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UKRAINE: SCHOOL TEACHER: A HIGH-RISK JOB UNDER RUSSIAN OCCUPATION

"If you wanted to avoid working for the occupiers in a reopened school, you had to disappear."

Tetiana, a history teacher from Kherson, occupied by Russian forces from March till November 2022

INTRODUCTION

The occupation of large swathes of Ukrainian territory by Russian forces at the start of the full-scale invasion in early 2022 entailed numerous violations of international human rights and humanitarian law. The occupying authorities resorted to intimidation and direct reprisals (such as those illustrated below) to ensure the local residents' conformity and loyalty, and many local residents fled to Ukrainian government-controlled territory. Russian forces specifically targeted certain categories of civilians, as Amnesty International has established through interviews and other research, who were seen as agents of potential resistance and opposition. Former members of the Ukrainian armed forces, police, National Guard and other law enforcement agencies ended up traced and incarcerated by the occupying forces in the first instance. They were followed by civil servants, community leaders and activists who expressed their pro-Ukrainian views.¹ Those suspected of disloyalty faced abductions, enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention, torture and other ill-treatment and extrajudicial executions by occupying forces in order to ensure their loyalty and submission or to instil fear in others.²

However, one of the categories of people the occupying forces were particularly interested in identifying and promptly coercing into full cooperation were teachers. Behind this was the occupying authorities' intent to promptly reopen schools and to introduce a Russian curriculum in the newly occupied territories of Ukraine. This made headmasters and teachers targets for Russian forces. Cooperation and support of school staff was crucial in ensuring the attendance of schools by students, and, consequently, the spreading of propaganda and false narratives about the war in Ukraine.

However, in numerous instances, convincing headmasters and schoolteachers to cooperate turned out to be a challenging task. Promises of high salaries and promotions convinced some, but they were not enough to properly staff schools and relaunch the education process. Consequently, occupying forces resorted to threats, intimidation, blackmail, physical violence and abductions in their efforts to coerce teachers into cooperating.

Amnesty International interviewed 27 schoolteachers and headmasters between May and September 2023 from the Kharkiv, Zaporizhzhia, Mykolaiv and Kherson regions. They shared their experiences and those of their colleagues of living through the period of Russian occupation since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. It transpires that in all these different locations the occupying Russian authorities followed the same strategy: to reopen the local schools to teach the Russian curriculum, to staff them as much as possible by their pre-occupation teachers, and ensure their compliance and cooperation by a range of means that included intimidation and threats of brutal personal reprisals, including in some cases carrying them out. All those interviewed refused to cooperate and teach the Russian curriculum in reopened schools. As a result, they all had to eventually flee to Ukrainian government-controlled territories where the majority of the interviews took place.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

International humanitarian law (IHL) governs obligations of states in an armed conflict. Under Geneva Convention (IV) relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, an occupying power must ensure that civilians in occupied territories are treated without any adverse distinction based, in particular, on race, religion or political opinion.³ It prohibits

¹ Details will be provided in Amnesty International's forthcoming publication on unlawful deprivation of liberty of civilians by members of Russian forces and Russian-installed administrations.

² Amnesty International, *Ukraine: "He's not coming back". War crimes in Northwest areas of Kyiv Oblast*, 6 May 2022, Index Number: EUR 50/5561/2022.

³ Geneva Convention (IV) on Civilians, Article 27.

physical or moral coercion⁴ as well as any “measures of brutality”⁵ against the civilian population. Article 50 of the Convention requires the occupying power “with the cooperation of the national and local authorities, [to] facilitate the proper working of all institutions devoted to the care and education of children.” However, Article 27 of the Convention enshrines the principle that the fundamental rights of the civilian population must be respected, “in particular, the right to physical, moral and intellectual integrity – an essential attribute of the human person,”⁶ a requirement that must be met in the operation of schools.

Under international humanitarian law, the occupier's duty of good governance covers education in the occupied territory. In particular, Article 50 of the Geneva Convention (IV) requires the occupying power “with the cooperation of the national and local authorities, [to] facilitate the proper working of all institutions devoted to the care and education of children.” Article 27 of the Convention enshrines the principle that the fundamental rights of the civilian population must be respected, “in particular, the right to physical, moral and intellectual integrity – an essential attribute of the human person,”⁷ a requirement that must be met in the operation of schools.

Article 51 of the Geneva Convention (IV), provides that the Occupying Power can only compel the civilian population to provide work where this is “necessary either for the needs of the army of occupation, or for the public utility services, or for the feeding, sheltering, clothing, transportation or health of the population of the occupied country.”

International human rights law is complementary to IHL and also applies during war. Therefore, in addition to the applicability of IHL, both Russia and Ukraine are state parties to multiple international human rights treaties including the UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the ILO Convention Concerning Forced or Compulsory Labour (No. 29) (‘the Forced Labour Convention’).

The ICESCR guarantees everyone the right to education that should strengthen the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations and all racial, ethnic or religious groups and further the activities of the UN for the maintenance of peace.⁸ Under Art. 29(c) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, “the education of the child shall be directed to: [...] The development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate...” The UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education has emphasized that the right to quality and inclusive education does not permit propaganda and/or indoctrination in any form.⁹ ICCPR prohibits propaganda for war.¹⁰

In the context of the treatment of Ukrainian teachers, other relevant ICCPR guarantees include the rights to liberty and security of person¹¹ to hold and express opinions,¹² together with the prohibition on torture and other ill-treatment.¹³

Furthermore, ICESCR guarantees everyone the right to work, which they freely choose or accept.¹⁴ It means that no-one should be forced or compelled to do a particular job (such as, in this case, a job of a teacher) against their will.

While the Russian authorities have an obligation to cooperate with local authorities to facilitate education of children, it cannot do so in a manner that violates its obligations under IHL, international human rights law or the governing treaties. It is illegal, under international law, for it to coerce teachers through threats, torture and other ill-treatment, as well as to compel them to take actions that violate the rights of the children or their families, or their own rights to hold and express opinions. In this context, as shown below, Amnesty International’s documented research on the practices in Russian-

⁴ Geneva Convention (IV) on Civilians, Article 31.

⁵ Geneva Convention (IV) on Civilians, Article 32.

⁶ International Humanitarian Law Databases – ICRC, *Article 27, Treatment I, General Observations, Commentary of 1958*, available at: <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/gciv-1949/article-27/commentary/1958?activeTab=>.

⁷ International Humanitarian Law Databases, *Article 27, Treatment I, General Observations, Commentary of 1958*, available at: <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/gciv-1949/article-27/commentary/1958?activeTab=>.

⁸ ICESCR, Article 13(1).

⁹ Special Rapporteur on the right to education, *The role of the right to education in the prevention of atrocity crimes and mass or grave human rights violations*, 29 July 2019, available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-education/role-right-education-prevention-atrocity-crimes-and-mass-or-grave-human-rights-violations>.

¹⁰ ICCPR, Article 20(1).

¹¹ ICCPR, Article 9(1).

¹² ICCPR, Article 19(1).

¹³ ICCPR, Article 7.

¹⁴ ICESCR, Article 6(1).

occupied territories concerning the treatment of teachers provides strong evidence of unlawful coercion and the violation of their rights.¹⁵

International human rights law requires independent investigation of all of the relevant alleged violations, and if upheld the right of victims to an appropriate remedy.¹⁶

HIDING ONE'S PROFESSION IN FEAR OF REPRISALS

As early as May 2022, less than three months after the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia, the newly formed local administrations, comprising former Ukrainian officials who chose or were forced to cooperate with occupying authorities, started reaching out to teachers and headmasters. The plan was to get children back to schools in September 2022. According to teachers and headmasters interviewed by Amnesty International and open sources,¹⁷ schools were to reopen for in-person learning and to teach the Russian curriculum. The latter aim was opposed by many of the teaching profession as the Russian curriculum contained propaganda that justified Russian aggression against Ukraine and misrepresented facts of Ukrainian history with a clear aim of indoctrinating school children.¹⁸

Teachers and headmasters interviewed by Amnesty International described the process of reopening of schools and the return of former staff as happening in stages. At first, the occupying authorities promised high salaries, promotions, new textbooks and educational materials, emphasized the official Russian narrative that the respective town or village had been “liberated” from Ukrainian rule, and assured the teachers of a brighter future as a part of Russia.

Tetiana,¹⁹ a teacher from Zaporizhzhia region, shared that during one of the school meetings she was invited to attend Russian soldiers said: “How are you? Are you feeling free? You should feel free as we have liberated you from the Nazis who forced you to speak Ukrainian.” She believes that the attending members of the Russian forces were sure that headmasters and teachers would gladly cooperate with them and support them in both the schools’ reopening and the introduction of the Russian school curriculum.

However, when it turned out that there was little if any enthusiasm amongst many teachers for teaching the Russian curriculum under the occupation administration, authorities resorted to coercion. Consequently, some teachers felt the need to conceal their professional identity.

Svitlana,²⁰ a 38-year-old teacher of Ukrainian language and literature from Mykolaiv region, said: “I was very afraid they [Russian soldiers] would discover I am a teacher. Even more so because of the subject I teach. Teachers of Ukrainian and of Ukraine’s history were their main enemies. [...] I explained to my children that they must tell anyone who asks that I was a cleaner at school.”

¹⁵ The ILO has categorized Russia’s forcing workers to staff the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant to be forced labour under the Forced Labor Convention, where the workers were subjected to threats and in some cases torture. The ILO concluded that this constituted forced labour, despite its recognition that the continued operation of the plant has prevented any nuclear incident. ILO Brief, *Violations of fundamental principles and rights at work at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant and in Enerhodar city in Ukraine, temporarily occupied by the Russian Federation*, May 2023, available at [ILO Brief: Violations of fundamental principles and rights at work at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant and in Enerhodar city in Ukraine, temporarily occupied by the Russian Federation | International Labour Organization](https://www.ilo.org/public/english/condemnation/forced-labour/docs/2023/20230501_zaporizhzhia_nuclear_plant_enerhodar_city_in_ukraine_temporarily_occupied_by_the_russian_federation.pdf)

¹⁶ See Article 2(3) ICCPR.

¹⁷ E.g., see de facto Ministry of Education in Russian-occupied Kherson Region, «С 1 сентября образовательный процесс в Херсонской области полностью переходит на российские стандарты», Telegram channel «Министерство образования Херсонской области», 31 August 2022, available at <https://t.me/depobrkherson/90>; Юрий Васильев, «Херсонские школы избавляются от украинских страхов», Совет по внешней и оборонной политике 4 сентября 2022 г., available at <https://svop.ru/mains/43174/>; ТАСС, «В Херсонской области надеются, что к 1 сентября учебниками из РФ будут обеспечены все дети», 18 июля 2022 г., available at: <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/15242405>.

¹⁸ Amnesty International, *Ukraine: Children’s education is one more casualty of Russian aggression*, 11 December 2023, Index Number: EUR 50/7508/2023. Amnesty International,

“Ukraine/Russia: New history textbook is a blatant attempt to unlawfully indoctrinate school children in Russia and Russian-occupied Ukrainian territories,” press release, 1 September 2023.

¹⁹ Interview in person with Tetiana, September 2023, Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine. Here and later, full name not disclosed, and the first name may be changed, to protect the interviewee’s identity and safety of their family members and associates who may still be in Russian-occupied territories and at risk of reprisals,

²⁰ Interview in person with Svitlana, September 2023, Mykolaiv region, Ukraine.

Olha,²¹ a 40-year old history teacher from the Kharkiv region, expressed her terror when Russian soldiers came to her home for a random house search (a practice common in the Russian-occupied territories according to various interlocutors): “Once the Russians came to search my apartment. I was petrified they would discover the hidden history textbooks, maps and all the Ukrainian history literature I had. [...] I saw Russian soldiers savaging the school. First thing they did was burn all Ukrainian books, state symbols and maps,” she recalled, recounting the fear that her colleagues who joined the reopened school would inform on her. Luckily for her, nothing in her apartment caught the eye of the soldiers and they just left.

According to our interlocutors, Russian forces used a variety of tactics to track teachers and school staff down: some were identified with the help of cooperative locals, some were reported on by their colleagues. Occupying forces were requesting personnel files from headmasters. Repeated house visits were done by Russian military to addresses where teachers were supposed to live. Messages were passed to teachers through students, neighbours and family.

Olha shared that she eventually received a text message from her headmaster inviting her for a meeting in the townhall. She did not go and moved to live with her neighbours to avoid being found at home.

Oleksandr,²² a headmaster and geography teacher from Zaporizhzhia region, said that in their small village everyone knew him. The occupation administration head told him as early as April 2022: “We know that if headmasters agree to work in a reopened school, all their teachers will follow.” Oleksandr was pressured into calling a gathering at his school in May 2022. At the gathering, the head of the administration promised all those who would agree to start working in the reopened school a salary of 100,000 roubles (around US\$ 1,000) and provision of new books and teaching materials. Oleksandr refused to work, citing his existing health reasons. The head of the administration started paying him regular visits after that: “I was afraid of every sound of an approaching car on my street”, Oleksandr told Amnesty International. The reason for frequent visits was to compel Oleksandr to hand over personnel files of the teachers from his school. “I told him I had burnt all the personnel files as a precaution at the very start of the invasion.”

Many teachers interviewed by Amnesty International had to flee to Ukrainian government-controlled territories during the summer of 2022 to avoid working in reopened schools.

Tetiana,²³ a Ukrainian history teacher from Kherson, said that she had to leave the city in June 2022 as her headmaster had agreed to cooperate and was “pressing [her] to agree to work in a Russian school.” Her husband who stayed behind had to move in with his parents as their apartment was repeatedly visited by officials of the occupation administration and Russian military as they were looking for Tetiana.

Olena,²⁴ a headmaster from the Zaporizhzhia region, shared that she had deleted their school’s webpage on Facebook with pictures and publications to make it more difficult for the occupation administration to identify teachers. She also said that she lived in a constant anticipation of a house search: “To be a teacher under Russian occupation means to live in one place, to keep your work computer and other work-related things in the other. You must always have two sets of personal devices: one to provide during a search, the other for personal use.”

COERCING COOPERATION

Amnesty International has documented a number of examples from the testimony of victims where they were being coerced into returning to work in schools against their will through a range of practices – threats, intimidation, blackmail harassment and assaults. Taken together, these practices provide strong evidence, which should be subject to urgent further investigation, that both Article 6 of ICESCR and the ILO Forced Labour Convention appear to have been breached, in so far as occupying powers have been seeking to exact work from teachers under the menace of a penalty, including severe extrajudicial reprisals, and for which they had not offered themselves voluntarily.

“Shortly after I refused to cooperate [in reopening a school under occupation], four armed men came to my house”, says Oleksandr,²⁵ a 44-year-old headmaster and Geography teacher from Zaporizhzhia region. “Two grabbed me and took me to the car. They hit me with their rifles. Two other men stayed behind with my wife. I was taken to the school backyard and hit again. They called me a “fascist” and a “Nazi”. They demanded that I come to the event at the school and, by this visit, “endorse” the school’s operation, posing for pictures with Russian state symbols. They wanted to use these pictures

²¹ Interview in person with Olha, June 2023, Kharkiv region, Ukraine.

²² Interview in person with Oleksandr, September 2023, Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine.

²³ Interview in person with Tetiana, August 2023, Kherson, Ukraine.

²⁴ Interview in person with Olena, August 2023, Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine.

²⁵ Interview in person with Oleksandr, September 2023, Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine.

later [for blackmail], as proof of my collaboration with and support of the occupation. They threatened that those pictures would be enough for Ukrainian authorities to prove my support for occupation and put me in jail.”

On the morning of the event, Oleksandr received “a reminder call” from one of his abductors. He had no choice but to attend. Calls and demands of presence at all school events, that he said were “nothing but propaganda,” continued until Oleksandr fled to the Ukrainian government-controlled territory. From his neighbours he knows that Russian soldiers are now living in his house, without his consent.

The reopening of schools was instrumental in indoctrinating children and part of the Russian forces’ efforts to ensure loyalty among the civilian population in the occupied territories. This, however, would not be possible without the cooperation of headmasters and teachers. They were key to ensuring that students would attend classes in the reopened schools that now taught the Russian curriculum.

However, ensuring teachers’ cooperation turned out to be a challenging task. Despite the eagerness of some headmasters and teachers to work in reopened schools, many others were not that willing. As a result, the occupying forces resorted to coercion to be able to staff the reopened schools.

Oksana,²⁶ an acting headmaster from Kherson region, recalls in her interview with Amnesty International a meeting with the occupation administration: “They were trying to convince me for three hours. They did not threaten me but were pressuring me psychologically. They told me that the Kherson region was Russian forever, and that Ukraine had abandoned its fight for us. They promised me a good salary and warned me that sooner or later I would have to agree to work for them as I would not survive without an income. There was an emotional blackmail too. They told me I would be betraying my students if I refused to work.”

Tetiana,²⁷ a deputy headmaster from Zaporizhzhia region, was pressured by her headmaster who had agreed to teach the Russian curriculum and to work in the reopened school, to follow in his steps. “You are part of the management team. Our staff must see we are united. You are the only one of the management who is refusing to cooperate and work in [a] Russian school”, Svitlana was told by the headmaster who went on to warn: “You do not fully understand the consequences of your refusal.” At the meeting with all the school staff, however, Svitlana still refused to rejoin the school. Eleven other teachers followed her example.

Those unwilling to cooperate were told to resign. Still, this did not put an end to coercion. Representatives of the occupation administrations would visit without notice the teachers who had resigned, sometimes several times a week. They would keep threatening them with continuous unemployment, inability to get social support and medical help and being included into so-called “blacklists” of people not allowed to leave the occupied territories.

Tetiana told Amnesty International that soon after her refusal to work in the reopened school, she was approached by one of her former colleagues: “She said again that I did not understand the consequences of my refusal, that I would be sent to dig trenches on the frontline and that I would be included in the ‘blacklist’ and would lose my house. I heard rumours being spread around the village of me being a traitor to my students. Some would advise me not to leave my house at all as I might encounter trouble.”

Soon after the meeting, Tetiana decided to flee to the Ukrainian government-controlled area. On the day when she left, Russian soldiers raided her house and interrogated her husband about her whereabouts.

Some of the teachers’ stories shared with Amnesty International tell that those refusing to work in reopened schools as well as their family members received threats from local administrators and headmasters. They were told that they would be arrested for “anti-Russian propaganda”, separated from their children or sent to dig trenches at the frontlines or to rebuild destroyed towns. Many were told that they would be evicted from their houses.

Serhiy,²⁸ the head of the Department of Education in a local council in Zaporizhzhia region, told Amnesty International that he was warned in June 2022 by the occupation administration in his village that unless he arranged a meeting with all the teachers from his school he would be “taken to the basement” and sent “to dig trash holes.” He also said that many of the teachers from his school were threatened “to be taken to a neighbouring town to the Commandant’s Office or to a SIZO [detention centre], and that they may never come back.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

²⁶ Interview in person with Oksana, August 2023, Kherson, Ukraine.

²⁷ Video interview with Tetiana, August 2023.

²⁸ Interview in person with Serhiy, September 2023, Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine.

Amnesty International calls on the Russian authorities to:

- End Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine;
- Immediately ensure that Russian forces and de facto authorities under Russian control fully abide by Russia's obligations under international humanitarian law and international human rights law; and in particular:
- Stop the practice of indoctrination of children and spreading propaganda for war purposes at schools including those operating in the occupied territories of Ukraine as well as in Russia, and ensure that the curriculum meets appropriate education standards;
- Ensure protection of all civilians under their control from human rights violations and other abusive practices, and in particular:
- End the practice of coercing teachers, headmasters and other school personnel, to engage in activities contrary to their professional duties or otherwise do work against their free will including the teaching of the Russian curriculum;
- Conduct a prompt, transparent and effective investigation into reported abusive practices, including apparent breaches of Article 6 of ICESCR and the ILO Forced Labour Convention, and in particular instances of threats, intimidation, harassment, arbitrary questioning and house searches, unlawful deprivation of liberty, torture and other ill-treatment, and forced eviction, and bring those responsible to account, where applicable, in fair trial proceedings;
- Ensure that all staff and students in educational institutions are able to fully enjoy their fundamental human rights, including the rights to freedom of expression and to quality, inclusive education.

Amnesty International calls on the Ukrainian authorities and the international community to take all appropriate steps to document human rights violations in the occupied territories and to ensure accountability for them, and to make effective provisions to protect victims and witnesses of any future investigations. All reported human rights violations should be subject to effective independent investigations, including by relevant domestic authorities as well as, where appropriate, international mechanisms. Victims of violations should be granted the right to an effective remedy and adequate reparations.