
Children of the Occupied Territories of Ukraine: Russian Strategies of Mind Colonization

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Summary

The article examines the strategies of the Russian Federation's influence on the youth of the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine. The comparative analysis made it possible to determine the main differences in the Russian strategy of de-Ukrainization of the child population of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, certain areas of Donbas and regions of Ukraine temporarily occupied by the armed forces of the Russian Federation in 2022. The approaches of the Russian military-political leadership and the occupation administrations controlled by them depended on the region, the length of its stay under the occupation, the intentions regarding the Ukrainian youth in the short-term and long-term perspectives: maintaining the level of loyalty to Russia and its regimes, forced mobilization, violent deportation, illegal adoption, etc.

Keywords: Children, Minors, Youth, Occupation, Identity, Re-Education, Militarization, Mobilization, Deportation

Introduction

The Russian-Ukrainian war, which entered a new period in February 2022, forced widespread discussion about a new phenomenon – Ruscism as a new type of totalitarian ideology (along with German Nazism or Italian fascism of the first half of the 20th century). The emergence of this term is due to the need to explain the origins of brutality in Russia's conduct of war, neglect of its laws and customs. Although the term is still in the process of scientific development, especially for a Western audience (Snyder, 2022), researchers consider it appropriate, "... because it indicates that we are dealing with a particular Russian version of the ideology of extermination..." (BBC, 2022). Researchers agree that Ruscism is a "... national exceptionalism and cultural superiority of Russians; ... interference in the internal af-

fairs of other states and the possibility of imposing own worldviews through armed invasion of sovereign states” (Piskun, ed., 2023, p. 12), “... a racist, xenophobic, chauvinistic, populist ideology that, despite its obvious anti-democratic nature, is supported by the majority of the Russian population and is implemented in Russia’s aggressive and criminal foreign policy activities” (Ohryzko, 2022). Based on these definitions of Ruscism, this term foremost should be considered in the context of Ukrainian-Russian relations. After all, it was Ukraine and the Ukrainian people that were the main object of influence, and signs of Ruscism were evident long before the large-scale invasion. Such signs include the cult of power and militarism, the self-aggrandizement of Russia and Russians at the expense of violent oppression and denial of the existence of the Ukrainian people, the spread of the Russian language and culture, the Russian Orthodox Church, the media, political and public institutions, and the promotion of the ideas of the “Russian world” (Verkhovna Rada Ukrainy, 2023). The core of Ruscism, among other things, is the aggressive Russification (Hrytsiuk and Lysenko, 2023, p. 9) of the population of states that Russia considers to be the object of geopolitical encroachments. The work of the Russian occupation administrations with young people in the occupied territories of Ukraine was primarily aimed at its de-Ukrainization and militarization, which contained all the signs of Ruscism.

The situation in the temporarily occupied territory of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, in particular the de-Ukrainization and militarization of the child population, in the context of Russia’s violation of international humanitarian law, was covered in a number of publications (Tyshchenko *et al.*, 2016; Semena, 2018; Miroshnychenko *et al.*, 2020; Vynohradova, ed., 2021). The quantitative indicators of the reduction of Ukrainian classes and schools cited in the publications clearly demonstrate how the de-Ukrainization of local education was carried out. B. Demianenko and V. Demianenko (2020) analyzed the legal framework introduced in Crimea in terms of military-patriotic education of Crimean youth and its direct implementation since 2014. How Russia militarizes the child population of the territories of Donbas occupied since 2014 through the activities of clubs and organizations, primarily of a paramilitary (“Cossack”) orientation, is detailed in the works of H. Bækken and J. Barbieri (Oliinyk and Bækken, 2023; Barbieri, 2023). De-Ukrainization of the educational environment of Crimea and Donbas after the occupation was reflected in the study of S. Movchan, M. Sulialina and A. Halai (2020). How militarization was carried out through educational and non-educational activities in these territories (Pashkova, 2023a; 2023b; 2023c) and up to its climax in February 2022, when the youth of the pseudo-republics were mobilized (Pashkova, 2024), is represented in other scientific works of the author. The collection of observations by journalist S. Asieiev is interesting from the point of view of daily life of the youth

of the occupied territories of Donetsk region (until 2022). He raised the issue of the militarization of the local child population through the prism of the activity of higher military educational institutions (Asieiev, 2018) as part of the military education system, which began its development in so-called DPR in 2015.

A variety of open sources were drawn on to build up a coherent picture of the de-Ukrainization and militarization of the child population of the occupied regions since 2014. This includes information of state authorities of Ukraine (The Main Intelligence Directorate of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights) related to the involvement of cadets of so-called institutions of higher military education in hostilities. Specific data has been collected by human rights organizations, in particular The Eastern Human Rights Group (Ukraine), Regional Centre of Human Rights (Ukraine), The National Anti-Crisis Management (Belarus) and Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. In particular, they provide important statistical data on the number of children illegally taken out of Ukraine and actual data on their location. Mass media publications controlled by self-proclaimed authorities in the territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, and journalist interviews, were also taken into account. Photo and video materials from open sources were used as an additional source of information; so-called legislative acts of the pseudorepublics were also included as key data.

Research purpose. Russia's de-Ukrainization of the child population of different regions of Ukraine had a number of features that required a comparison of the strategies of the military-political leadership of the Russian Federation depending on the occupied region.

Crimea 2014. Strategy “Unalternative Russian Identity – Returning to the Native Harbour”

The political leadership of the Russian Federation began to implement the ideas of Russism in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea in the 1990s. Crimea was militarily a priority target for Russia, being, in fact, a large military base in Soviet times. The Russian leadership could not come to terms with its loss both from a military and a psychological point of view. And if Russia could not afford open military aggression (except “testing the waters” around Tuzla in 2003), then using a “soft power” strategy came to the fore. Humanitarian expansion was aimed at marginalizing any manifestations of Ukrainian culture as secondary to Russian culture, spreading the idea of Crimea's inseparability from Russia and the idea of the superiority of life in the Russian Federation. Spreading the narratives of the strictly censored “official” history, with cultivation of the status of the victorious state in the Second World War, historical myths such as “Sevastopol is the city of Russian glory” were supposed to emphasize the “belonging” of the peninsula to a state with powerful

military strengths. This in itself should have contrasted with Ukraine and its military capabilities at the time. Russian cultural dominance on the peninsula had to be perceived both by local residents and by the citizens of the Russian Federation as a matter of course, as a historically determined phenomenon.

The work with the young people of the peninsula consisted in encouraging them to enter Russian institutions of higher education through advertising campaigns, visits by rectors, the opening of branches of their institutions in the territory of Crimea (Tyshchenko *et al.*, 2016, p. 47). Proposals and initiatives were received from the Russian side regarding the creation of joint military educational institutions on the peninsula for the children of servicemen of the Naval Forces of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and the Black Sea Fleet of the Russian Federation. Although they were not implemented, such proposals indicated an attempt to interfere on the part of the military-political leadership of the Russian Federation in the education of Ukrainian youth (Pashkova, 2021, p. 340, 341). Russia's humanitarian policy towards the population of the peninsula, including children, did not face significant opposition from the Ukrainian government. Despite outwardly declaring good-neighbourly relations with Ukraine, Russia supported and used its proxies from among local representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church, numerous veteran organizations, paramilitary organizations, or the so-called Cossacks. In this case, they accused the Ukrainian authorities of violating human rights and of discrimination on the basis of ethnicity or language, etc.

Russia began to quickly get rid of everything that would remind of life in Ukraine (national symbols, printed products in Ukrainian, cultural and historical objects). The changes that began in the educational sphere of the peninsula after its occupation covered from 700 to 800 thousand schoolchildren and teachers. Already in June 2014, more than 20,000 members of the local teaching staff were involved in the "training program" to prepare for the new role (OHCHR, 2017, p. 27). In particular, 276 teachers of "Ukrainian language and literature" were sent to 10-month retraining courses in the "Russian language and literature" specialty (Vynohradova, ed., 2021, p. 60). In September 2014, 1,570 general education schools, 510 pre-schools, which were also switched to new Russified curricula, 148 additional education institutions, 61 institutions of secondary vocational education, such as training colleges or colleges, and 12 universities, began a new academic year in Crimea. On September 1, 2014, more than 21,000 children entered the 1st grade of the brand new "Russian" schools (Semena, 2018, p. 283). Comparing to the previous 2014/15 academic year, the number of students studying in Ukrainian in secondary education institutions of the peninsula decreased from 12,694 to 2,154. Thereafter, this trend continued: in the 2015/16 academic year, their number went up to 949, but in 2016/17 there were only 371. In 2019/2020, there were only 206 such students

(Vynohradova, ed., 2021, p. 62). By 2017, the number of Ukrainian schools also decreased (from seven to one), and the number of Ukrainian classes – from 875 to 28 (OHCHR, 2017, p. 27). Formally, the choice of language to study for children belonged to their parents. However, hardly anyone wanted to stand out against the background of the propaganda frenzy that accompanied the first years of the occupation of the peninsula. The choice of a non-Russian language could be perceived as a demonstration of political views and as a sign of possible “unreliability” of newly minted “citizens” of the Russian Federation. Formally, Russia claimed that it did not ban other languages, be it Ukrainian or Crimean Tatar, but in practice the language issue remained the cornerstone of the Russian mantra about the “non-Ukrainianness” of Crimea.

The inclusion of the peninsula in the legal field of the Russian Federation, in the field of education (Tyshchenko *et al.*, 2016, p. 47, 48) as well as military-patriotic education (Demianenko and Demianenko, 2020, p. 328), was aimed at full integration of the local children into the Russian Federation. In this regard, the de-Ukrainization of the local educational environment was accompanied by the activation of military-patriotic education, in fact, militarization. Militarization as such is connected with the idea of maintaining constant readiness to defend the Motherland. The “New Motherland”, in turn, was very interested in local human resources, which it received by occupying the territory of Ukraine. Paramilitary classes (cadet, Cossack, marine) began to be introduced in secondary education institutions. Their creation and functioning were lobbied for and patronized by law enforcement agencies, in particular the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Crimea, the Ministry of Emergency Situations of Russia, and the Investigative Committee of Russia. The number of cadet classes on the peninsula increased 9(!) times in just four years – from 12 in 2016 to 109 in 2020. The increase in their number had several visionary goals, and not only the implementation of the “correct” Russian patriotism. Propaganda of the military profession and motivation to choose it has been aimed at the constant replenishment of the state military apparatus. Indeed, in 5 years, 273 young men graduated from the “Crimean Cadet Corps” Boarding School, of which 145 opted for further study at security agencies educational institutions, and 122 – at military educational institutions (Vynohradova, ed., 2021, p. 64).

Another area of work of the occupation authorities was the creation of paramilitary organizations on the peninsula, in particular the Cossacks. However, the all-Russian organization “Unarmia” gained the greatest development in Crimea. It is important to note that its activities are fully financed by the state. The cost of only a uniform is approximately 20,000 rubles, and most Crimean “little soldiers” receive them for free. At the beginning of 2020, the Crimean “Unarmia” had 7,000 children (of which 3,000 were in Sevastopol alone), public headquarters were ope-

rating in 23 of 25 municipalities, more than 200 detachments and groups were formed (Movchan, Sulialina and Halai, 2020, p. 38; Demianenko and Demianenko, 2020, p. 342). Undoubtedly, the interest of the Russian military-political leadership, particularly financial, in the Crimean “Unarmia” was simply explained. Work with local youth, which had to be de-Ukrainized as quickly and efficiently as possible, required more resources. It is not surprising that, in terms of percentage, the participation of Crimean schoolchildren in this organization was higher than in Russia itself.

Despite the fact that the international community condemned the occupation of the territory of Ukraine in general and the militarization of local youth in particular, no countermeasures were developed. The state authorities of Ukraine tried to create conditions for the reintegration of local school-age youth, encouraging them to enter higher education institutions in mainland Ukraine, while continuing to monitor the situation on the peninsula and inform the global community. Thus, in October 2020, the Office of the Prosecutor General of Ukraine sent a notice to the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court regarding the policy of propaganda and the imposition of military service among children in the temporarily occupied territory of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. Indeed, the male population of the peninsula became subject to mandatory conscription into the Russian armed forces, including military service in the territory of the Russian Federation. From 2014 to the middle of 2020, Russia illegally conducted 11 conscription campaigns, and the total number of Crimean conscripts during this period was from 25,000 to 28,000 people (Miroshnychenko *et al.*, 2020, p. 21, 25).

Thus, in Crimea, which Russia positioned as part of the federation, the “Ukrainian question” was resolved due to the full integration of the peninsula into the Russian political, social, military, cultural, religious, and educational space. Undoubtedly, the occupation regime tried to implement these measures primarily targeting the child population of Crimea. Its acquisition of the Russian identity (which equally applied to the representatives of the Crimean Tatar people) became the “unalterative” option. At the same time, the Crimean space itself was “filling with Russia” due to the mass resettlement of Russian citizens. And if earlier the inhabitants of the peninsula interacted with them in the context of tourist relations, since 2014 they were already forced to share this space with them. In the period from 2014 to 2020, more than 205 thousand Russians moved to Crimea (Vynohradova, ed., 2021, p. 60). In such conditions, there was no room left for anything Ukrainian, except for being perceived as an enemy.

Donbas 2014. Strategy “Twisted Identity – Republicans Are Always Ready to Fight for the Nameless Motherland”

If Russia used the rhetoric of “reunion” and “return to the Motherland” to create a sense of peaceful irreversibility in the population of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, then the emphasis on people’s power (“people’s governor”, “people’s militia”, etc.) served as a kind of confirmation of the spontaneity of the public movement in Donbas. Local youth was actively involved in this “spontaneous” trend (Pashkova, 2023a, p. 23). In particular, both schoolchildren and students took part in the seizure of administrative buildings and mass riots, including on the initiative of the institution’s administrations (Radio Svoboda, 2016).

The simultaneous proclamation of almost identical “republics” in name testified in itself to their outright artificiality, but the local population, which perceived the events at the time with enthusiasm, was not confused by it. Likewise, a part of the population that was still waiting for some kind of breakthrough and the return of these territories to the control of the state authorities of Ukraine either left over time or adapted to new conditions. Adaptation also affected the children’s population as the most flexible category for any changes. Thus, after seizing certain areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, the Russian occupation regime began constructing the identity of local youth. This, in turn, required appropriate institutional support: the development and implementation of legislation, including the educational field (Pashkova, 2023c, p. 244, 245), creation and functioning of state authorities, in particular those responsible for the educational sphere. The existing educational infrastructure (educational institutions of all levels, teaching staff, educational and methodological base) was gradually reoriented: Ukrainian language and literature were pushed out of the curricula by reducing teaching hours to a minimum, teachers were retrained, sports and defence disciplines were militarized as much as possible (Movchan, Sulialina and Halai, 2020), paramilitary classes were created (Pashkova, 2023b). The return to Soviet educational practices, such as “Ready for Labour and Defence”, only confirms that the Russian creators of the pseudo-republic used previously tested methods as a basis. This made it possible, on the one hand, to speculate on the nostalgic feelings of the older local generation, and, on the other hand, not to invent anything new for the youth.

At the same time, in order to maximally erase the Ukrainian trace from the local sphere of education, the integration processes of including the pseudo-republic’s “education system” into the Russian one began. For example, in November 2018, the first deputy chairman of the State Duma Committee on Education and Science of the Russian Federation, Gennadiy Onishchenko, illegally visited the temporarily occupied territory of the Donetsk region and participated in the meeting of the board of rectors of the local universities devoted to the integration of local universi-

ties into the scientific and educational space of the Russian Federation. It is worth noting that in June 2021, the “order” of the so-called ministry of education and science of the “DPR” announced the full integration of the “republican” education system into the educational space of the Russian Federation. In particular, the order introduced the study of the subject “Russia in the world”, which provided for the formation of schoolchildren’s “ideas about Russia in different historical periods, knowledge about its place and role in the context of world development, a view of the modern world from the point of view of Russia’s interests, ideas about information policy and mechanisms of creating the image of historical and modern Russia in the world”, etc. Intensification of scientific and educational ties between the pseudo-republics and the Russian Federation was defined as one of the directions of the so-called “Russian Donbas doctrine”.

The complexity of the impact on the children’s population was also reflected in providing their leisure time. Conducting events of a “patriotic” orientation has acquired a systematic character with a tendency to increase their number annually. For example, in 2019, in the temporarily occupied territories of the Donetsk region 880 such events were held, with the participation of more than 300,000 people. Some events were of a purely military-historical nature: the “Hero Street” action, in which more than 3,000 people took part in 2019, or the “Race of Heroes” competition, which involved 820 people (Internet Archive, 2020). Of course, the number of events cannot indicate their effectiveness, because the very approach to their organization resembled the Soviet practice of “voluntary-forced” participation. That is, the organizers of events provided a significant number of participants at the expense of administrative resources. If we talk about schoolchildren, it was almost impossible for them to avoid participation.

At the same time, permanent activities (clubs, organizations, movements, camps) required the voluntary consent of both the minors themselves and their parents. The content of the work of paramilitary clubs, namely the acquisition of basic military training (Oliynyk and Bækken, 2023; Barbieri, 2023), was closely related to the propaganda of the idea of “defending the Motherland”. In essence, local education was aimed at forming and maintaining the constant readiness of young “republicans” to fight for the Motherland, but without specifying which one. The very idea of “defending the Motherland” rested on a certain basis: the so-called symbols of legitimacy (national flag, coat of arms, and anthem) and a historical mix. The Soviet interpretation of the so-called Great Patriotic War in general and the battle for Donbas and liberation from the German Nazis in particular became a template on which the events of the present day began to be imposed, creating and supporting a new narrative about the “people’s war” against the “Ukrainian Nazis”.

Ultimately, this years-long militaristic rhetoric reached its peak in February 2022, when both pseudo-republics simultaneously announced the general mobili-

zation of men aged between 18 and 65. Just then, it would be relevant for the local population to ask the question “Which Motherland are we fighting for?”. However, in the conditions of anti-Ukrainian propaganda, no one would risk voicing such a question. It is especially interesting that in the first months of the large-scale Russian invasion, the recruitment of students of all courses of local higher education institutions became widespread, which, in fact, became a mobilization hub for the military commissariats. Students, faced with a choice between going to the military commissariat, being expelled, fined or even imprisoned, obviously adapted to the circumstances. Administrations and teaching staff of educational institutions, in turn, directly contributed to the transfer of their male students to the army. Teachers ensured the arrival of students to meetings where representatives of the “military commissars” were present, compiled lists of those not yet mobilized, handed out summonses, etc. (Pashkova, 2024).

It can be assumed that some teachers did it under duress. However, it is worth remembering that the establishment of the educational process in the “republican” course after the beginning of the armed conflict in Donbas happened quite quickly. Pedagogical staff of institutions of all levels adapted to the new educational realities, and if they were not completely convinced pro-Russian “republicans”, at least they did not openly express their true views for safety reasons.

Among our teachers... there was a member of the “Izborskiy Club” [Russian nationalist movement – Author], and a “Barkashovets” [Russian nationalist neo-fascist movement – Author], and less radical people who simply broadcast the stamps of state television. They were diluted by really good specialists, who at some points made us feel that we were studying in an ordinary modern institution where there is a place for discussion, but then another monarchist teacher dispelled that feeling... Despite the fact that no one broadcast an openly pro-Ukrainian position, some teachers were ready to listen to criticism of what was happening... In a calmer time, we could even discuss with the teachers of pro-Russian views, but after February 24, when some of them became radicalized, I can no longer imagine any peaceful discussions (Nechaev, 2022).

The “cadets” of the so-called higher military educational institutions, where local young men directly mastered the military profession, were also involved in the hostilities. Initially, the representatives of the occupation administrations considered persons who directly participated in the overthrow of the constitutional order in Ukraine in 2014 as a promising resource for “military personnel”:

I graduated from school in 2014 and a month later joined the militia, the “Vostok” battalion. I was there... Then my company commander came to me and said: the school is opening, I want to see you there, we will need competent officers... [...] Yes, we have quite a few cadets who came after the militia (Kurchatova, 2022).

Thus, as part of illegal armed formations, local youth, in fact, underwent a kind of initiation, a baptism of fire under “republican” flags. Such an “ideological” contingent was a sufficient resource to ensure the activities of occupation administrations and illegal armed formations. If the first recruitment (2015) consisted of cadets not only with the appropriate outlook, but also with combat experience, then later, when the local education system was established, the range of potential recruits for admission to such institutions expanded significantly. First of all, at the expense of students of the so-called cadet/cossack classes, as well as members of paramilitary clubs and other organizations, e.g. “Unarmy”.

In particular, we are talking about the so-called Donetsk higher military command school, which trains future command staff in the following areas: intelligence, tank troops, infantry and political work. Literally in a few months (from the end of summer to the beginning of autumn of 2015), an educational and material base was created, comprehensive support was organized (as of 2016, cadets received financial support in the amount of about 1,500 rubles, i.e. \$17), a teaching staff was selected, an educational process was established, and the first graduation took place in 2020. According to an eyewitness of those events in Donetsk, the number of cadets increased every year, and even young people from the temporarily occupied territories of the Luhansk region tried to enter the “school” (Asieiev, 2018, p. 171).

It is also worth mentioning the so-called Academy of the Ministry of Internal Affairs named after F. Dzerzhynskyi, where representatives of the “DPR” security forces – police, prosecutors, personnel for the “ministry of state security” – were trained. It was on them to ensure “security in the republic”, search for the “enemies of the people”. It can be assumed that the work in the law enforcement bodies of the pseudo-republic was characterized by a high level of financial support. This, in turn, may indicate that entering such an institution required not only absolute loyalty to the regime, but also depended on the appropriate relations (nepotism) with persons who held important positions in the occupation administrations. During the “memorial” days, cadets were on duties at checkpoints (*ibid.*, p. 187) (probably as an honor guard with an “educational” purpose), and later they performed the same tasks already under the conditions of a large-scale invasion. Obviously, the “ministry of state security” was directly interested in the training of future personnel. In particular, in the civilian institution “Donetsk National Technical University”, the so-called ministry opened a specialized faculty. “Education” of cadets aimed, among other things, at creating an image of the enemy, in particular through the demonstration in classes of images of certain officials of the state authorities of Ukraine (Dim, 2021).

That is, this category of young men was more than “ideological”, and was fully aware that sooner or later they would fight against Ukraine. The cadets were

not mobilized in the traditional sense, and, apparently, unlike civilian students who were “scattered” in units along the entire frontline, they mostly participated in the battles near Mariupol. Even holding a graduation ceremony in the summer of 2022 in an occupied city probably also had a symbolic meaning and propaganda significance. At the same time, only part of the graduates (174 people) was involved in the ceremony, the rest received diplomas in Donetsk:

In Mariupol, the graduates... were given a diploma and let to the prom, while those from Donetsk are sent to the front. This is justice in the republic (Spektr, 2022).

The use of cadets mainly in one area may also indicate that a contingent with a certain military knowledge was more valuable. Also, if the losses suffered among students did not receive a republican resonance, due to the fact that there were losses among cadets (also mainly in the Mariupol area), the “minister of internal affairs of the DPR” even ordered an official investigation into the chief of the “academy” (Defence Intelligence of Ukraine, 2022).

The age category of local young men (18-23 years old) is of particular research interest, because at the time of the occupation in 2014, they were between 9 and 12 years old. It was they who came under the test and approval of the new educational environment, their formation took place in the conditions of massive anti-Ukrainian propaganda. At the same time, active hostilities were taking place in the region, which also left an imprint on children’s consciousness. That is why the main goal of the Russian leadership in working with the local youth was to push out everything Ukrainian as alien and perceive it as hostile. This would make it impossible for the local population to reintegrate into Ukrainian society in case of de-occupation and would allow the region to continue to be a source of constant tension for Ukraine.

The twisted identity of the population, primarily of the younger generation, was supposed to be a compilation of Soviet, modern Russian, but with a “republican” facade. That is, from the outside, the occupation administrations tried to imitate statehood, but from the inside, everything was aimed at maintaining loyalty and trust in Russia as a kind of guarantor for the existence of the pseudo-republics. This concerned, first of all, the young generation, especially of school age. The involvement of local student youth in all-Russian “patriotic” movements (for example, “Unarmy”) or events of an all-Russian scale (paramilitary camps on the basis of military units of the armed forces of the Russian Federation, excursions, festivals, etc.) had several goals. On the one hand, this was supposed to dispel the feeling of isolation of the local population and create a feeling of being protected by the “big powerful state”. On the other hand, the exploitation of regional patriotism with the simultaneous formation of the image of the enemy in the person of Ukraine was supposed to morally prepare young “republicans” for the great war. Nevertheless,

the use of the local male population as “cannon fodder” (YouTube, 2022), including young men from the age of 18, at the beginning of the large-scale invasion proved that the military-political leadership of the Russian Federation saw the local youth only as a mobilization resource, regardless of their beliefs or patriotic feelings.

Invasion 2022. Strategy “Genocide – Violent Erasure of Ukrainian Identity”

The strategy of the Russian leadership in the occupied territories of Ukraine in 2022 consisted of the liquidation of Ukrainian statehood, the creation of administrative-territorial units under Russian control, the introduction of strict censorship in the political, cultural, and educational spheres, the restoration of Soviet-style “socialism”, the implementation of repressions against opponents of the occupying power, and the final assimilation of Ukrainians into “Russian civilization” (Hrytsiuk and Lysenko, 2023, p. 10). Thus, one of the goals of the so-called special military operation was “denazification” of Ukraine, which also applied to the child population of the occupied regions. The terror in the territories that Russia seized was not so much about the formation of Russian identity as it was about the erasure of Ukrainian identity. The destruction or looting of cultural objects, museums, libraries, any monuments that symbolized Ukrainian culture and art, was aimed at the total liberation of the space from everything Ukrainian. War crimes by servicemen of the armed forces of the Russian Federation were carried out everywhere and with particular brutality in order to intimidate citizens and demoralize representatives of the Defence Forces of Ukraine.

The illegal inclusion of the occupied territories of Ukraine into the Russian Federation, with corresponding changes in the Russian constitution, was motivated by the efforts of the Russian military-political leadership to give the occupying regimes institutional legitimacy, in particular by ensuring the functioning of local educational institutions of all levels. In order to restore the educational process in the occupied territories, the Russian occupation regime, first of all, tried to persuade the administrations of institutions to cooperate, because “schools need to be operational since the Russian Federation is here to stay forever”. The pressure on the teaching staff regarding the transition to Russian educational standards, as well as the “re-certification” of Ukrainian teachers, were carried out through physical influence (arbitrarily detaining, torturing, ill-treating, or threatening with violence), bribery and threats of dismissal in case of refusal to obtain a passport of a citizen of the Russian Federation (OHCHR, 2024, p. 22). For the so-called retraining of Ukrainian teachers, especially regarding the teaching of the Russian language, literature, and history of Russia, the occupiers sent teachers from the Russian Federation to the temporarily captured territories of Ukraine. They were also supposed to compensate for the shortage of teaching staff, which arose due to the mass exodus

of the population, as well as in the case of the refusal of educators to cooperate with the occupiers.

Throughout 2022, the situation in the educational sphere in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine developed according to three main scenarios: the educational process did not take place due to hostilities and the absence of participants (teaching staff, students), teaching staff secretly continued their activities in a remote form, for which they were subject to persecution by the occupiers (*ibid.*, p. 29), and the Russian occupation regime forcibly transferred the educational process to Russian standards (Nazarenko, Kohut and Zherobkina, 2022). The pressure on the parents of school-age children was accompanied by bribery and threats of deprivation of parental rights if the children did not attend Russian-style educational institutions (OHCHR, 2024, p. 28). The Russian textbooks and manuals discovered in the de-occupied territories of Ukraine in the summer of 2022 testified to the intention of the occupying state to gain a foothold in the captured territories in the long term, which was accompanied by the destruction of Ukrainian teaching and methodical materials, national symbols, library funds and museum exhibits in educational institutions.

At the same time, the policy of the Russian Federation regarding children of the occupied territories of Ukraine, deprived of parental care, was indicative. Since 2014, this category of minors has been in the constant focus of attention of the Russian military and political leadership. The absence of legal guardians caused their complete dependence on the decisions of the occupation administrations, in particular their education and upbringing conditions. The Russian occupation regime carried out the illegal transfer of children deprived of parental care to the territory of the Russian Federation from the institutional care facilities of Crimea and Donbas, including for training in paramilitary classes, clubs and organizations, etc.

The mass deportation of the child population during the large-scale invasion reached catastrophic proportions. The victims of the occupiers were minor citizens of Ukraine with the status of orphans, children deprived of parental care (Osipova, 2023). So were children forcibly separated from their parents or other relatives, children who lost their parents or guardians during the Russian invasion. To keep deported minors, the Russian military-political leadership created a network of so-called camps (filtration, rehabilitation, military-patriotic (militarized), indoctrination). This network covered 30 federal subjects of the Russian Federation (at least 46 institutions), the territory of temporarily occupied Crimea (7), and even Belarus (8) (Ukrinform, 2023).

In the filtration camps, Ukrainian citizens were tested for loyalty to the occupying state (past service in the Defense Forces of Ukraine, participation in volunteer activities, civic position, patriotic beliefs, etc.). Children could literally be separated

from their parents or official guardians, sent to the territory of Russia to institutional care facilities, followed by illegal adoption. The so-called rehabilitation camps ("safety" camps) functioned on the basis of real children's camps (in the territory of Russia as well as Crimea and Belarus). After the occupation of a part of the Kherson region, persons with minor children were offered to send their children to Crimean camps for "rehabilitation", where they would be safer in "calmer" conditions. Some parents gave voluntary permission for their children to stay on the peninsula for 10-14 days. However, in practice, parents were often faced with the organizers' refusal to hand over their children at the end of their stay, allegedly for reasons of "safety" (Osipova, 2023). Military-patriotic camps, in fact, were fully tested practices, when Russia involved minor citizens of Ukraine to acquire basic military training (firearms, combat training, etc.) in paramilitary camps. At the same time, systematic work on indoctrination began through the so-called "Cultural map 4 + 85" (meaning 4 occupied regions of Ukraine) program. By showing the "beautiful" facade of Russia (in particular Moscow and St. Petersburg), Russia tries to demonstrate the "national greatness" and "advantages" of life in the Russian Federation through cultural and historical sites. Another approach has already been used here – "soft Russification", for which 69 billion rubles were allocated in 2023 (Ukrinform, 2023). In 2023, the number of children who went through this "indoctrination tourism" amounted to 10,000 people from the occupied Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions of Ukraine.

Crimes against the child population of Ukraine, in particular deportation, were also committed with the participation of the vassal state of the Russian Federation – the Republic of Belarus. An organized and systematic transfer of Ukrainian children to Belarus started in September 2022. As of November 2023, more than 3,000 children (over 2,100 of which were orphans) from over 20 temporarily occupied cities and towns in Ukraine (including Donetsk, Mariupol, Volnovakha, Yasynuvata, Yenakiieve, Snizhne, Khartsyzk, Horlivka, Makiivka, Komunarivka, Debaltseve, Ilovaisk, Antratsyt, Rovenki, and Kamianka-Dniprovska) were taken to Belarus. Young Ukrainians were sent from the occupied territories to Russia in the city of Rostov-on-Don, then to Minsk, Belarus (National Anti-Crisis Management, 2023a; 2023b). The children were placed in camps such as Zubrenok, Dubrava, and sanatoriums like Volma, Ostroshitsky Gorodok, and Golden Sands. The Dubrava camp, owned by the Belaruskali Company (potash fertilizer producer), received the largest number of children (National Anti-Crisis Management, 2023b). Instead of the announced "rehabilitation", they were involved in anti-Ukrainian, pro-Russian re-education activities. The main actors of those activities were representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church, motorcycle clubs such as the "Night Valkyries" and "Night Wolves", officials from the Lukashenko regime, members of the youth organization "Belarusian Republican Youth Union", etc. (National Anti-Crisis Management, 2023a).

Thus, in 2023, the Russian Federation not only continued its genocidal policy towards Ukrainian children (87 cases of transfer of at least 8,330 Ukrainian children to so-called re-education camps were recorded), but also increased new capacities and strengthened a system that has appropriate legal regulation, financial support and a program aimed at erasure of the Ukrainian identity of the child population of the occupied territories (Ukrinform, 2023). The mass abduction of minor citizens of Ukraine was aimed at improving the demographic situation in Russia itself, primarily in the so-called depressed regions, as well as the de-Ukrainization of the child population as an instrument of genocide. Thus, from the temporarily occupied Mariupol, the occupying state illegally transported Ukrainian children to distant Russian regions – Tyumen, Irkutsk, Kemerovo, Altai Krai, etc. An unspecified number of children were illegally adopted by citizens of the Russian Federation, including representatives of the state authorities, during 2022. The most high-profile case was the adoption of a Ukrainian boy by Maria Lvova-Belova, the Commissioner for Children's Rights of the Russian Federation. During the full-scale war against Ukraine, Russia forcibly deported 2,8 million Ukrainians, and almost 20,000 children among them were identified (*ibid.*).

Conclusions

During the three years of full-scale war, Russia amassed an unprecedented amount of human, material and financial resources for the occupation of Ukrainian territories, their maintenance, as well as the creation of conditions for the functioning of the occupation regimes. Undoubtedly, since 2014, Russia managed to prepare not only a significant base for a military invasion, but also a whole generation of people ready to support this idea and implement it in practice. At the same time, the regional features of the occupied territories were taken into account. The population of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea had to accept the Russian identity as unalterative, as something natural. A militant quasi-identity (semi-republican/semi-Russian) was implanted in the population of certain regions of Donbas, which enabled the Russian creators of the republics to manipulate the idea of “defending the Motherland”, which, in fact, was a permanent call not to defend something, but rather to fight against someone. Against Ukraine as a state. The population of Ukraine, which was under occupation in 2022 and remains in these conditions to this day, became a victim of the aggressor's efforts to completely erase the Ukrainian identity, through deportation to Russia, illegal adoption, psychological and physical violence. It is obvious that the Ukrainian identity in itself poses a threat to the concept of the “Russian world”, which is the reason for the almost fanatical struggle of the Russian regime against all those who represent it, including children.

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