast who choose to obtain Ukrainian birth certificates for children born under Russian occupation will need to provide state-notarized Russian-language translations of the Ukrainian birth certificates.⁶⁶ Such a practice covertly “Russifies” Ukrainian names, as the required translation will write out the names of children using the Russian orthography rather than the Ukrainian. Translation of birth certificates

also likely allows occupation administrations to collect personal information on parents who make the ostensibly anti-Russian/pro-Ukrainian decision to keep their children's birth certificates in the Ukrainian version. Russian occupation authorities also control the implementation of minimum wage and state payrolls in occupied areas through the Russian Federal Social Insurance Fund, so residents of occupied areas are reliant on Russia to receive compensation for labor and promised pensions.⁶⁷ The Russian Social Fund notably requires Russian citizenship for residents of occupied regions to receive pension payments, thereby further coercing passportization.⁶⁸

Maternity capital payments are the strongest example of Russia's use of social services as a "poison pill"—a seemingly mundane bureaucratic detail with multigenerational impacts that will reveal themselves in years and decades to come. Maternity capital is a one-time payment made by the Russian state to women who are Russian citizens upon the birth or adoption of their second or third (or more) child.⁶⁹ Russia has used maternity capital payments domestically to encourage families to have several children and increase Russia's birthrate.⁷⁰ Maternity capital payments have been available in occupied Kherson, Zaporizhia, Donetsk, and Luhansk oblasts since January 2023. Putin signed a law on December 25, 2023, mandating that maternity capital payments can only be issued if the parents are Russian citizens at the time of the birth or adoption of their second or third child, and only if the child is a natural Russian citizen.⁷¹ Russian occupation authorities will likely use this new and more stringent maternity capital provision to coerce families in occupied Ukraine to register their children for Russian passports at birth and to further force adult

residents to receive Russian citizenship to be eligible for the payment.⁷² Parents in occupied areas of Ukraine will be coerced under this law to make the decision to receive Russian citizenship for themselves and their children in order to obtain social benefits, which will increase the number of Russian citizens in occupied areas and fundamentally change the ostensible demographics in occupied Ukraine in following generations.

Patronage programs, infrastructure projects, and generated economic dependencies:

Russia is using patronage programs led by Russian federal subjects (Russian regions that are the constituent entities of the Russian Federation roughly similar to US states but with fewer real powers) to make occupied regions of Ukraine economically dependent on Russia and integrate them into the Russian economic sphere while removing the burden of Ukraine's reconstruction from the Kremlin's direct budget.⁷³ Putin acknowledged the patronage networks during his speech to the Russian Federal Assembly on February 21, 2023.⁷⁴ Russian federal subjects provide occupied Ukrainian settlements with financial support and humanitarian aid and directly plan and implement infrastructure programs in occupied areas. Russian occupation officials credit their Russian regional patrons with the construction of schools, hospitals, transportation infrastructure, and more.⁷⁵ The intended effect of these programs is to render Ukrainian settlements entirely dependent on Russia for economic support and infrastructure development and shift some of the direct financial burden of re-building Ukraine away from the Kremlin and onto federal subjects.

Maternity capital payments are the strongest example of Russia's use of social services as a "poison pill"—a seemingly mundane bureaucratic detail with multigenerational impacts that will reveal themselves in years and decades to come.

Russia's ethnic cleansing campaign in Ukraine

Russia's occupation of Ukraine likely amounts to a wider deliberate ethnic cleansing campaign that is heavily reliant on a strategy of forced depopulation and repopulation, creating the façade of multigenerational and irreversible impacts intended to further isolate Ukraine from the West in decades to come. Ethnic cleansing has not yet been defined as a distinct crime under international law but is well-situated in a body of international precedent largely emanating from crimes committed in the former Yugoslavia. A UN Commission of Experts defined ethnic cleansing as “rendering an area ethnically homogeneous by using force or intimidation to remove persons of given groups from the area,” and “a purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove by violent and terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic areas.”⁷⁶ Acts that could amount to ethnic cleansing per the UN definition notably can also constitute violations of international law and the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Genocide Convention).⁷⁷

Russia is engaged in what appears to be a deliberate campaign to depopulate parts of occupied Ukraine by removing ethnic Ukrainian populations and replacing them with Russian citizens, thus substantially altering the demographics of occupied areas of Ukraine. Russia's modern deportation campaign is an updated application of the tried-and-true Soviet strategy of moving ethnic minority populations around within its claimed territories.⁷⁸ The depopulation/repopulation dynamic and resulting demographic changes aim to undermine Ukraine's claim to its own territory by importing Russians who will participate in Russian-controlled civil society and political processes in order to create the guise of popular grassroots buy-in for the Russian occupation and by physically removing Ukraine's people and their culture and society from Ukraine's own lands.

Removal and Deportation:

NB: ISW differentiates between “forcible transfer/removal” and “deportation” of occupied populations according to international legal definitions.⁷⁹ Forcible transfer/removal refers to occasions when the occupying power forcibly removes certain populations from their homes to other areas within national borders, for example—Russian authorities removing Ukrainian civilians from Kherson Oblast to occupied Crimea. Deportation refers to the case in which the occupying power deports residents of the occupied areas across de jure international borders. Both are prohibited under the Fourth Geneva Convention.⁸⁰ Both Russia and Ukraine are signatories to the Geneva Conventions.⁸¹

Russia is conducting a broad deportation campaign in occupied Ukraine. Kremlin-appointed Children's Rights Commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova stated in a report released on October 15, 2023, that Russia has “accepted” over 4.8 million Ukrainians (4.1 million adults and 700,000 children) since February 24, 2022.⁸² This number is difficult for Ukrainian officials or the international community to confirm—by design. Russian authorities have frequently used the guise of humanitarian concern to justify the mass removal of Ukrainians further into Russian-controlled territory in Ukraine or to justify their deportation to Russia. Kherson Oblast occupation authorities used the guise of humanitarian concern to set conditions for large scale removals of Ukrainian civilians from the right bank of Kherson Oblast as it became apparent that Russian forces would have to retreat from the right bank in October 2022.⁸³ Russian occupation officials began calling for the official evacuations on October 22, 2022 due to “increased danger of massive shelling...and the threat of terrorist attacks.”⁸⁴ Kherson Oblast occupation officials suggested that they viewed the evacuations as preparations for the permanent resettlement of up to 60,000 Ukrainians further in Russian-controlled territory in occupied Kherson Oblast—in an apparent violation of international law, which allows an occupying power only to temporarily evacuate populations under their control for safety reasons with

the stipulation that the occupying power must return these populations when danger has passed.⁸⁵ This massive removal of around 22,000 Ukrainian civilians was likely meant to depopulate the right bank of Kherson Oblast and weaken Ukraine's ability to reintegrate this territory upon its liberation.⁸⁶

Russian authorities also use the medical system to facilitate and justify the deportation of Ukrainians to Russia. The Rostov State Medical University, a medical facility subordinate to the Russian Health Ministry, reported on July 11, 2023, that Russian doctors operating in occupied Kherson Oblast may refer patients to the Rostov State Medical University clinic if they need "high-tech" medical treatment.⁸⁷ Russian Health Minister Mikhail Murashko confirmed during a visit to occupied Mariupol, Donetsk Oblast, on January 12, 2024 that Russian authorities have deported over 2,100 Ukrainians (including 500 children) to federal medical clinics in Russia for medical reasons over the course of 2023.⁸⁸ It is of course possible and even likely that Ukrainian residents do, in fact, receive medical treatment in Russia. However, the fact of their deportation for medical purposes remains inconsistent with international law, and the lack of available data on the return of these individuals further supports the presumption that Russian officials are using the medical system to facilitate largescale deportations.⁸⁹

Ukrainian children are a clear target of Russia's overarching deportation campaign. Lvova-Belova stated in the October 2023 report that Russia has "accepted" over 700,000 Ukrainian children since February 24, 2022.⁹⁰ The Ukrainian Ministry of Reintegration's "Children of War" platform has confirmed the deportation and/or displacement of 19,546 Ukrainian children between February 24, 2022 and January 13, 2024.⁹¹ Ukrainian officials cannot confirm the full extent of Russian deportations of Ukrainian children because Russian officials frequently deport children without guardians or parental representation such that no one can confirm their identities or account for their whereabouts. Russian occupation authorities are facilitating the deportation of Ukrainian children through multiple avenues, including:

- **Sociocultural avenues:** The deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia to participate in sociocultural programs, where they are exposed to Russian history and culture to discourage them from affiliating with their Ukrainian identity.⁹²
- **Educational avenues, including military-patriotic programming:** The deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia to participate in various state-controlled education programs, including military-patriotic programming.⁹³ Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov confirmed that he was overseeing the deportation of "difficult teenagers" from Ukraine to participate in military-patriotic education programs in Chechnya.⁹⁴ Russian opposition outlet *Verstka* found that Russian Investigative Committee Head Alexander Bastrykin is overseeing efforts to deport Ukrainian children to Russia and placing them in military cadet training courses.⁹⁵
- **Civic and youth engagement avenues:** The deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia to participate in youth-led civic engagement initiatives, such as the "Movement of the First" program.⁹⁶ Such programs are intended to coerce Ukrainian youth to participate in Russian civil society and set conditions for multigenerational buy-in for the Russian political system.
- **Vacation schemes and children's camps:** The removal and deportation of Ukrainian children to children's summer camps in occupied Crimea and throughout the Russian Federation.⁹⁷ Such programs are often presented as an opportunity for children to go on vacation to "rest and relax" from the stress of living in active combat zones in Ukraine. Russian authorities have deported children from Kherson Oblast as far as a children's camp in Vladivostok, Primorsky Krai that is closer to Alaska than to Ukraine.⁹⁸
- **Medical and psychological rehabilitation:** The deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia under the guise of providing them with medical or psychological care.⁹⁹ It is unclear on what timeline, if at all, Russian authorities return children to Ukraine after medical or psychological treatment.

- **Deportation via Belarus:** Belarusian officials, including Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko, are closely involved in the deportation of Ukrainian children to Belarus and Russia alongside Kremlin officials.¹⁰⁰ A 2023 investigation by the *Telegraph* estimated that Russian and Belarusian officials had deported roughly 2,150 Ukrainian children to at least four children's camps in Belarus as of July.¹⁰¹
- **Adoption, including by high-ranking Russian officials:** Several high-ranking Russian officials have personally adopted children from Ukraine. Lvova-Belova frequently talks about how she adopted a 16-year-old boy from occupied Mariupol and has used the child to highlight how Russian adoption schemes aim to eradicate Ukrainian identity in adopted children.¹⁰² *BBC Panorama* and Russian opposition outlet *Vazhnye Istorii* also published investigations in November 2023 detailing how Just Russia Party leader Sergei Mironov adopted a 10-month-old Ukrainian girl whom Russian authorities forcibly deported from a Kherson City orphanage in the autumn of 2022 alongside 40 other children.¹⁰³ Lvova-Belova claimed that 380 children from occupied Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts were placed in foster care with Russian families between April and October 2022, and the number of actual forced adoptions and foster placements from all four occupied oblasts of Ukraine is likely to be much higher nearly two years into the war.¹⁰⁴

Russia's deportation campaign has the clear intent of robbing Ukraine of its multigenerational potential and damaging Ukraine's future claims to its own people. Russia's occupation design for Ukraine is meant to raise a generation of young people in a Russian-controlled system in which children are forced to forgo their Ukrainian language, history, and culture. The deportation of up to 700,000 Ukrainian children to Russia physically deprives Ukraine of its future generations—young voices who will be essential for the reintegration of Ukrainian lands into Ukraine. Russia's deliberate censorship of information about deported Ukrainian children exposes the falsity of Russian information operations claiming that the removal

and deportation of children is a temporary humanitarian endeavor and that Russia's ultimate interest is in returning these children to their homes and families.¹⁰⁵ The forced adoption of Ukrainian children is meant to erase any links these children have with their homeland, making it incredibly difficult to repatriate them. Their Ukrainian names and birthplaces are being irreversibly changed to Russian ones, in a way that mirrors Nazi Germany's forced kidnapping and "Germanization" of up to 200,000 Polish children during the Second World War. This multigenerational devastation is the intended effect of Russia's overarching depopulation campaign.

Repopulation:

Russia's depopulation campaign for occupied Ukrainian territory is supported by a parallel campaign to repopulate occupied territories with Russian citizens.¹⁰⁶ This repopulation campaign operates on multiple levels that echo many of the repopulation methods Russia used in Crimea after 2014. One of the initial repopulation waves following the full-scale invasion in 2022 came in the form of imported Russian occupation officials—civil servants who moved to occupied Ukraine to staff positions in occupation administrations and enforce occupation agendas.¹⁰⁷ Russian opposition outlet *Verstka* found that as of October 2023, about half of the senior and middle-level officials in occupation administrations in occupied Kherson, Zaporizhia, Donetsk, and Luhansk oblasts had relocated from Russia.¹⁰⁸ *Verstka* noted that 15 of the 24 members of the Donetsk Oblast occupation Council of Ministers are Russians. DNR Head Denis Pushilin has actively been staffing his cabinet with Russians since 2014 and appointed former First Deputy of Yakutia Dmytro Berdnikov as the occupation mayor of Mariupol in November 2022.¹⁰⁹ The relocation of Russian officials to Ukraine, likely alongside their families, increases the overtly pro-Russian population of occupied areas and allows Russian officials to mitigate the risk of working with too many local collaborators, whom Russian officials apparently regard as less trustworthy.

Russia is also trying to stimulate the flow of migration from Russia to occupied Ukraine replicating

the Crimean example. Occupation authorities offer preferential mortgage programs in larger occupied cities such as Mariupol to encourage Russians to move to occupied Ukraine.¹¹⁰ Russian officials are also presenting infrastructure projects in occupied cities as attractive employment opportunities for Russian citizens.¹¹¹ Russian opposition outlet *Novaya Gazeta* found that over 7,000 construction workers from Moscow Oblast are working on construction projects in Mariupol, for example.¹¹² The Ukrainian Resistance Center stated that its sources in the Ukrainian partisan movement obtained documents in August 2023 detailing Russian plans to encourage migration from Russia to increase the population of occupied Mariupol by 300,000 by 2035.¹¹³ Ukrainian sources frequently report on an influx of ethnic minorities and Russians from more economically disenfranchised Russian regions into occupied Ukrainian cities, suggesting that Russian authorities consistently use the incentive of housing and to encourage relocation to occupied Ukraine.¹¹⁴ Russian officials may have a more difficult time casting occupied Ukraine (which remains an active combat zone) as an attractive tourist destination for sun-seeking Russian tourists than was the case with Crimea but are nevertheless currently engaged in various development projects to

encourage this demographic to repopulate occupied areas.¹¹⁵ Pushilin announced in May 2022, for example, that he intends to convert Mariupol into a resort city to create additional jobs and generate income for the city through tourism.¹¹⁶

The depopulation/repopulation dynamic forms the backbone of Russia's ethnic cleansing campaign—it is premised on the deportation of Ukrainians, the eradication of their Ukrainian identities, and

their replacement with Russian populations, language, laws, and customs. Russia's occupation of Ukraine, at its core, is a campaign to irrevocably erase Ukraine and permanently absorb it into Russia.

These manipulations are meant to expand Russia's claims to Ukraine through the "compatriots abroad" ideology, by allowing Russia to claim that the newly occupied territories of Ukraine are comprised of Russians with no interest in or right to remain part of Ukraine. This ideology does not require that the beneficiaries of this ethnic cleansing effort be ethnic Russians—they need only be Russian speakers according to Kremlin doctrine. This effect will become stronger with each passing generation, as children are born into a Russian-controlled system that Russia increasingly isolates from Ukraine the West.

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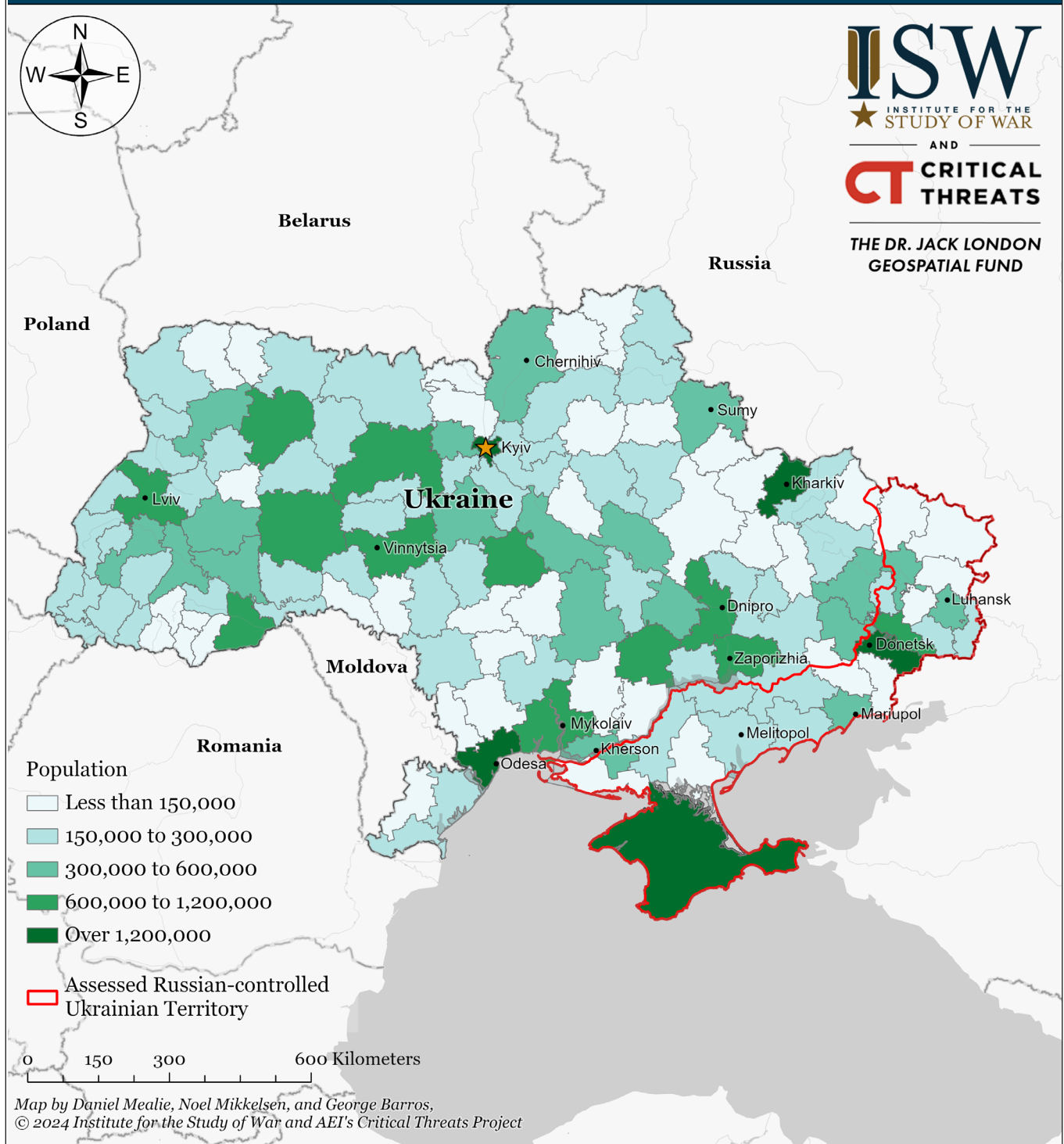
Occupation under hypothetical Russian victory

Russian victory in Ukraine, achieved by a ceasefire that freezes the frontlines and maintains the Russian occupation of 18 percent of Ukrainian territory and 5 million Ukrainian people in the first instance, and using the current frontline as a springboard for further attempts to seize more Ukrainian territory in the second instance, will further concretize the destruction of Ukraine as a sovereign state. Negotiations on Russia's terms and freezing the lines as they currently stand would also cede to Russia the millions of Ukrainians living behind those lines. It would constitute an implicit but concrete endorsement of Russia's ethnic cleansing campaign and send a clear signal to Russia that the West will ultimately accept Russia's project of completely erasing the Ukrainian people. Should Russia then launch a subsequent invasion of Ukraine, as ISW forecasts it likely will do after Moscow has used a ceasefire secured on its terms to recover, Russia will then have the opportunity to seize and absorb more densely populated areas of Ukraine and conduct its occupation strategy on an even wider scale. Ukraine would be left, at best, a rump state that is effectively a political, social, linguistic, cultural, economic,

and bureaucratic ward of Russia, without the ability to liberate its people.

Russia has shown what it intends to do in the rest of Ukraine through its occupation of Crimea and the Donbas and its more recent illegal annexation of additional Ukrainian territories. The West must not fool itself into believing that a ceasefire offers any meaningful future prospect of reversing the destruction of Ukrainian identity, culture, language, and lives in the occupied lands. Western leaders must also internalize the reality that simply holding onto the lands Russia happens to have secured already will never satisfy Putin or any successors of like mind. The Russian war against Ukraine was always a war to eliminate Ukrainian nationhood and thus cannot end until Kyiv itself is made over into a Russian city and all Ukraine a Russian province.

Ukrainian Population Density by Raion



* Raion population data is based on the January 2022 report by the State Statistics Service of Ukraine. Population data on Crimea's raions has been limited following the 2014 annexation. ISW used the combined estimated population for Sevastopol and the Autonomous Republic of Crimea taken by Russian authorities in 2021.

De-occupation and reintegration in the case of Ukrainian victory

All is not yet lost, however. Ukraine is still relatively well-positioned to reintegrate the people currently living under Russian occupation in the short term if its international partners provide it with the military support needed to re-introduce maneuver to the battlefield, retake its territories, and liberate its people.¹¹⁷ Ukraine can feasibly dismantle occupation regimes, rebuild damaged infrastructure, and reinstitute local governance systems with international support and already has prepared many such plans.¹¹⁸ Ukraine has already experienced the heartbreaking task of restoring and reintegrating de-occupied areas in places like Bucha, Irpin, Kherson City, and Izyum which were the sites of Russian atrocities in the early months of the invasion.¹¹⁹

The challenge of repatriating deported Ukrainians, especially children, will be substantially more difficult, however, because the Russian deportation campaign has been designed to be irreversible. Various Ukrainian organizations are working tirelessly to identify and return deported Ukrainians and advocate for stolen Ukrainian children, but

the burden of repatriation still largely falls on the bravery of individuals or private groups.¹²⁰ This already complicated effort will undoubtedly become substantially harder the longer Russia has to develop its deportation campaign and administratively erase the identities of deported Ukrainians. It will become even more difficult if Russia is given the opportunity to expand the pool of deportable Ukrainians by seizing more Ukrainian territory.

Russian efforts to cleanse occupied Ukraine and make its occupation permanent are still reversible. But speed is of the essence. The longer Russia is allowed to occupy Ukrainian lands the harder it will be to reintegrate them into Ukraine, to say nothing of the additional lives lost and irrevocably damaged in the meantime. The West must act decisively to help Ukraine, and it must act now.

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