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Mechanisms of Latent Urbicide under Russian Occupation: The Cases of Melitopol, Berdyansk and Prymorsk

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Abstract

This study is dedicated to a specific form of urbicide (city-killing) being committed by Russians in the occupied territories of the Zaporizhzhia region. The proposed concept of “latent urbicide” outlines the deliberate gradual erosion of urban space under the guise of “normalisation”, when the city loses its function as a shared social space and turns into an instrument of military expansion and total control. On the example of Melitopol, Berdyansk, and Prymorsk in the Zaporizhzhia region it is shown which mechanisms are used by the occupation administration and Russian forces for eradication of heterogeneity of urban space . These cities are united by the fact that they were captured by Russian forces within a matter of days in February 2022, thus avoiding significant physical destruction. The research of latent urbicide is based on the testimonies of internally displaced persons (IDPs) who were forced to leave the occupied territories but maintain contact with friends and relatives in Melitopol, Berdyansk, and Prymorsk. This topic is relevant for understanding the Russian occupation and mechanisms of latent urbicide for countering their spread.

Key words: urbicide, war, urban destruction, Russo-Ukrainian war, occupied Ukrainian cities, urban diversity erosion, city transformation, internally displaced person, Ukraine, Melitopol, Prymorsk, Berdyansk

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Introduction

Physical destruction often accompanies the active phase of warfare, yet not all ruins are incidental to military targeting. It is the deliberate demolition of the urban environment that the term “urbicide” describes. Still, urbicide is not limited to the visible destruction of buildings and infrastructure. While it is often associated with such material devastation, a city can be dismantled without a single missile being launched. Buildings may remain intact, new asphalt may cover the roads, people may sit in cafés, children may attend school, and students may go to lectures. What disappears, however, is the essence of the city – the community, the sense of shared space, and social trust – systematically eroded.

This form of destruction is not immediately apparent to an outside observer. On the surface, the city appears functional, yet a closer look reveals that the space no longer belongs to the local community. Under Russian occupation, latent urbicide in Ukrainian cities becomes a tool for consolidating authority, imposing new ideology, and preparing ground for geopolitical ambitions through military means. Its mechanisms are more complex and insidious than overt physical devastation.

The term “latent urbicide” is used here to describe the deliberate strategy of transforming rapidly occupied cities by the occupation administration and Russian military. It highlights the gradual erosion of the urban fabric under the guise of “normalisation”, where the city shifts from a space of social interaction and cultural diversity into a mechanism of military expansion and comprehensive control.

This study examines urbicide as intentional strategies of city destruction in wartime. Drawing on the analytical framework developed in the study of the Yugoslav wars, parallels can be traced to the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war and the occupation of Ukrainian territories.

According to the results of an illegitimate referendum, the Zaporizhzhia region was included in the constitution of the Russian Federation even with territories that were never captured. The studied cities have been under Russian occupation for over four years. During this time, the Russians have partially integrated them into the Russian economic and political space, but as resource appendages. Construction and reconstruction projects implemented by the occupiers are publicly positioned as socially important, but primarily serve military and propaganda purposes. The free urban life that existed until 2022 is being eradicated.

To explore the instruments of latent urbicide, this study analyses three cities in the south of Zaporizhzhia region: Melitopol, Berdyansk, and Prymorsk (Figure 1). Rapidly occupied by Russian forces in late February 2022, these cities had previously served as centres of local economic activity, education, and cultural life. These cities are important for Russia's aggressive strategy, as their control allows the aggressor to create a land corridor to

the Crimean peninsula. With the arrival of occupation forces, urban institutions were subordinated to the new administration, infrastructure was redirected to military purposes, and cultural and educational life was repurposed as instruments of propaganda and regime legitimization.

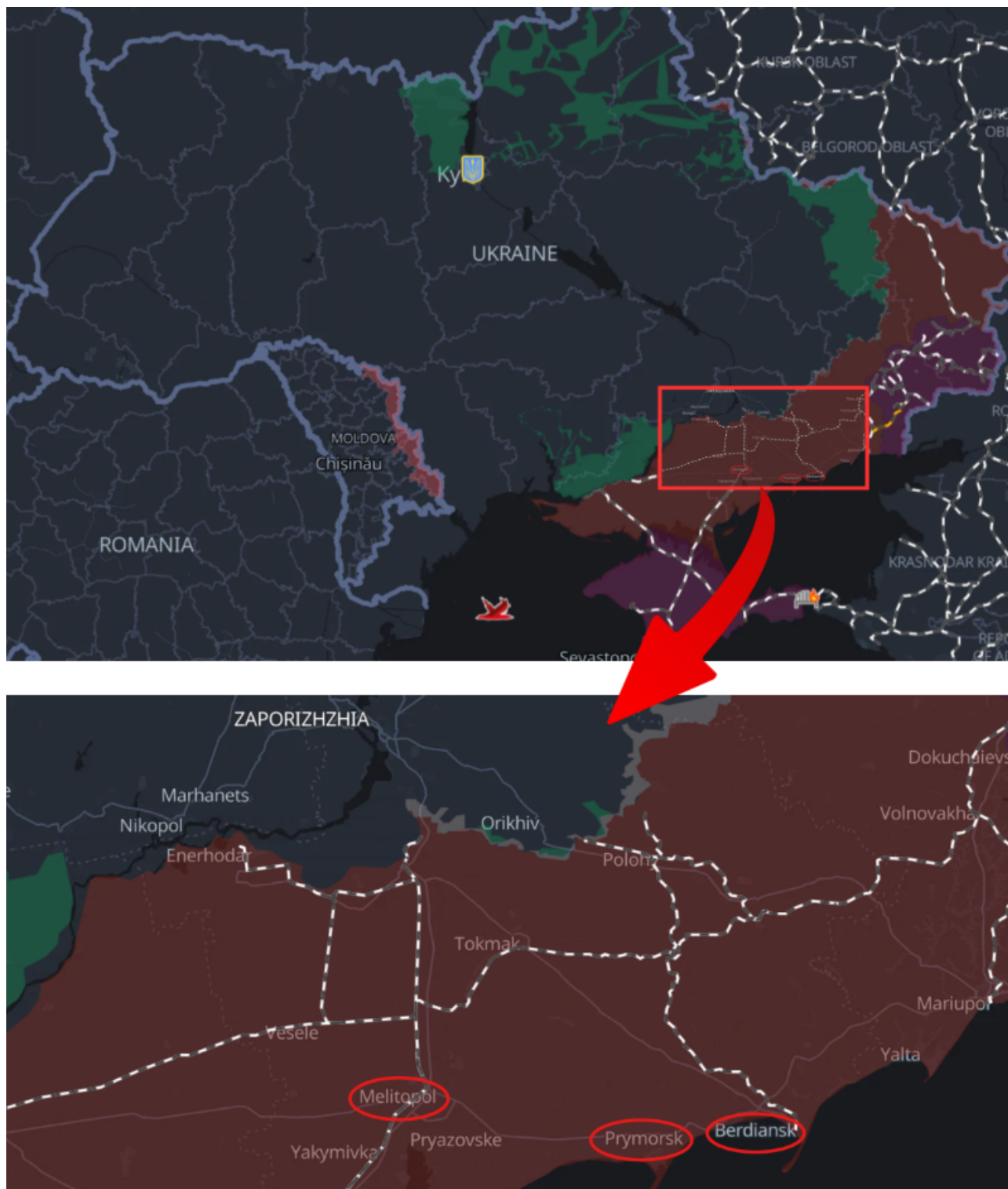


Figure 1. Occupied cities of Melitopol, Prymorsk, and Berdyansk shown on the map.

Source: DeepStatemap, 2023, <https://deepstatemap.live/en/#6/51.8086148/4.8999023>.

The scientific novelty of this study lies in shifting the focus from the macro-events of war to the latent, everyday mechanisms of destroying urban life. The Russian strategy is aimed at deliberately erasing historical memory and social cohesion, while creating an atmosphere of fear and subjugation. The process of deliberate and gradual erosion of urban life under Russian occupation is masked by the rhetoric of “liberation” and “reconstruction”.

Theoretical framework

The literature on urbicide demonstrates a gradual shift from critiques of cities' redevelopment to analyse urban violence during war actions, highlighting the need to also consider less overt processes of urban erasure. The term “*urbicide*” (from Latin *urbs* - city and *caedere* - to kill). The term was initially employed by critics of urban planning and architecture to describe large-scale redevelopment in the mid-20th century United States (Coward, 2009, p.36). Jacobs, although she did not use the term “urbicide” in her classic work *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* articulated similar arguments, emphasizing the dangers of centralised planning that destroys local communities of the city (Jacobs, 1961, p.279-274). Thus, the concept of “urbicide” emerged as a response to the destructive impact of aggressive redevelopment on urban communities, but it was further developed in the 1990s during the Yugoslav wars, when it came to denote the deliberate destruction of urban space as a form of political violence (Coward, 2009).

Lemkin, in his work *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe* (1944, p.79), introduced the term “genocide” to denote the deliberate destruction of national, ethnic, racial, or religious groups. The concepts of genocide and urbicide are closely related, as both describe systematic and intentional destruction, yet they target different objects. Genocide concerns people, whereas urbicide refers to the destruction of their living environment – the city as the space of communities. Moreover, urbicide often accompanies genocide, since the destruction of the urban environment complements the physical annihilation of people, aiming to create a monoethnic space (Coward, 2009, p.15).

Bogdanovic, analysing the experience of the Yugoslav wars, emphasised that urbicide is not only the destruction of buildings but also the deliberate erasure of memory, identity, and cultural conditions that sustain community life (Bogdanovic, 1993). Coward develops this idea, arguing that the target of violence is the very “otherness” of urban space. Furthermore, he argues that the destruction of architectural monuments, particularly the ancient Old Bridge in Mostar, serves as a symbolic destruction of shared connections between different ethnic groups (Coward, 2009, pp.4-7). In other words, urbicide consists of deliberate actions directed against urban diversity with the aim of producing a homogeneous city.

However, due to the aggressive nature of the wars of that period, the concept of “urbicide” became primarily associated with visible signs – the physical destruction or damage of buildings, infrastructure, and urban symbols (Bogdanovic, 1993; Coward, 2009).

This study focuses primarily on the invisible manifestations of urbicide, which in the long term achieve similar goals.

In the contemporary context of the Russo-Ukrainian war, focusing exclusively on the material dimension of urbicide is insufficient. Violence may also take hidden forms. As noted by authors comparing Mariupol (direct destruction) and occupied Donetsk (gradual degradation), urbicide can be “less visible” (Mezentsev&Mezentsev, 2022, pp. 497,501). While physical destruction is an obvious act of violence, the systemic degradation of infrastructure leads to similar consequences – the death of the city as a living organism.

Mykhailova classifies Ukraine’s experience since 2014 into three types: Mariupol (total direct urbicide through physical destruction), Kharkiv (terror and economic suppression), and Donetsk (indirect urbicide and depopulation) (Mykhailova, 2022). Moreover, taking into account the mistakes of the Donetsk scenario, in 2022, after the occupation of the studied cities, the Russian regime implemented a more systematic and aggressive approach under its own flag.

As Bogdanovic noted, the West reacts painfully to the physical manifestations of urbicide, perceiving them as an act of destroying civilisation, since for centuries the concept of “city” has been inseparably linked to the concept of “civilisation” (Bogdanovic, 1993). Yet the most terrifying scenario is when a city is destroyed invisibly to the outside observer. Without recognition and attention, a city that is gradually eroded has no chance of survival. This is why the identification of invisible, hidden, latent forms of urbicide is essential, as it constitutes the first necessary step toward the rescue of the city and the prevention of this process in future times or in different places.

Malchykova and Pylypenko describe a complex process in occupied Kherson in 2022: the militarisation of urban space, a sense of disenfranchisement accompanied by egregious human rights violations, humanitarian and economic decline, restrictions on mobile and internet communications as well as access to independent media, and the mass exodus of the population. (Malchykova & Pylypenko, 2022). Bukareva and Afanasyeva (2022), while not using the term "urbicide", describe similar processes that describe the militarisation of space, forced russification, as well as problems with access to medicine, confiscation of property, and repression used as tools to subjugate the local community and "transform it into russians". Kherson remained under occupation for several months and demonstrated similar patterns in the early stages of the imposition of occupation authority as in other studied cities.

Unlike the relatively short-term occupation of Kherson, the cities of the Zaporizhzhia region demonstrate how this model continues to unfold and expand due to the prolonged nature of the occupation and Russia’s long-term plans for consolidating control. The de-occupation of Kherson provided access to evidence of crimes committed by the occupation authorities, meaning these actions can no longer be viewed merely as negligence

or passive degradation. However, the currently occupied cities, despite being subjected to a similar model initially, remain significantly under-researched.

The reaction of local residents, documented in numerous videos after the liberation of the city, shows how long-awaited and joyful the news of Kherson's liberation by the Armed Forces of Ukraine was ([BBCNews, 2022](#)). The later discovery of torture sites and mass graves confirms that the local community experienced systemic violence at the hands of the occupiers ([PivdenUkraine, 2022](#)). The similarity between the context of Kherson's occupation on the one hand and Melitopol, Berdyansk, and Prymorsk on the other demonstrates the systematic and deliberate strategy behind such actions.

The war waged by Russia against Ukraine includes both direct form of urbicide: massive attacks on peaceful cities and the deliberate destruction of infrastructure across Ukraine (Kyiv, Odesa, Kharkiv, among others), total bombardments of frontline cities (Mariupol, Bakhmut, Avdiivka, among others); and indirect ones: gradual degradation (Doneck, Luhans) and deliberate creation of conditions that make the existence of local communities impossible (Melitopol, Berdyansk, Prymorsk). Therefore the term "urbicide" requires reconsideration in response to the hybrid nature of Russia's warfare against Ukraine.

The term "*latent urbicide*", proposed in this study, emerged as a response to a rapid occupation and maintaining control by the Russian army in Ukrainian cities. In such conditions, military destruction is not mandatory, instead, damage to the urban community is inflicted mainly by administrative and forceful methods. It is a process of urban transformation by occupying authorities, in which massive physical destruction may be absent, yet the essence of urban life is deliberately narrowed to a limited set of functions controlled by the aggressor, while urban diversity is intentionally eliminated. The essence of the city as a space for interaction of diverse communities is nullified and urban infrastructure is exploited for military-expansionist purposes and the legitimisation of the occupation regime. This term can be associated with indirect urbicide (Mezentsev & Mezentsev, 2022, pp. 496-497), but highlights not only the inactivity and incompetence of occupied authorities, but also the deliberate creation of dangerous living conditions for the local community, which are masked by propaganda as "liberation" and "prosperity".

As Olena Styazkina rightly notes, residents of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, who found themselves under occupation in 2014, have not received due attention, support, and publicity regarding the suffering and torture they experienced ([Papina, 2025](#)). These crimes began then and took on more aggressive forms. The researcher emphasises that people under occupation are still forced to remain silent, because any resistance carries a mortal danger: no one teaches how to survive in such conditions, hide one's views, and pretend to be someone else. Meanwhile, speaking openly about resistance and the people who carry it out means de-anonymizing them and exposing them to direct threat ([Papina, 2025](#)). That is why latent forms of urbicide in the occupied territories are so difficult to research, but

meanwhile so important both for understanding the situation and helping the occupied people, and for preventing similar scenarios in the future.

Data and Methodology

The purpose of this study is to demonstrate the transformation of the concept of urbicide in the context of Russia's hybrid warfare, focusing on occupied cities that were rapidly captured in February 2022 and avoided large-scale physical destruction.

This study is driven by three core **research questions**: Which mechanisms constitute latent urbicide in occupied cities? How do direct and indirect forms of urbicide differ in their instruments? How do these latent mechanisms reshape urban life and identity in southern Zaporizhzhia region cities under russian occupation?

The research methodology consists of three main components:

- a **desktop research** reviewing academic publications, international reports, and media sources;
- an **empirical analysis** combining in-depth semi-structured interviews with a narrative analysis of the Ukrainian media space and Russian propaganda outlets;
- a **comparative analysis** contrasting direct urbicide (during the Yugoslav Wars) with indirect (using the example of the occupied cities of the southern Zaporizhzhia region).

The research of latent urbicide is based on the testimonies of internally displaced persons (IDPs) who fled the occupied territories but maintain contact with friends and relatives in Melitopol, Berdyansk, and Prymorsk. The use of such proxy testimonies is a necessary step to ensure the safety of Ukrainians who continue to reside in the temporarily occupied territories and reject the russian occupation regime. Under current circumstances, conducting interviews directly with residents of the occupied cities is impossible due to a series of critical security risks. The russian occupation administration exercises total control over communication channels, enabling the interception of any conversations or digital correspondence. Furthermore, regular checks of personal devices by Russian security forces can expose the true views of the interlocutors. People living under occupation are forced to resort to strict self-censorship and conceal their beliefs, as any manifestation of disloyalty, condemnation of the aggression, or suspicion of assisting Ukraine's right to self-defence can lead to unlawful detentions, kidnappings, and torture. Given these critical threats to the life and health of the residents of the occupied cities, direct interviewing is precluded, necessitating the implementation of additional security measures when working with their evacuated relatives.

The russian occupation authorities purposefully conceal their actions through strict information isolation, which precludes the safe documentation of evidence directly on the

ground. Under such conditions, the use of proxy testimonies is a justified methodological tool: it allows for the collection of essential empirical data on spatial transformations and the everyday experience of living under occupation without endangering the primary informants.

The in-depth semi-structured interviews involved 12 participants aged 28 to 45: seven from Melitopol, three from Berdyansk, and two from Prymorsk. The respondents included professionals in education and accounting, athletes, and small business owners, all of whom hold a strong civic stance and refuse to recognise the occupation authorities in their hometowns. With one exception, all respondents have experience living under occupation ranging from 1 to 12 months. Despite restrictions on internet and mobile communication, they maintain contact with friends and relatives currently residing in the studied cities. For security reasons and in accordance with the study's ethical principles, I did not require participants to provide written consent, which could have compromised their anonymity, relying instead solely on verbal consent.

The grave threat to the safety of Ukrainians in the occupied territories necessitated the rigorous security measures implemented during the interviews. The identification of respondents could endanger their relatives in the temporarily occupied cities of the southern Zaporizhzhia region. Therefore, given the extreme sensitivity of the data and the high security risks, the study strictly adheres to a set of ethical principles, specifically:

- changing names and any details that could identify the respondents, their loved ones or their location in the occupied territories;
- providing participants with the opportunity to review and correct the digitised testimonies before their stories are used for analysis;
- right to refuse to answer any question or to stop the interview at any time;
- empathetic wording of questions and avoiding any pressure.

The empirical data collected during the interviews are used to identify common and divergent patterns of latent urbicide across the three focal cities. They make it possible to trace how urban life has changed following the Russian seizure of these cities and to capture the residents' attitudes toward these changes, which forms the basis of the qualitative analysis.

A vital complement to the in-depth interviews was a narrative and visual media analysis. The empirical base for this stage comprised two main groups of sources. The first group encompasses local and national Ukrainian media covering the situation in the occupied cities, with a particular focus on photo and video materials that document everyday life and spatial transformations. The second group includes the official web resources of the Russian occupation administrations (zo.gov.ru; minstroy.zo.gov.ru), as well as Russian propaganda media (zonews.ru; tass.ru). The collection and analysis of these materials allowed for tracing the construction of Russian narratives aimed at erasing Ukrainian identity, as well as gathering visual evidence of latent urbicide practices.

This study compares different mechanisms of urbicide during the Yugoslav Wars and the rapidly occupied Ukrainian cities by Russian army. Given the differences in context, timeframes, the nature of warfare, such a comparison is essential for identifying the common goals of these mechanisms. This makes it possible to outline the characteristics of urbicide in the context of hybrid warfare and under the rule of occupation administrations.

A distinctive feature of this study is my **personal experience** of living in Melitopol during the city's capture and the initial phase of the occupation regime's establishment. This lends the research a deeper understanding of the contemporary context of Russian occupation and enables a more precise interpretation of the respondents' accounts. Simultaneously, it serves as an opportunity to restore agency and grant a voice to the residents of the occupied cities. A voice that the Russian authorities purposefully attempt to silence by constructing an artificial reality in which the Ukrainian nation does not exist.

The limitations of this study primarily stem from the severe security risks faced by people living under occupation. This significantly narrowed the pool of respondents willing to share information about their relatives' lives in the captured cities. Furthermore, there is a risk of self-censorship during the interviews, as participants may have consciously or unconsciously altered certain details to avoid endangering those who remain under occupation. Recruiting respondents from Berdyansk and Prymorsk proved more challenging than from Melitopol, where I could more readily rely on established networks of trust. An additional challenge is deciphering the coded language within the respondents' accounts, used when communicating with relatives in the occupied territories to hide sensitive information from wiretapping. Nevertheless, my own experience of living under occupation and strict compliance with security requirements help to build trust and provide a better interpretation of the obtained data. Despite the uneven distribution of interviewees across the cities, efforts were made to maintain balance in the information gathered from each of the studied locations.

Chapter 1.Spatial control

The pursuit of total control is the primary catalyst for urbicide. The most radical method to achieve this objective is the physical erasure of urban space, as happened in Grozny (Coward, 2009, p.104) or Mariupol (Mezentsev&Mezentsev, 2022, p. 497). When the city no longer exists, the possibility of organised resistance disappears, and thus control over the territory becomes much easier. Meanwhile, when a city has already been captured, territorial control also becomes significantly simpler. The most obvious instrument of control is the ubiquitous presence of armed soldiers. In the conditions of the rapid occupation of Melitopol, Prymorsk, and Berdyansk, these cities were left without law enforcement structures or an army. Local communities were left face to face with armed occupiers, with no one to protect them. In such circumstances, the occupier feels the full extent of their power.

Buildings and urban infrastructure that survived the occupation become a resource, while people are seen as an obstacle to obtaining it. The repurposing of civilian infrastructure, the construction of checkpoints and fences, as well as the implementation of showcase “new projects” act as a single mechanism of latent urbicide in the pursuit of spatial control.

1.1 Fence-based demarcation

A characteristic feature of the cities under study is the fencing off of administrative buildings, courts, buildings of so-called law enforcement agencies, and others (Figure 2). Additionally, they are guarded by Russian military personnel and video cameras, which may indicate the occupying authorities' distrust of local residents and the secrecy characteristic of authoritarian regimes. Such demarcation indicates the establishment of a new hierarchy, where Russian occupation law enforcement officers and administrators consider themselves the upper caste. This culture of demarcation of power from citizens is completely alien to Ukrainian political culture, which is why respondents in their stories negatively assess such practices and see them as attempts to limit freedom and indicate lower status of local residents.

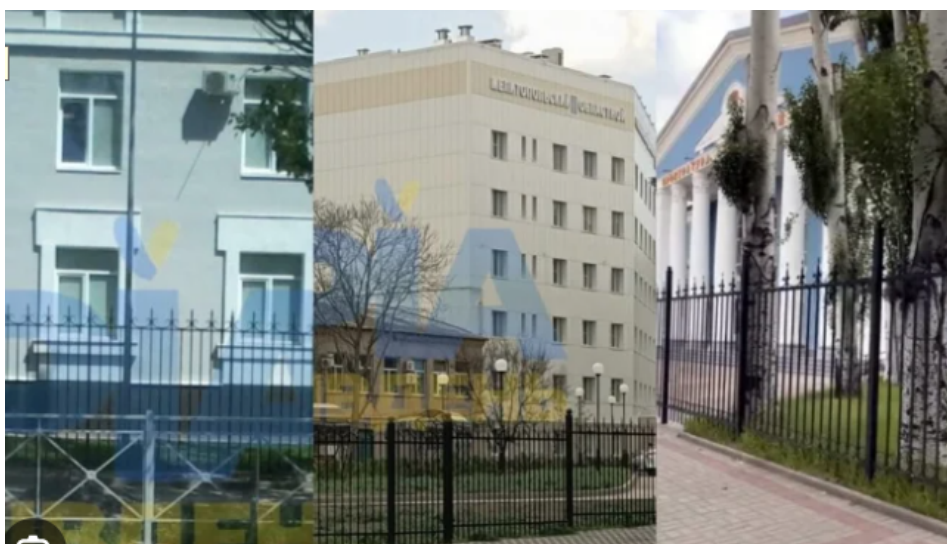


Figure 2. Fences around occupied administrative, law enforcement and municipal buildings in Melitopol (RiaMelitopol, 2025)

According to eyewitnesses, the newly created square in the centre of Melitopol near the cancer hospital is also fenced off for unknown reasons, and access to it is restricted. The territories of several educational institutions, where local residents liked to walk, have also been fenced off and made inaccessible. Comparisons with a prison and a concentration camp are the most common associations among respondents in Melitopol.

Another feature of occupied Melitopol is the abundance of fences along the roadways (Figure 3). Tetiana (Melitopol, 46 y.o.) describes her experience of walking on a pavement with fences on both sides: *“There is a fence near the university and a fence along the road. You walk between two fences. It's not very pleasant to be there”*. The city has no bypass road outside the dense urban area, so military equipment moves directly through the city streets. The occupiers are erecting fences along the main roads, presumably to restrict pedestrian traffic and passenger drop-offs and, as a result, to ensure unhindered military logistics towards the front line.

Unlike Melitopol, near Berdyansk, military equipment moves away from the densely built-up city, and in Prymorsk, it affects only a small part of the city's buildings. Perhaps the peculiarities of the location of through roads explain why respondents from Berdyansk and Prymorsk only mention newly erected fences around buildings, but do not mention those along roads. No photos or videos depicting the new parks along the roads from occupied Berdyansk and Prymorsk were found, while Melitopol is full of such photos.



Figure 3. Fences along the roads in Melitopol (RiaMelitopol, 2025).

The installation of fences may at first glance seem like ordinary improvements, but respondents emphasise that they irritate them and make them feel oppressed. And this is not surprising, because such "improvements" fit into the policy of subjugation and control of the local population, which perceives the occupying power as hostile.

1.2. "New Projects" by Russian occupation authorities

Respondents describe some new urban projects that are being implemented after the occupation of their cities. However, they emphasise that local residents do not feel any practical benefit from them. These projects are also mentioned in the local media.

The occupation authorities in Melitopol are launching a large-scale project to build a complex of residential buildings and a medical facility on the site of destroyed cherry orchards in one of the city's districts. (RiaMelitopol, 2025). The Philibert Gardens, right in the middle of a residential neighborhood, have been a highlight of Melitopol since the late 19th century. They were valued by the townspeople as a place to relax due to their walkability and special beauty in spring when the cherry trees are in bloom. More than 100 species of trees were planted here, mostly cherries. Respondents perceive their destruction as a great loss for the city's memory. Meanwhile, they do not feel any advantages from the occupiers in the form of housing and a hospital, explaining this by the fact that such "development" is primarily intended to treat wounded soldiers and attract Russian workers with new apartments and workplaces. According to them, the city does indeed have problems with medical care for its residents, but the main reason for this is the lack of qualified doctors, not hospitals. This project is probably intended to fill this gap as well. It is part of a broader strategy of ethnic replacement, when the local population is forcibly displaced and their place is taken by Russians.

According to media reports, the occupation authorities in Berdyansk have announced a so-called "master plan for development", which, instead of systematic investments in infrastructure or economic recovery, creates the illusion of improving the city through superficial measures, such as cosmetic repairs (Official website of the Zaporozhye region government (illegitimate), 2025). Denis (Berdyansk, 28 y.o.) talks about the implementation of a project to restore the railway, which was supposed to pass through his district. According to him, this project was rejected due to protests by Berdyansk residents during the time of the Ukrainian authorities, but now there is no one to protest, because any protests during the occupation threaten harsh repression.

The case described by Khrystyna (Prymorsk, 45 y.o.) is a prime example of how the occupation authorities appropriate previous achievements of the Ukrainian state. The building, which was completely renovated by the Ukrainian authorities even before the start of the occupation, and which was not put into operation, was presented in Russian media propaganda as the result of the work of the occupation administration and “sponsors” from the Russian city of Murmansk.

Oleksandr (Melitopol, 44 y.o.) describes a similar situation regarding the Children's Sports School, which was thoroughly renovated back in 2021. But the occupation authorities, having built only one additional basketball court next to the existing one, presented all the work in the media as their own achievement. This myth is easy to refute even by comparing satellite maps of 2021 and today, but local residents, knowing the real state of affairs, cannot openly point out the occupiers' lies for fear of imprisonment (Figure 4).

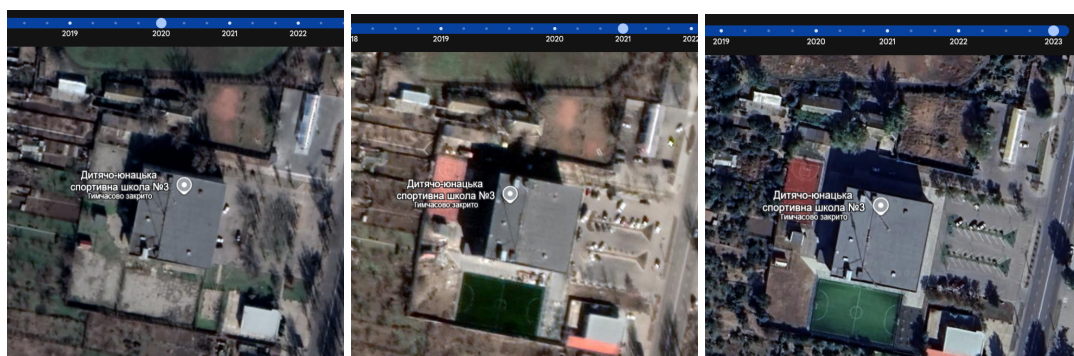


Figure 4. Children's sports school in 2020, 2021 and 2023(Melitopol), which was renovated in 2021 and the russian occupation authorities appropriate this work.

It is much easier to imitate development than to truly invest in it. Taking advantage of the lack of resistance and the deployed repressive machine, the occupiers are trying in every way to present new "achievements" to an outside observer and legitimise their presence in foreign territories. Meanwhile, the memory of the achievements of the Ukrainian authorities is being erased.

1.3. Repurposing and checkpoints

Some institutional buildings have changed their purpose with the arrival of the occupiers. For example, the premises of the Melitopol Professional Agricultural Lyceum have been converted into a so-called “prosecutor's office” and the police and migration service buildings are being used as torture chambers, indicating the deployment of a repressive machine to pressure local residents.

After the occupation, Prymorsk, which until 2022 was a well-known resort on the Sea of Azov, lost its civilian character and turned into a military hub. Respondents confirm that the tourist infrastructure is used as a location for military personnel and training.

It is known from the stories that the former passport office building in Melitopol and the police building in Berdyansk became places of illegal detention of civilians and torture. In Melitopol, journalists marked 13 places of torture on a map ([Melitopol City Council, 2024](#)). The world has already seen evidence of similar places of torture in Bucha, Kherson, and Izyum after liberation from Russian occupation, but there is very little information about such places in the occupied cities.

Respondents from all cities note the active construction of roads and highways, but locals do not feel any improvement from this. On the contrary, moving around the city and between settlements becomes a difficult and dangerous process. Checkpoints, document checks, and the constant presence of armed soldiers with their faces covered create a feeling of constant control and fear.

“...they check phones, looking for Ukrainian symbols or related messages”.
(Kateryna, Prymorsk, 45 y.o.)

Residents also note a significant deterioration in road safety caused by military convoys' failure to comply with traffic rules. According to respondent Alexander (Melitopol, 44 y.o.), most military vehicles travel at high speed without stopping. In Prymorsk, local residents try to avoid the Berdyansk-Melitopol road, which cuts through residential areas, by using secondary roads, where there are significantly less military vehicles.

Khrystyna (Prymorsk, 45 y.o.) reports a traffic accident in which her acquaintance was injured under the wheels of military equipment. Attempts to seek justice from law enforcement agencies were in vain, and the perpetrator was not punished. Thus, the danger is not only the military equipment at breakneck speed, but also the lack of legal mechanisms to protect citizens in the occupied territories.

In response to the question: “Have you noticed that certain places have become “alien”, inaccessible or dangerous?”, all respondents from Melitopol, Prymorsk and Berdyansk without hesitation state that what is alien to them is not a separate segment of the

urban environment, but the entire city. Public spaces are perceived as dangerous and alienated, deprived of opportunities for free communication and safe interaction. They cease to play the role of social interaction, because the presence of armed occupiers in them and distrust of others nullifies this role

Thus, spatial transformations in the conditions of the long-term occupation of the Zaporizhzhia region serve as tools for the deliberate creation of a controlled environment that makes open resistance and free expression of will impossible. Instead of serving the needs of the community, urban infrastructure is subservient to the military logistics of the aggressor. This undermines the very essence of urban life as a place of social interaction, laying the groundwork for slow killing of the city - latent urbicide.

Chapter 2. Social fragmentation

2.1. Panoptic environment

The expression of difference under occupation is frequently punished, while the prospect of justice remains elusive. Foucault's (2020) concept of disciplinary power is particularly relevant in this context: *"Discipline organises an analytic space. It makes bodies visible and places them in a field of surveillance. It imposes constant observation and the possibility of punishment"*. In occupied territories, this disciplinary logic becomes intensified, producing a hypertrophied panoptic environment in which the city itself is transformed into a space of omnipresent surveillance. Within such a framework, any deviation from the norms imposed by occupying authorities may result in repression or punishment.

Consequently, the notion of normalcy under occupation is illusory, particularly for those unwilling to internalise the ideological framework of the occupiers. Individuals who remain loyal to Ukraine or are critically aware of the war's underlying motives are often compelled to adopt a dual mode of existence: a performative public identity conforming to imposed expectations, and a private, concealed identity committed to preserving truth and national consciousness. It is within this hidden sphere that resistance is cultivated, and where Ukrainian identity, memory, and agency continue to be maintained despite systemic efforts to suppress them.

In conditions of routine inspections of private phone communications, the monitoring of internet traffic, and the threat of interrogations, freedom of speech is progressively extinguished as a fundamental right. Any expression that deviates from the narratives sanctioned by the occupation authorities is treated as a potential threat to the regime. Fear of detention leads individuals to ask even close acquaintances to refrain from sharing any "forbidden" information, as under torture any detail can be weaponised against them.

"You can forget about free speech...Any other dissatisfaction and you could be taken to the commandant's office". (Dmytro, Melitopol, 45 y.o.)

This creates an atmosphere where silence becomes the only safe form of existence. Freedom of speech is accompanied by a system of punishments, and free expression of opinion can lead to kidnapping, arrest or torture. Even everyday complaints or criticism of the local administration become dangerous, because the authorities respond not with the law, but with force.

A separate element of terror in the occupied cities is forced passportisation (Lunova, 2025). Without a Russian passport, it becomes impossible to obtain medical assistance, use emergency services or even resolve some everyday issues.

“Our dad broke his leg during the occupation. And they didn't even give him first aid because he has a Ukrainian passport. They put a cast on him at home, and he lay there. And that's how he died at home”. (Olha, Melitopol, 40 y.o.).

Thus, forced passportisation turns basic urban services into a means of coercion, depriving Ukrainians of the opportunity to use them without accepting Russian citizenship. This is a major reason why residents of occupied cities take Russian passports.

Respondents' testimonies show that abductions and torture are widespread: everyone knows someone who has gone through this abuse, and two respondents recounted their own experiences. The fate of many remains unknown, creating an atmosphere of constant uncertainty and fear. The issue of civilian release is particularly complex, as Russia does not officially recognise their status as prisoners of war. This makes it impossible to apply international protection and exchange mechanisms, leaving people in long-term detention without legal protection.

“I was taken away at the beginning of summer 2022. They tried to pin attempted murder and terrorist acts on me. They interrogated me. As soon as I got there, they started beating me brutally. ... They beat you to such an extent that you'll tell them everything. Everything you know and don't know, you'll agree to everything and sign everything”. (Dmytro, Melitopol, 45 y.o)

Maria (Melitopol, 42 y.o) recounts how, during her abduction, armed Russian soldiers brought her to the former migration service building in Melitopol and confiscated her phone: *“In my cell, there were several tables pushed together, and there was even a small mattress on these tables and an old blanket. We used to have those in kindergartens. I understand that someone had been there for a very long time. Because there were marks showing how many days someone had spent there. Someone had written prayers on the walls. There was a pile of water bottles and a bucket instead of a toilet.”* Then there was an interrogation about a video found on her phone during a search at the checkpoint, showing protests against the occupying authorities in March 2022. According to Maria, she managed to avoid abuse and prolonged imprisonment because of messages found in private correspondence about her intention to leave the occupied city.

Valentyna (Melitopol, 34 y.o) says that her father was kidnapped from his home by armed Russian soldiers and held for two months: *“He said that the men were severely beaten. He told us that they didn't touch him, but I'm sure that's not true... The psychological pressure was constant and my father broke down. He says he lay down and decided not to get up again”.* The woman is convinced that the torture and constant psychological pressure he endured worsened his health. Although he managed to leave the occupied territory, he died a few months later. The lack of effective international mechanisms makes it almost impossible to bring those responsible for these crimes to justice.

Latent urbicide manifests not only in the transformation of space but also in the systemic disintegration of the urban community and the destruction of the city's social fabric. The use of fear as an instrument enables the occupying authorities to maintain control over a fragmented society. Kidnappings, illegal detentions and torture destroy the basic function of the city as a space of safety, trust and communication.

2.2. Prohibition of religious freedoms and cultural centres

One of the objectives of urbicide is the attack on the material conditions that make communal life in the city possible. The city creates opportunities for interaction among diverse groups, while urbicide dismantles these opportunities. At its core lies a deliberate political strategy aimed at reducing urban diversity in favor of homogeneity.

Clear and well-documented cases of the destruction of multiethnic and multiconfessional urban environments can be traced in the mass executions and deportations of Croats in Vukovar (1991), the ethnic cleansing of Bosnian Muslims in Srebrenica (1995), the expulsion of Serbs from Krajina (1995). The shelling of religious buildings in Sarajevo was aimed at depriving the urban space of evidence of religious diversity while simultaneously making community gatherings unsafe. Shelling of civilians in Kosovo by Serbian forces primarily served to force the flight of Kosovar Albanians (International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, n.d.). The destruction of thousands of mosques, churches, and Catholic shrines erased evidence that other groups had roots in these places. The demolition of buildings and infrastructure thus functioned as a deliberate strategy to eliminate conditions for coexistence (Coward, 2009, p.8).

Yet urbicide is not limited to visible acts of physical violence. It also takes latent forms, manifesting in the gradual exclusion of religious and ethnic communities from urban life.

In addition to Greek Catholic, Roman Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, and Jewish communities, two Orthodox jurisdictions play a major role in Ukraine's contemporary religious landscape: the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which functions as a national autocephalous institution, and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP), which remains dependent on the Russian Orthodox Church. The UOC-MP has been one of Russia's most powerful soft power structures in Ukraine and after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion, it was discovered that the clergy of the UOC-MP were spreading pro-Russian materials ([Tarasiuk, 2023](#)). I personally witnessed, in the first days of the occupation in Melitopol, how Russian military vehicles entered daily onto the grounds of the Monastery of Saint Sava the Sanctified (subordinate to Moscow), and there were signs that the monastery dormitories were being used to accommodate Russian soldiers overnight (frequent presence of military personnel nearby).

One such example from Melitopol was shared by Olha (40 y.o.). Her family belongs to a religious community, though for anonymity its name will not be specified. Before 2022,

Olha's family actively participated in community events and maintained friendly relations with other religious groups in the city. She recounted that in the early days of occupation in March 2022, Russian forces abducted the priest of their church. Through unlawful detention and threats, the occupiers attempted to coerce him into cooperating with the illegitimate city administration. Eventually, he was forcibly deported and managed to walk nearly 10 kilometers across the frontline to Ukrainian-controlled territory.

According to Olha (Melitopol, 40 y.o.), such abductions of clergy occurred in other religious institutions as well, except for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (a subsidiary of the Russian Orthodox Church). In cases where communities refused to cooperate, their buildings were confiscated by the occupation administration. Some premises were converted into so-called "youth centres", while clergy were deported. In this way, they were "punished" for faithfully serving their communities, delivering humanitarian aid, feeding stray animals, and refusing to submit to the "new" authorities.

Thus, instead of worship services and spiritual gatherings, the buildings seized from religious communities were repurposed for propagandistic entertainment events for youth under the Russian flag. Olha reports that several such events were recorded by surveillance cameras that continued to operate in one of the churches for some time after the community had been expelled. Access to the online stream from these cameras was available from Ukrainian-controlled territory, allowing Olha to view the recordings. Eventually, however, the occupiers discovered the cameras and the connection was terminated. For Olha, the very fact of holding entertainment events in a church is offensive and inappropriate for a place that once united parishioners in prayer.

Another example is provided by Danylo (Berdyansk, 28 y.o). The city had Polish, Greek, Bulgarian, and Russian communities. According to him, after February 2022 the occupation authorities selectively searched and prohibited the activities of some of them. Significantly, no Ukrainian association was permitted to function in the occupied cities. Instead, Danylo recalls participating before 2022 in events organised by the Russian community, where Russian literature was studied and thematic gatherings were held.

He further recounts that armed soldiers entered the Catholic church in Berdyansk, conducted searches, and labeled it a hostile organisation. The church had been a gathering place not only for Catholics but also for people of other denominations, hosting cultural events and serving as an important part of the Berdyansk community for generations. Danylo (Berdyansk, 28 y.o) emphasises that under occupation there is no religious freedom or freedom of assembly; virtually all churches other than those affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church are at risk. They face searches, confiscation of property, and repression of their leaders. According to him, former ethnic and religious communities can now meet only in small groups at home, while larger gatherings are prohibited.

In this way, through the confiscation of places for worship and assembly, the prohibition of peaceful gatherings, the deportation of clergy, and the constant fear of

abduction and torture, the objectives of latent urbicide are achieved in a more subtle and concealed manner. The buildings remain physically intact and are even used for public events, yet the communities that once contributed to urban diversity are effectively deprived of access to these spaces. Such occupation policies force residents either to become what they are not, or to abandon their homes.

Chapter 3. Forced ethnic change

The central motif is a feeling of alienation: people emphasise that the city has been filled with “*not ours*”, “*strangers*” who are easily distinguished by their language, behaviour, and appearance. The testimonies repeatedly mention the image of “*too many soldiers*” who do not add to security but, on the contrary, cause irritation. Russian soldiers occupy empty houses and warehouses, turning them into barracks. They also bring their families, occupying the houses of local owners who have left to escape the occupation. In addition, the occupying authorities lure specialists from regions of Russia, who are in short supply in the occupied cities (Nedielko, 2024).

3.1 Confiscation of property

Respondents describe the same scheme of housing confiscation. First, a notice is posted on the door stating that the property is considered “ownerless” and that the owner must come in person with their documents to a special office set up by the occupying authorities. If the owner has left or does not have Russian documents, the property is confiscated and given to newly arrived migrants. There is also a well-established system of “informing” whereby loyal or intimidated local residents report unoccupied dwellings to the occupying authorities. Such dwellings are then marked as “ownerless”.

Resettlement practices are combined with the housing confiscation, even from those local residents who have remained under occupation. Olha (Melitopol, 42 y.o.) talks about the seizure of homes by Russian soldiers: “*They came right into people's homes and said, ‘You no longer live here.’ And the people said, ‘How am I going to live? This is my home and my farm.’ - ‘Go to your relatives. This street is completely ours.’*”.

Oleksandr (Melitopol, 44 y.o.) says that during his six months in occupied Melitopol, he has repeatedly seen people's personal belongings thrown away in rubbish bins near residential areas: school supplies, toys, new items. In his opinion, these belong to apartment owners who were forced to leave their homes due to the Russian occupation, and were probably thrown away by newcomers who took over someone else's home. According to Maria (Melitopol, 42 y.o.), some apartment owners who left the occupied territory are pretending to renovate their apartments, in particular, dismantling important utilities and toilets to make the homes as unattractive and uninhabitable as possible. For a certain period of time, this scheme helps to protect property from confiscation.

Victoria (Melitopol, 40 y.o.) recounts about the settling of the Russian military families into local apartments: “*The neighbors were given time to very quickly take away the basic things in the apartment. The friend [the owner] asked them to take away the magnetic tape with national symbols from the refrigerator and the photos*”. The Russian occupation authorities do not recognise Ukrainian documents for this property and demand

physical presence to prove ownership, so internally displaced people from occupied cities may lose their homes after leaving.

In Prymorsk, according to Kateryna (Prymorsk, 45 y.o.), the situation is similar: *“Neighbours called and said: people have moved into your house, they threw all your belongings into the rubbish bin and your photo albums are lying on the street”*. Khrystyna (Prymorsk, 45 y.o.) recounted a case where a confiscated house was given to a local resident who did not have her own home and supported the occupation policy.

Similarly, in Berdyansk, there are reports of a large number of displaced persons from various Russian minorities and Russian military personnel with their families. They are easily distinguished from local residents because they often do not know the city and have their own cultural, linguistic and religious characteristics. Daryna (Berdyansk, 42 y.o.) notes that many displaced persons from Mariupol have moved to the city, who probably lost their homes in the first months of the occupation and the terrible destruction of the city by the Russian military.

The confiscation policy targets not only residential properties but also commercial properties. According to respondents, shops belonging to large Ukrainian chains and a number of local businesses have been taken over by new owners. Using commercial premises and existing equipment, the new owners, who are likely to be migrants from Russia, are opening shops with new names and importing goods from Russian regions. Thus, the occupation of Ukrainian cities provides Russian migrants not only with free housing, but also with ready-made facilities for doing business. Such resources become a tool for forming new “elites” who receive economic privileges and strengthen their influence in the region.

Often, seized industrial premises are equipped for military purposes. Oleksandr (Melitopol, 44 y.o.) recounts how Russian troops settled in one of the warehouses in Melitopol, but the company was allowed to continue operating in other premises nearby. Over time, all employees were expelled and all property came under military control.

Dmytro (Melitopol, 45 y.o.) continued to run his business in occupied Melitopol as long as it was possible not to register it under Russian law. Not paying taxes to the Russian budget was his principled position, as a significant portion of these taxes finances the Russian military machine and the shelling of Ukrainian civilian cities. Over time, armed Russian soldiers came to them and offered money for cooperation with the occupying authorities. Despite the fact that the sums offered were considerable, Dmytro refused: *“All this is someone's blood, and not just anyone's, but the farmers of our region who have been robbed”*. The narrator understood that his refusals aroused suspicion, and he knew of examples of his acquaintances who had been taken prisoner and had their businesses taken away for refusing. Therefore, when such visits became more frequent, he decided to leave, leaving all his equipment and property behind.

The cafe in Berdyansk, which belonged to Daryna (Berdyansk, 42 y.o), continues to operate under the management of new “owners”. It is noteworthy that they did not even change the name and are working with the existing equipment, effectively using the reputation and material base of the previous owner. After leaving, Daryna lost all access to the premises and equipment and only received news about her former business from acquaintances. The entrepreneur cannot return to Berdyansk because she has information from neighbours that Russian troops have already been looking for her in the city, showing her photo, because of her active civic position.

In Prymorsk, a typical example is the creation of a Muslim café for the needs of displaced communities from the Russian Federation (Kateryna, Prymorsk, 45 y.o.). The establishment was opened on existing premises, which indicates a dual process: economic displacement of local entrepreneurs and cultural replacement.

Although official statistics on demographic changes in the occupied cities of the Zaporizhzhia region are currently unavailable, respondents’ testimonies indicate a mass influx of citizens of the Russian Federation, primarily military personnel, their families, and “scarce specialists”. Respondents and their relatives living under occupation describe the newcomers as “outsiders”, often using derogatory language that reflects deep emotional rejection. Some migrants return home due to a perceived hostility of the environment.

3.2 Displacement of the Population

The forced displacement of populations, practiced during the Balkan Wars, has today received a new incarnation in the Russian strategy of aggression. Baker writes that after the siege of Vukovar (Bosnia and Herzegovina), ethnic cleansing began once the city fell (Baker, 2015, p.53). This was a deliberate signal to others: flee, or the same fate awaits you. The creation of an atmosphere of terror was intended to force people to abandon their homes.

The ICG report (1997) describes the burning of houses in Drvar immediately after negotiations between an international delegation and local authorities: 25 houses were set on fire, and 50 more were prepared for arson – doors and windows removed, roof tiles stripped to improve draft, and fuel canisters scattered throughout (ICG, 1997). This confirms the deliberate and organised nature of the actions rather than spontaneous rage. The goal was to destroy specific homes to which Serbian refugees had the right to return. They had constituted the majority before the war and fled en masse after Croatian forces took control of the city. The level of organisation and the subsequent inaction of the police suggest that the Croatian authorities could not have been unaware. In effect, this was a clear message to displaced persons: do not return, you are not welcome in your hometown.

In the occupied cities of Melitopol, Berdyansk, and Prymorsk, the message can be formulated as follows: anyone unwilling to accept a Russian passport and recognise the occupation is deprived of the possibility of remaining in their home. This is primarily

enforced through the confiscation of property and businesses lacking Russian registration. Without Russian citizenship, it is impossible to access medical, administrative, or other services, obtain employment, or register property or entrepreneurial activity. In practice, those without Russian passports are excluded from social life and stripped of basic rights – to housing, healthcare, and education.

Oleksandr (Melitopol, 44 y.o.) shared the case of his elderly relative who refuses to take a Russian passport. He receives no Russian pension and cannot work. Only financial support from his son, who emigrated to an EU country, allows him to survive. He knows that in case of illness he will receive no medical assistance, yet he refuses to leave his home to the occupiers. His car and house were re-registered under another relative who accepted a Russian passport, offering some hope that he will not be evicted. Such individuals contradict the official Russian narrative that locals welcomed the occupiers as liberators, and therefore they are denied even basic services in their own cities, despite never choosing to live under Russian rule. Aware that any resistance or protest could result in abduction, torture, and confiscation of property, people conceal their true attitudes toward the occupation.

Khrystyna (Prymorsk, 45 y.o.) told the story of a man who lost his shop. Armed men hinted that he should “hand it over voluntarily”. After losing his business, he was forced to leave. Another respondent Kateryna (Prymorsk, 45 y.o.), explained that since 2023 many displaced persons returned home to obtain Russian passports and re-register their property and businesses under Russian law. She interprets this as a coerced step, motivated solely by fear of losing everything accumulated over a lifetime. Some of these individuals, after securing their property, left again, hoping to return after de-occupation. They are compelled to officially recognise themselves as Russian citizens against their will, as no one else offers them protection. Tetiana (Melitopol, 46 y.o.) expressed it poignantly: *“It is better to beg within our own walls; we are unwanted everywhere – neither in our occupied hometown nor in the wider world”*. These residents feel abandoned and misunderstood, as little information about occupied people reaches Ukrainian or global discourse. This is partly due to security risks (abductions and torture) and partly to a lack of understanding of the depth of the situation. Yet this silence benefits the aggressor, enabling continued dispossession without accountability.

This situation mirrors Drvar, where brochures were distributed among new Croatian settlers encouraging them to occupy abandoned homes at will after the city’s capture (ICG, 1997). War victims became instruments of political manipulation. Authorities not only permitted the seizure of property but also ignored arson. Local police failed to intervene, and international negotiators admitted their inability to act.

Similar state-endorsed looting is reported by respondents from Melitopol, Berdyansk, and Prymorsk. The difference is that Russian settlers, lured by incentives, arrive voluntarily, while no independent international organisations have access to occupied cities. Newcomers

settle in seized property, while locals who reject occupation and refuse to comply with imposed rules face unbearable living conditions.

In the case of Drvar, attention is also drawn to brochures that were widely distributed among new Croatian settlers, encouraging them to occupy vacant housing of their choice after the city's capture (ICG, 1997). War victims thus became instruments of political manipulation. The authorities not only permitted the seizure of other people's property but also failed to respond to the arson of houses. Moreover, the local police made no attempt to intervene, and international negotiators likewise acknowledged their inability to act.

Similar looting, supported at the official level, is confirmed in the accounts of respondents from studied cities. The difference from the case of Drvar lies in the fact that Russian settlers arrive voluntarily, lured by high salary, affordable housing, comfortable climate conditions and development perspectives of this territory (Nedielko, 2024). As new housing projects are not enough, newly arrived Russians settle into seized property, while local residents who refuse to accept the occupation face unbearable living conditions or leave their homes. Moreover, local specialists are offered employment in other regions of Russia. This population mixing is designed to completely populate the occupied territories with Russian citizens in order to make de-occupation impossible. Forced ethnic change erases the city's historical heterogeneity and removes the connection with the indigenous population.

Chapter 4. Symbolic domination

4.1. Renaming toponyms and replacing visual symbols

Symbolic violence (Bourdieu, as cited in Schubert, 2012), understood as non-physical coercion manifested through language, cultural practices and symbols, becomes particularly evident in the occupied cities of Ukraine. Russian and Soviet symbols are actively imposed, while Ukrainian ones are systematically destroyed, reshaping the visual appearance of urban space. Respondents describe how cities are literally “covered” with enemy symbols, as Ukrainian markers of identity are painted over and erased.

The visual design of occupied cities often features figures from the “Russian world” (Demchuk, 2025, p.44). For example, the head of the self-proclaimed DPR, O. Zakharchenko, the daughter of Russian ideologist D. Dugin, terrorists “Givi” and “Motorola”, propagandist Vladlen Tatarsky (BBC, 2023), who have no connection to Melitopol, Berdyansk or Prymorsk. Ukrainian signs, billboards and street names are being replaced with Soviet or Russian ones.

In Melitopol, the occupying authorities dismantled a memorial to the victims of the Holodomor, as Russia does not recognise the Holodomor¹ as genocide against the Ukrainian people (Hura, 2024). The monument to Taras Shevchenko² in the central square was replaced with a stele bearing the Russian coat of arms (Istorychna Pravda, 2023). This action was not only a replacement of symbols, but also a kind of revenge for the mass protests against the occupation, which gathered in front of the Shevchenko monument.

In Berdyansk, in the first months of the occupation, the military dismantled the monument to the Heroes of the Heavenly Hundred³. The former monument to the Defenders of Ukraine was turned into a monument to the heroes and victims of the First World War. In Melitopol, people remember the transformation of the Railway Workers' Park and the memorial complex to the “heroes of the SVO”⁴.

Russians are destroying not only all Ukrainian national symbols in the visual space of cities, but also local symbols. In particular, respondents note changes in the coats of arms, slogans and logos of Melitopol, Prymorsk and Berdyansk. In Melitopol, Medova and Chereshneva streets, which are associated with the main symbols of Melitopol, have been

¹ *Holodomor* – the man-made famine in Soviet Ukraine in 1932–1933, caused by Stalin’s policies of forced collectivisation and grain requisition. It resulted in the deaths of millions of Ukrainians and is recognised by many scholars and states as an act of genocide.

² *Taras Shevchenko* (1814–1861) was a Ukrainian poet, artist, and public figure, regarded as the national bard of Ukraine. His works, particularly the collection “*Kobzar*”, played a foundational role in shaping modern Ukrainian literature and national identity.

³ The Monument to the Heroes of the Heavenly Hundred is a memorial dedicated to the participants of the Revolution of Dignity (November 2013 - February 2014) who died during protests in Kyiv. It symbolises the struggle of Ukrainians for freedom, dignity, and the right to their own statehood.

⁴ “SVO” is the Russian abbreviation for “*Spetsialnaya Voyennaya Operatsiya*” (“Special Military Operation”), the official designation used by the Russian Federation for its full-scale aggression against Ukraine, which began on February 24, 2022.

renamed after Russian figures. Such changes testify to the occupiers' desire not only to Russify the urban space, but also to erase its local identity.



Figure 5. Examples of symbolic urban environment in Melitopol (Ukrainska Pravda, 2022; Suspilne Media, 2025)

P. Sudoplatov occupies a special place in Russian propaganda. Murals and monuments (RadioSvoboda, 2022) honour the head of the Soviet foreign sabotage services, and a youth corps in Melitopol, Prymorsk, and Berdyansk also bears his name. Sudoplatov was indeed born in Melitopol and was called the chief terrorist of the Soviet Union, best known as the murderer of Yevhen Konovalets⁵, a colonel in the Army of the Ukrainian People's Republic. In contrast to Sudoplatov, the name of the prominent Ukrainian figure Dmytro Dontsov⁶, who was also born in Melitopol, is being devalued and negatively portrayed in every way possible. In particular, D. Dontsov Street in Melitopol has been renamed in honour of Sudoplatov (Istorychna Pravda, 2023), which emphasises the Russians' desire to rewrite history to suit their own agenda – Soviet and Russian executioners of the Ukrainian people are glorified, while Ukrainian figures are erased and marginalised.

There is a particular pain in the stories when it comes to children – Ukrainian children under occupation are forced to wear military uniforms, participate in “cadet corps”, sing the Russian anthem and learn military skills. Educational institutions hold meetings with Russian military personnel, where the war of aggression against Ukraine is justified and the crimes of the Russian military are hushed up. Every children’s event is invariably accompanied by the Russian anthem, flag, and the glorification of Russian “culture”. Moreover, respondents talk about threats to parents that their children will be taken to an orphanage for refusing to attend school and, in particular, propaganda events.

⁵ Yevhen Konovalets (1891–1938) was a Ukrainian military and political figure, colonel of the Army of the Ukrainian People’s Republic (UNR), and the founder and first leader of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN).

⁶ Dmytro Dontsov was a Ukrainian philosopher, publicist, political figure, literary critic, and theorist of Ukrainian integral nationalism.

<https://nashformat.ua/authors/dmytro-dontsov-books?srltid=AfmBOor4yD9EmT4MLc6exEzIgh8I7BZpLSYKFu2hYxOhcNNFTVd7zpey>

There are references in the stories to the fear of speaking Ukrainian not only in public, but even at home. Maria (Melitopol, 42 y.o.) recounts how, during the occupation, her neighbours asked her to stop her son from singing “Oy u Luzi chervona kalyna”⁷ (Oh, the red viburnum in the meadow), demonstrating the fear of bringing trouble upon oneself simply by singing a Ukrainian song about Ukraine. Khrystyna (Prymorsk, 45 y.o.) talks about the so-called opportunity to study Ukrainian at school and the need for parents to write a separate application for this: “*One mother wrote that her child wanted to study Ukrainian, and then came back and took the application away. She was afraid*”. Despite the fact that the Russian authorities publicly declare freedom of use of “minority” languages, including Ukrainian, locals do not consider this safe and see such actions as an attempt to identify “spies” among the local population.

Despite forced displacement, most respondents maintain a deep sense of belonging to their temporarily occupied communities. This profound feeling of cohesion has deepened against the backdrop of a common misfortune (Polek, 2023). Respondents continue to identify themselves as residents of Ukrainian Melitopol, Berdyansk, and Prymorsk, although they describe the city as a “concentration camp” where every element of space reminds them of external control. Respondents note that they find such changes painful to accept. In response to the question “How do you react to such changes in symbolic space?”, they answer “*disgusting*”, “*I am repulsed*”, “*the city looks foreign*”.

Thus, the Russian occupation strategy, through the replacement of symbols, toponyms, and the visual design of the city, seeks, first of all, to replace the values of the community and impose its version of history, while simultaneously imposing the narrative “Russia is here forever”(Tass.ru) .

4.2. Rewriting urban memory

Monuments, street names, and other cultural symbols in a city create a shared field of meaning for its inhabitants. That is why they often become targets during armed conflicts, as attempts are made to rewrite history.

When military objectives extend beyond bases and logistical sites to include national libraries, mosques and churches, religious shrines, and cultural symbols, the aim is to erase the city’s past and construct a new “artificial” reality (Baker, 2015, p.67). Cities, as centres of culture and education, become battlefields where destroying the essence of the city means destroying its capacity to resist.

Coward describes the destruction of the Old Bridge in Mostar as an attempt to sever ties between different ethnic groups (Coward, 2008, p.1). The demolition of this historic

⁷ “Oy u Luzi Chervona Kalyna” (“Oh, the Red Viburnum in the Meadow”) is a Ukrainian patriotic song written in 1914 by Stepan Charnetskyi. It became one of the most recognisable symbols of resistance, originally linked to the Sich Riflemen during World War I and later revived as a hymn of Ukrainian resilience during Russia’s full-scale invasion in 2022.

architectural monument went beyond military logistic necessity; it was an act of aggression against urban heterogeneity and collective memory (Coward, 2008, p.5). The bridge was too old to serve any logistical function, but it carried immense historical and symbolic significance. The large and diverse city of Mostar was transformed into two homogeneous entities: Croatian West Mostar and Bosnian East Mostar. The bridge was destroyed precisely to make shared life impossible. Communities that had coexisted for centuries could more easily be convinced that such coexistence was no longer possible once the physical link between them was eliminated.

The Sarajevo library (Vijećnica) was struck by artillery shells and completely burned in 1992. Becker describes this as an act of demonstrative barbarity (Baker, 2015, p.67). It was not the chaotic by-product of war but a deliberate destruction of memory, evidenced by the remains of incendiary shells fired at the library (Baker, 2015, p.67). Around 2 million books, rare manuscripts, and archival documents were lost. Books pose no military threat, but they preserve memory and truth – proof that Serbs, Croats, Bosniaks, Jews, and other ethnic groups had lived together for centuries. Historical documents become dangerous because they contradict the ideology that different groups have always hated one another. Their destruction helps impose a new reality in which shared memory has no place.

Comparing this to the current Russian-Ukrainian war, one of Russia's central narratives is the denial of Ukraine's existence as a sovereign state in all its manifestations, and the imposition of a single "shared" past – heritage of Kyivan Rus, followed by incorporation into the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. This past fits neatly into Russian imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet discourse. Ukrainian philosopher from Melitopol, Dmytro Dontsov, emphasised that the essence of Moscow's power lies in its drive to subjugate and destroy everything that refuses to accept its yoke (Dontsov, 1966, p.334).

In this paradigm, the city itself becomes a material bearer of its multilayered history – encoded in its toponymy, monuments, visual symbols, and cultural institutions. The Russian narrative seeks to displace these diverse pasts and replace them with a singular imperial version.

Repression under the Russian Empire and Soviet rule systematically restricted the development of Ukrainian culture, pushing it out of urban space and condemning it to provinciality (Hrytsak, 2016). This policy has taken on a harsher form in today's Russian Federation, particularly in occupied cities.

Systematic renaming of streets, squares, schools, and institutions with Russian or Soviet titles, the dismantling of monuments to Ukrainian figures, and the installation of Russian or imperial symbols are all intended to impose the familiar narrative that "Russia is here forever" (Tass.ru, 2022). Respondents recount with disgust the stories shared by their relatives under occupation about such practices, while also noting certain places that still remind locals of their connection to Ukraine – though stripped of state symbols and therefore less obvious to the occupiers.

Khrystyna (Prymorsk, 45 y.o.) described a new mural initiated by the occupation authorities. It depicts a Soviet actor, presumably intended to evoke nostalgia for a shared Soviet past. Yet, according to her, few in Prymorsk even recognise who it is.

Valeria (Berdyansk, 45 y.o.) reported an incident where Russian soldiers aggressively destroyed a monument to the Heroes of the Heavenly Hundred:⁸ *“they even filmed themselves tearing it apart piece by piece*

Moreover, since March 2026, a law has come into force requiring all business owners to change signage from Ukrainian or other languages into Russian (Berdiansk territorial community, 2024). This fact complements the broader picture of violent Russification of visual public space.

Respondents also mention the impossibility of finding Ukrainian books in libraries, as they have been removed from collections. Some even report deliberate destruction of these books, pointing to a systematic policy of erasing Ukrainian cultural memory. Libraries continue to operate, hosting events dedicated to “national unity” – but this “unity” manifests as the suppression of the cultural memory of other peoples.

The primary instrument of control, however, aimed at “subduing” the local population, is the abduction and torture of activists, priests, teachers, and journalists who preserve community identity. The analytical center Zmina reports that Ukrainian civilians Denys Hlushchenko and Oleksandr Malyshev, administrators of the Telegram channel “Melitopol is Ukraine”, were sentenced to 26 years in a strict-regime colony (Zmina, 2026). Journalist Iryna Levchenko and her husband were detained by the occupiers in May 2023. Accused of terrorism, the couple remains in captivity (Zmina, 2023). Civilian prisoners are held together with military personnel, but their exchange process is significantly more complicated (Zmina, 2023).

Thus, through the replacement of visual symbols, Russian occupiers attempt to impose a new imperial reality, while the aggressive repressive apparatus deprives the urban community of its voice in this process.

⁸ The Monument to the Heroes of the Heavenly Hundred is a memorial dedicated to the participants of the Revolution of Dignity (November 2013 - February 2014) who died during protests in Kyiv. It symbolises the struggle of Ukrainians for freedom, dignity, and the right to their own statehood.

Conclusions

In the Russian logic, if a city does not become Russian, it must be forced to do so or be annihilated. Even while keeping the Ukrainian city under their control, the Russians continue to methodically destroy it as a center of Ukrainianness.

The assault on otherness by Russian occupiers is inevitable. It is an attempt to legitimise aggressive actions by disguising them under a false “normalisation”. The destruction of heterogeneity sustains the Russian myth that Ukrainians were waiting for Russian soldiers with weapons and rejoiced at the “liberation” of their cities. Latent urbicide is a subtle way for the occupier to prove that the occupied cities have always belonged to the “Russian world” (Demchuk, 2025, p.44). From this perspective, urban heterogeneity is seen as a threat, because it demonstrates that Ukrainian cities did not need any “liberation”. On the contrary, they were successfully developing, and this very success inevitably provoked the aggressor to attack (Mezentsev & Mezentsev, 2022, p. 517).

Urbicide, understood as an attack on the material conditions for the coexistence of diverse groups, often becomes a deliberate strategy in wartime. During the Yugoslav wars, visible manifestations of urbicide included the bombing of infrastructure, destruction of housing, and demolition of cultural heritage sites. The primary aim was to simplify urban diversity, displace unwanted groups by creating uninhabitable conditions, and erase historical memory in order to secure territorial control.

In the rapidly occupied cities of southern Zaporizhzhia (Melitopol, Berdyansk, Prymorsk), similar objectives are pursued not only through shelling but also through hidden instruments. Confiscation of private property and businesses, denial of basic services, transformation of public spaces, total control over education and media, forced Russification of the visual environment, aggressive propaganda combined with bans on peaceful assemblies, and a pervasive repressive apparatus create unbearable living conditions for residents who never expected a Russian soldier in their homes. Meanwhile, occupation policies deny the right to peaceful resistance without fear of reprisal and exclude any participation in local decision-making.

The study provides grounds to assert that the Russian occupation strategy fundamentally relies on perpetrating latent urbicide. This complements the broader pattern of attempts to destroy other Ukrainian cities (such as Mariupol, Bakhmut, Odesa, Kharkiv, Kyiv, and others) through various available means. Latent urbicide allows the Russian occupiers to construct the myth that the cities under their control function normally, or even prosper. By subjecting Ukrainian-controlled cities to heavy shelling, Russia offers latent urbicide as the “better” version for Ukrainian cities.

This research identifies four key dimensions of this process, though the list is by no means exhaustive:

- **Spatial control:** Video surveillance, ubiquitous fencing, checkpoints, and the subordination of civilian infrastructure to military needs serve as direct instruments of spatial subjugation. Through spatial control the occupying administration establishes conditions for centralised authority and the imposition of uniform rules.
- **Social disintegration:** The panoptic logic of constant surveillance, the persistent threat of unlawful detentions, and an atmosphere of fear and self-censorship provoke profound social fragmentation, ultimately stripping the community of its collective subjectivity. Social disintegration facilitates the ability of the Russian occupation authorities to prevent any form of organised resistance.
- **Ethnic replacement:** The aggressive policy of replacing the local population with civilian migrants and families of military personnel from the Russian Federation, coupled with the confiscation of private property, forces disloyal residents out of their homes. This demographic change enables the occupation authority to legitimise and maintain occupation, while also providing tangible benefits to ordinary Russians derived from the war.
- **Symbolic violence:** The proliferation of Russian symbols alongside the eradication of Ukrainian ones, the renaming of streets, the replacement of monuments, and the ideological education of children are all designed to normalise the occupation regime and sever the city from its history and memory. Symbolic violence fixes the narrative that “Russia is here forever”, reframing Ukrainians as enemies or merely “incorrect” Russians who must be re-educated.

Together, these mechanisms deprive local communities of agency, dismantle urban social diversity, and normalise the occupation regime as both inevitable and permanent.

This study relies on indirect evidence and proxy data due to the impossibility of conducting safe on-site fieldwork. Therefore, it requires further expansion once more information becomes available. Cities under Russian occupation are undeservedly given insufficient attention by the international community. This is primarily due to the difficulty of obtaining reliable information from the occupied territories, but this is precisely what needs to be worked on. The lack of data on crimes, in particular the latent urbicide, combined with massive propaganda about “liberation” and “prosperity” (Official website of the Zaporozhye region government (site of illegitimate occupation authorities), 2026), creates a dangerous illusion of safety and normalcy in the occupied territories. This is primarily due to the difficulty of obtaining reliable information from the occupied territories, yet precisely this gap requires systematic attention. The absence of data on latent urbicide, combined with massive propaganda about 'liberation' and 'prosperity' (Official website of the Zaporizhzhia region administration, controlled by illegitimate occupation authorities, 2026), creates a dangerous illusion of safety and normalcy on the occupied territories. But understanding the mechanisms of latent urbicide shows the absurdity of the Russian Federation's demands for a peace agreement (Interfax, 2026). The withdrawal of Ukrainian troops and the voluntary transfer of territories under the control of the aggressor would not protect Ukrainian cities from deliberate destruction. On the contrary, the use of

captured cities as springboards for further attacks strengthens the enemy and generates new threats.

Thus, understanding the mechanisms of latent urbicide shows that the “killing of the city” does not stop after its occupation but merely becomes silent and less visible. This invisibility makes it particularly dangerous, as the community gradually loses its capacity to resist, while international institutions fail to recognise the threat.

As I cannot yet fully rely on my own knowledge of English, I used AI tools (Copilot, Gemini and DeepL) to translate some parts from Ukrainian, after which I checked whether the translation was accurate.

Recommendations: Regaining the Right to the City and Counter the Impacts of Latent Urbicide

Counteracting this phenomenon requires a rethinking of security frameworks, proactive countermeasures against hybrid threats, and the implementation of a systematic approach following de-occupation.

Since latent urbicide does not begin at the moment regular troops physically cross the border, its foundation is formed much earlier through systemic informational and cultural expansion. First, the aggressor absorbs the community into its information space, and only later do the tanks roll in. Consequently, countering Russian propaganda media, which purposefully exploit Western standards of freedom of speech to poison public discourse, should become a primary element of national security. An integral part of this preventive resistance is the decolonisation of markers and institutions of influence. Cleansing the public space of the Russian language, the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church ([Negron, 2025](#); [Tarasiuk, 2023](#)) another symbol of the "Russian world" ([Demchuk, 2025](#), p.44) and its derivatives serves as a necessary form of protection from the artificial erosion of its local and national identity.

Internal informational preparation of the civilian population plays a decisive role in saving lives. As the experience of the studied cities shows, widely accessible instructions on survival in conditions of hostilities and occupation are essential. Timely recommendations regarding the evacuation of families and the existence of clear security protocols for vulnerable populations would have allowed a significant number of citizens to avoid the trap of latent urbicide. An integral element of such instructions should be the prior mastery of alternative means of communication. Since the occupation regime primarily monopolises communication channels and establishes strict digital control, the availability of secure, information exchange tools is essential both for coordinating internal and external connections.

Therefore, countering Russian propaganda, building up their own resilience and ability to defend themselves remains the alternative-free long-term task for Ukraine and European countries.

The concept of 'urbicide' has not yet been integrated into international law. Currently, the legal qualification of actions that destroy the conditions necessary for civilian life is limited to 'destruction not justified by military necessity' (Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, 1998). However, intentional violence against the human habitat transcends the scope of such a qualification. Therefore, the formal recognition of urbicide as a distinct crime against humanity is a necessary step for the protection of urban space, as the deliberate destruction of living conditions must not remain an unpunished act.

Advocacy for de-occupation is the only way to stop latent urbicide. Since the most important step in countering latent urbicide is the return of Ukrainian law to Melitopol, Berdyansk, and Prymorsk, the key recommendation for international partners is to maximise military-technical and diplomatic assistance to Ukraine in the de-occupation of these territories. Any "freezing" of the conflict means conservation of this process.

Regardless of the timing of de-occupation, it is critically important to exert constant international pressure on the Russian Federation right now to respect human rights in the occupied territories. Because the occupation authorities have total control over communication channels, ensuring access for independent media and international organisations to document war crimes remains a major challenge.

After the return of Ukrainian control, the formation of a new security contour by the Ukrainian authorities, military, and police must be based on protecting the rights of citizens whose trust was undermined by the punitive machine of the Russian Federation.

The community has an acute demand for the just punishment of individuals who engaged in collaborationist activities and committed crimes. Furthermore, all civilian citizens of the Russian Federation who illegally relocated to Ukrainian cities after February 2022 must unequivocally leave these territories. Moving into other people's seized homes was their conscious choice. Therefore, ensuring justice and returning housing to its rightful owners must be a priority.

The local population, having lived for years in conditions of fear and the absence of basic freedoms, will require profound socio-psychological rehabilitation on a scale no less than that of soldiers returning from the front lines. Overcoming social fragmentation and achieving reconciliation among city residents with different experiences of the war must be carried out through participatory instruments. Restoring the residents' voice in decision-making and fostering a joint dialogue between those who survived the occupation and those returning from evacuation must become the pillar for the future of the de-occupied cities.

In contrast to the Russian occupation practice, where markers of the "Russian world" (Demchuk, 2025, p.44) are imposed aggressively and directly "from above", the Ukrainian approach must be based on broad community involvement ("from below") and open discussion involving historians, urban planners, and memorialisation experts.

The dismantling of the infrastructure of panoptic control (the "culture of fences") should not be delayed. This instrument of police control tears apart the urban fabric, restricts freedom of movement, and kills the trust. The primary step in restoration should be the total removal of these barriers to restore spatial connectivity and freedom of movement.

The occupation administrations expropriated squares, parks, and public gardens, turning them into zones of control, propaganda performances, and rallies. Reclaiming the

right to the city involves restoring these locations as open, inclusive spaces where the functions, content, and appearance are determined by the community itself through democratic participatory practices.

Equally important is the rethinking of places of violence. Buildings that served as instruments of repression (the former Passport Service building in Melitopol, police buildings in Berdansk, and the corresponding punitive infrastructure in Prymorsk) cannot simply return to performing their old functions, as this would re-traumatise the residents. A joint search for solutions should determine a new, symbolically rethought function for these spaces.

The memorialisation of the occupation experience through an updated symbolic space and local museums must necessarily visually and meaningfully record and incorporate the memory of the occupation terror and underground resistance, integrating this traumatic experience into a new urban identity to protect future generations.

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