



Andreas Heinemann-Grüder

in cooperation with Dmitry Durnev, Julia Friedrich,
Sergey Savchenko

ANNIHILATION BY INTENT

Russia's Occupation Policy in Ukraine Since 2022

With a foreword by Jan Philipp Wölbern

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Foreword

The Konrad Adenauer Foundation has been supporting Ukraine on its path to democracy, the rule of law, and European integration for over three decades. Since opening our office in Kyiv in 1994, our central aim has been to support those forces in politics, society, and academia who stand for a free, sovereign, and democratic country. In today's era, marked by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, this work is more urgent and important than ever.

It was therefore particularly important to us to support this study that addresses one of the most distressing and, at the same time, most important issues of this war: the nature and practice of the Russian occupation regime in the occupied parts of Ukraine. Andreas Heinemann-Grüder and his team colleagues present a compelling analysis of Russian occupation policy based on sound empirical research. We extend our sincere thanks to the authors for their meticulous and knowledgeable work. We also thank all the supporters involved who contributed their expertise, commitment, and perseverance to the creation of this book.

The Konrad Adenauer Foundation supported this project because it serves not only scholarly research but also public and political memory: What is happening in the occupied territories of Ukraine must not be forgotten. The massive human rights violations committed there—from deportations and torture to the systematic erasure of Ukrainian identity—are not abstract statistics or vague political phenomena. They represent experiences of Ukrainians whose lives have been shattered or restricted or even extinguished by a brutal occupation regime. From a German perspective, a disturbing comparison arises when reading this: The methods of Russian occupation policy in Ukraine exhibit a frightening degree of parallels to the practices of the Soviet occupation forces in the Soviet occupation zone and the early GDR—for example, in targeted repression, the establishment of a repressive state apparatus, the promotion of collaboration, and ideological re-education. And yet, the current Russian approach goes even further. The crucial difference compared to that time: The occupation of Ukraine is

based on an ethnocidal impulse. The goal is not merely political control, but the annihilation of Ukrainian statehood and cultural identity. This makes this war, and especially the occupation practices, a crime whose full extent has not yet been grasped.

This book is also a call to vigilance. It is a warning to all those who still downplay, underestimate, or deny the imperialist and inhumane ideology of “*Ruskiy Mir*” (Russian world). The analysis of the reality of the occupation in Ukraine clearly shows that this ideology aims at subjugation and disenfranchisement, even annihilation—not at negotiation or coexistence. We hope that this book will find many readers—in politics, academia, and civil society. And that it will contribute to a clearer picture of what this war is truly about: nothing less than the defense of freedom, democracy, and human dignity—in Ukraine, on our shared European continent, and beyond.

Kyiv, October 2025

Dr. Jan Philipp Wölbern

Deputy Head of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation’s Office
in Ukraine

Introduction

The purpose of the following account is to reveal the mechanisms of Russia's occupation of Ukrainian territories. What kind of regime has Russia established since the beginning of its occupation and formal annexation of Ukrainian territory? What does the occupation mean for those affected, how do they experience Russian control, and how do they cope with the imposition of autocratic order? Finally, what kinds of everyday practices, tensions, and contradictions emerge? We focus on the newly occupied territories, not on those already under Russian control since spring 2014.

Our study is an attempt to identify patterns of Russian behavior and of Ukrainian responses. Russia's war against Ukraine and occupation of parts of Ukraine shapes Russia's regime writ large. In the governance of occupation the Russian regime crystalizes, it finds its shape, modus operandi and imprint. Studying occupation means understanding the essence of Russian politics. Russia's intention is incorporation rather than mere occupation. Incorporation means dismantling the social fabric, forcing people to adapt in order to survive. Russia exports and reimports modes of governance. Years ago, some scholars wrote about the Chechenization of Russia, i.e., the securitization of domestic politics, the outsourcing of fighting to irregular armed groups, and the testing of repression, autocratic rule, and civil-military administrations.¹ The practices reveal the intentions in action.

The findings contribute to the necessary reconstruction of Russia's practices—few observers have paid much attention to the governance of the territories under Russian control.² We provide

1 On the different connotations of Chechenization see Robert Bruce Ware, Chechenization: Ironies and Intricacies, in: *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2009, pp. 157-169.

2 Several reports cover distinct dimensions of the occupation policy. On suppression of freedom of religion see: https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/547499_UKRAINE-2023-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf; Nikolay Petrov, *Russia in the Occupied Territories of Ukraine. Policies, Strategies and Their Implementation*, SWP Comment 2024/C 38, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2024C38/>; Maryna Venneri, *Russia's*

insights that go beyond journalistic reports, individual fates, or mere anecdotal evidence.³ Further studies will follow, especially after the war has ended.

Any transition from war to peace must begin with the recognition of facts. It is a moral obligation to establish facts on the ground rather than closing the books. Starting with the occupation of Crimea and the Donetsk und Luhansk and, since 2022, the Kher-son and Zaporizhzhzhiya regions, Russia controls roughly 20 percent of Ukraine’s territory and an estimated number of 3,5 million people. As a result of the war, the population of Ukraine decreased from 42 million in 2020 to estimated 28 million. As a result of the Russian invasion around 5.1 million Ukrainian refugees were registered across Europe and 5.6 million worldwide as of May 2025, among them 1.2 million refugees fled from Ukraine to Germany as of April 2025, 3.7 million were internally displaced.

Anyone proposing a land-for-peace deal, cutting off weapons supply for Ukraine to undermine its ability to defend itself, or a “peace agreement” imposed on Ukraine by great power dictates must be aware of the consequences for those who are forced to live under Russian control. Some right- and left-wing populists and politicians in the West – mostly in opposition, such as the populist politician Sahra Wagenknecht in Germany, but also some in government, such as Prime Minister Viktor Orban in Hungary or Prime Minister Robert Fico in Slovakia – repeatedly call for an appeasement of Putin’s regime. And yet, they do not spell out the consequences for the people forced to live under permanent Russian control.

The study is the result of a joint endeavor between the “Analytical Centre” in Kyiv under the leadership of the retired Major-General Sergey Savchenko, the Ukrainian journalist Dmitry Durnev, Julia Friedrich, fellow at the Global Public Policy Institute

occupation strategy – the biggest long-term threat to Ukraine’s stability, Middle East Institute, March 23, 2023, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/russias-occupation-strategy-biggest-long-term-threat-ukraines-stability>.

3 Katharina Raabe, Kateryna Mishenko (eds.), *Aus dem Nebel des Krieges. Die Gegenwart der Ukraine*, Berlin 2023, contains an insightful collection and reflection of personal experiences of war, forced displacement, and occupation.

(GPPI) in Berlin, and Andreas Heinemann-Grüder of the CASSIS institute at the University of Bonn and fellow at the Global Public Policy Institute in Berlin. The research is based on interviews with refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), persons living in Russian-controlled areas, media analysis, and open source intelligence (OSINT). The research was made possible by the generous support of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES). The FES particularly supported the research on coping strategies in the occupied territories. Finally, the research builds on a previous research project on “The consolidation of de facto regimes in the post-Soviet space”, which included the territories under Russian control since 2014 and was funded by the Volkswagen Foundation from 2019 to 2023.

In the occupied territories, data collection has to rely on personal contacts, on individual communication by “Signal” or “Telegram”. Interlocutors are increasingly afraid to speak openly over phone lines, skype or zoom. There are no reliable statistics. Researchers must thus collect fragments of information to create a more or less reliable mosaic, with scattered evidence from which insights have to be deduced. Triangulation is almost impossible, but the alternative would be to leave the practices of occupation outside any research focus. Autocratic rule requires guerrilla methods of data collection, wherein the safety of interlocutors and informers takes precedence over academic norms of transparency.

The draft of the section on Russia’s power ministries (*siloviki*) in the occupied territories was prepared by Sergey Savchenko and his team at the “Analytical Centre” in Kyiv, the section on collaboration was drafted by the journalist Dmitry Durnev while the section on everyday experiences is based on research by Julia Friedrich. The project was initiated, coordinated, and supervised by Andreas Heinemann-Grüder. Preliminary findings were presented at the KAS-sponsored conference “Café Kyiv” in Berlin on February 18, 2024.

