

Persecution of women as a tool to intimidate disloyal groups in occupied Crimea

Brief description of the problem:

The proportion of women among the victims of Russian politically motivated repression in the temporarily occupied territory of Crimea has increased significantly. They are subjected to enforced disappearances, torture, incommunicado detention and then sentenced to long prison terms in closed trials on charges of collaborating with the Ukrainian special services. No moral or ethical arguments, such as the presence of minor children, advanced age, care for disabled parents, etc., are accepted as mitigating circumstances.

Such persecution of women is actively covered by Russian propaganda resources, and a narrative is being formed on social media that such actions are correct, the punishment is fair, and the harsh approach of the security forces and the closed nature of the trials are completely justified and necessary.

The hypothesis of this research is that the number of prosecutions of women has been significantly increased in order to intensify the effect of intimidation of the disloyal part of the civilian population in the occupied territories.

Conclusions:

A comparative analysis of the number of politically motivated prosecutions of women in the period from the beginning of the occupation of Crimea to the full-scale invasion with the number of women prosecuted after the start of Russian armed aggression against Ukraine indicates a several-fold increase in prosecutions. It also indicates an increase in the rate of such repression.

A comparative analysis of the court's approaches to punishment in cases against women during the specified periods indicates that before the start of the full-scale invasion, most prosecutions were not related to imprisonment or were at the minimum level prescribed for the crimes charged. After the start of Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine, a significant proportion of sentences have included average or maximum terms of imprisonment.

The vast majority of charges against women in Crimea in politically motivated prosecutions (26 out of 31) are related to resistance to the occupation – interaction with Ukrainian law enforcement agencies or expressions of their pro-Ukrainian position. Some prosecutions involve enforced disappearances and torture, while some charges show signs of fabrication. More than half of the women are being prosecuted under 'flexible' articles of the Russian Criminal Code, which are open to interpretation, do not require substantial evidence and are convenient for use in politically motivated cases.

These prosecutions of women in Crimea are also affected by the general problems of the judicial system in the occupied territory, which has undergone total degradation since the start of the full-scale invasion. In trials against women, there have been problems with the transparency and openness of court proceedings, systematic violations of the presumption of innocence, and blatant disregard for the conditions for the independence and impartiality of judges in such trials.

In view of this, it can be argued that since the beginning of the occupation of Crimea, representatives of Russian power structures have avoided repressive actions against women whenever possible. However, after the full-scale invasion, the existing approaches and gender 'taboos' in occupied Crimea were completely abolished. According to the authors, this noticeable deterioration in the situation is intended to further intimidate the disloyal local population and suppress any forms of resistance to the occupation.

Information about the research approach:

Research objective: to analyse the characteristics of the persecution of women who show signs of resistance to the occupation and are used to intimidate the local population.

Tasks:

- To analyse changes in the number of cases related to the motivated persecution of women;
- To analyse changes in the court's attitude towards verdicts in cases related to the motivated persecution of women;
- To analyse the presence of political motives for the persecution of women (obvious or imagined ties to Ukraine);
- To investigate the peculiarities of ensuring minimum standards of access to fair justice;

Geography and time frame:

The subject of the research is judicial practice in the temporarily occupied Crimea and in the Southern District Military Court (exclusively in cases against residents of occupied Crimea) during the period from the start of full-scale armed aggression against Ukraine until August 2025.

Research criteria:

Since no information about distinct gender self-identification was received from any of the persons deprived of liberty during the research, gender was determined based on the analysis of the surnames and names of persons who had been subjected to motivated persecution.

The characteristics of persecution include criteria such as compliance with basic standards of access to normal judicial proceedings (within the meaning of Article 6 of the ECHR), practices and trends in sentencing, as well as representation and nature of media coverage in the occupied territory.

The relationship between the persecution of women and the policy of intimidation of the civilian population in the occupied territory will be established through:

1) demonstration of an actual or perceived connection with Ukraine (as a direct signal to other members of the disloyal group);

2) signs of unfounded accusations:

the charges are fabricated or invented;

the facts do not correspond to the legal interpretation of the law;

the interpretation does not comply with international standards;

3) the application of 'flexible' and 'blurred' criminal articles, convenient for motivated persecution, which have signs of resistance to occupation (as a direct signal to other representatives of the disloyal group).

Research process:

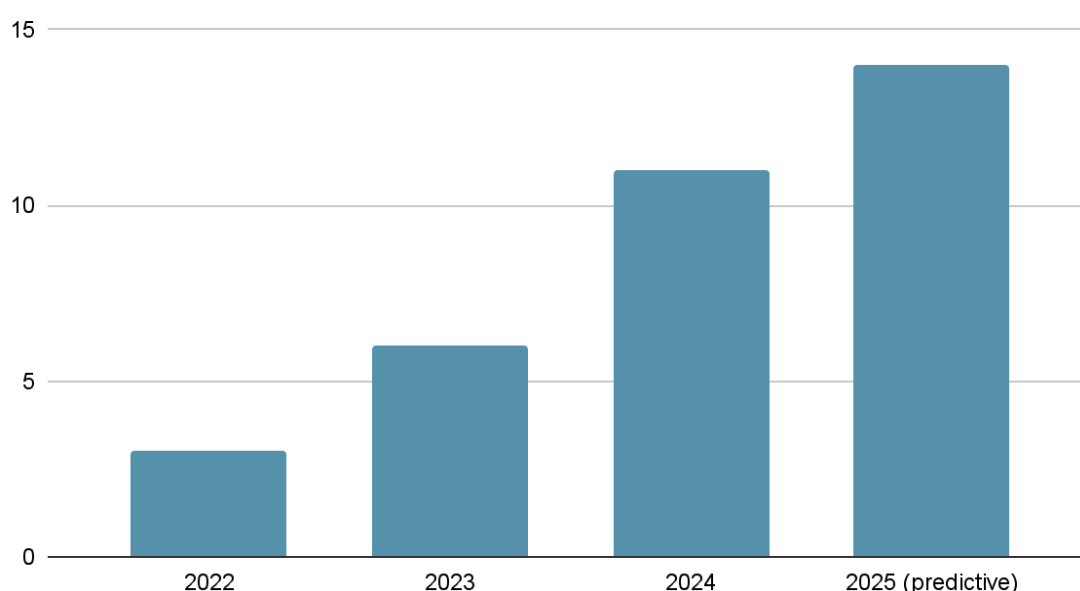
Change in the number of cases

In the period after the occupation of Crimea and before the full-scale invasion, only one case involving prolonged imprisonment was recorded on the peninsula that had signs of politically motivated persecution and concerned a woman—the case against Galina Dovgopolaya, a pro-Ukrainian resident of Sevastopol.

Since April 2022, the number of women who have been subjected to various forms of criminal prosecution with signs of politically motivated repression has grown rapidly. As of the date of this report (September 2025), there are 31 known cases of criminal prosecution of women detained directly in occupied Crimea with signs of politically motivated persecution (see Annex 1). This amount doesn't include cases against women from the newly occupied territories who were moved to Crimea during the pre-trial stage (Iryna Gorobtsova, Anna Yeltsova, Olga Chernyavska, etc.), as well as Crimean women who were forcibly disappeared and are still being held without charge incommunicado (Tetyana Dyakunovska, Elvira Ablyazova, Tetyana Shtrifanova, etc.).

In general, the dynamics of persecution of women in Crimea since 2022 are as follows:

Number of cases against women in Crimea



* The forecast for the current year (2025) is based on the number of prosecutions in the previous year – 11 cases per year – and the current year's numbers, which stand at 11

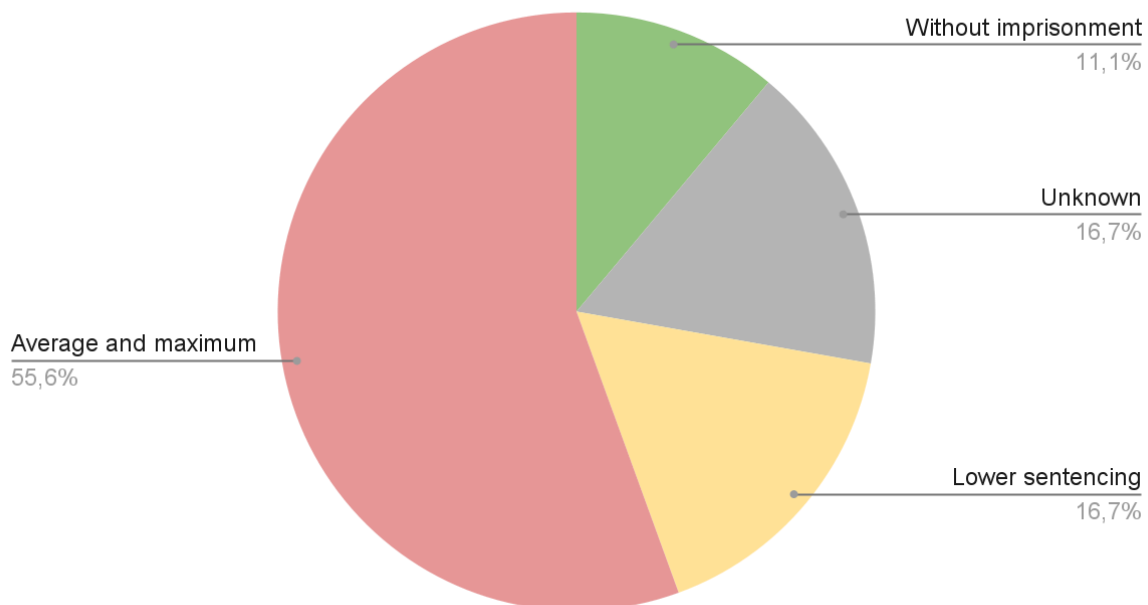
cases in 9 months. Thus, over twelve months, the number of prosecutions is expected to increase to 14 cases.

Change in attitude towards sentences

A distinctive feature of the persecution of women in the period between the occupation of Crimea and the start of the full-scale invasion is not only the small number of cases, but also the lenient attitude towards punishment. With the exception of the actual sentence handed down to Galina Dovgopolaya (which was also minimal under the article of the charge), politically motivated criminal prosecutions against other women were either conducted in absentia (journalists Anna Andriyevska, Gulsum Khalilova) or resulted in sentences without imprisonment (Larisa Kitayskaya, Elina Mamedova).

However, since the start of the full-scale invasion, a completely different approach has been observed in prosecutions. Of the 18 cases already considered, only one is known to have resulted in a suspended sentence (without imprisonment), 1 related to a conviction in absentia and in three cases the sentences are unknown, which also suggests the absence of severe punishment. In 13 cases, the sentences involved actual imprisonment, with only three women receiving minimum or near-minimum sentences, while all others received average or even maximum prison terms. In general, the attitude towards sentences in cases against women is as follows:

Types of sentences in cases against women after 2022



It should be noted separately that there is a new trend in Russian courts related to the consideration of crimes under Article 275.1 and the reclassification of events as more serious crimes under Article 275. This trend fully applies to women. For example, during the appeal proceedings, Ksenia Svetlishina, a resident of Sevastopol convicted under Article 275.1, was informed of the annulment of her sentence and the start of a new investigation under Article 275, which is more serious.

The presence of political motives

Another important aspect demonstrating the peculiarities of the persecution of women in Crimea is the high percentage of attention focused on the persecuted women's ties to Ukraine or their pro-Ukrainian positions. According to the authors of the [research](#), this is one of the main markers that openly indicates the purpose of such repression – to suppress resistance among the local population in the occupied territories. Of the 31 cases, at least 26 charges were related to the performance of tasks for Ukrainian security forces or statements/actions in favour of Ukraine.

Such a high percentage allows us to conclude that, following the full-scale invasion, no women in Crimea were detained on charges of sabotage, espionage or preparation of terrorist acts who were not connected to the Ukrainian special services. However, as noted in one of the previous research, the rate at which such cases are appearing is abnormal, and there are no adequate explanations in the public sphere for the nature of such a rapid increase in the number of serious crimes against state security.

It is important to note that the source of information about the prosecutions themselves and about the connections of the prosecuted women with Ukraine is the security forces in the occupied territory. In 22 cases, the source was law enforcement or judicial agencies of the Russian Federation, and in three cases, it was information projects that openly emphasise their ties to such agencies. This may serve as evidence that the dissemination of information about the repression of women for real or imagined relations with Ukraine are part of the conscious and consistent information policy of Russian security forces in the occupied territory.

Signs of unfounded accusations:

The presence of signs of unfounded accusations is one of the indicators of politically motivated persecution. In cases against women from Crimea, a lot of information is concealed under the guise of protecting state secrets, but even so, as of now, a third of the cases show signs of unfounded accusations.

For example, citizen journalist and human rights defender Iryna Danylovykh was abducted, tortured and had evidence of explosives storage fabricated against her. During the [trial](#), the prosecution was unable to convincingly refute these circumstances, and what is more, additional evidence of evidence fabrication was found in court.

At least six other women who were subsequently prosecuted also suffered enforced disappearance and/or torture. This casts doubt on the subsequent charges, as the security forces had every opportunity to fabricate evidence and influence the victims of persecution to confess to crimes outside the law.

It is also known that several women did not admit their guilt during the trial, claiming that the evidence had been falsified, but due to the lack of independent observation of their trials, it is not possible to assess the court's efforts to verify these circumstances. At the same time, there are many doubts about the admissibility in court of such episodes as the financing of the Armed Forces of Ukraine through the purchase of digital products on a platform that never sold such products (the case of Lyudmila Kolesnikova) or the storage of an explosive device (the cases of Iryna Danylovykh, Olha Kravchuk, Olena Voynarovska, Nadiya Hrekova, and Oksana Shevchenko), when the court either fails to establish where the explosives came from or ignores circumstances indicating that the women were not actually involved in storing them.

Application of 'flexible' and 'blurred' criminal articles

Another indicator of the widespread use of politically motivated prosecutions is the use of so-called 'vague' qualifications, where the aim is not to prevent the violation of other citizens' rights, but to provide a legal pretext for prosecuting dissidents. In cases against women from Crimea, 23 out of 31 cases involve the application of provisions that are criticised by human rights activists as imperfect and vaguely worded (in some cases, two such provisions are applied simultaneously).

For example, in 16 cases, the charges include the article on 'treason', which was [called](#) 'rubber' after amendments were made in 2012 to introduce broad possibilities for qualifying any contact with a foreigner as treason. In six cases, there are charges under articles related to terrorism, the wording of which is [considered](#) broad and susceptible to abuse and fabrication. In another five cases, the charges relate to articles of the Criminal Code with an extremist orientation, which Amnesty International has [described](#) as a cover for the relentless persecution of dissidents through vague legislation that allows for abuse and arbitrariness.

Ensuring minimum standards of access to fair justice

The inability to defend one's rights in court is one of the hallmarks of politically motivated persecution. Cases against women are no exception to the general approach of courts in the occupied territory to ignore existing international standards of access to justice.

Transparency and openness of court proceedings

The vast majority of court proceedings against Crimean women after the full-scale invasion are held in closed session. Of the 18 court proceedings, 14 (78%) were held without the possibility for the audience to be present. This is the result of both formally justified decisions to close the proceedings in order to preserve state secrets in the case files (the cases of Lera Dzhemilova, Nina Tymoshenko, etc.) and blatantly unlawful decisions explained by 'anti-terrorist security' measures (the cases of Tatyana Bibik, Elena Guseva) or the belief that only the relatives of the defendants can be listeners (the case of O.I.).

It should be noted that the ECHR allows for completely closed trials if this is in the interests of national security, but according to experts from the Crimean Process, the occupation courts are abusing the possibility of holding non-transparent trials under the guise of protecting state secrets. Moreover, in any case, the verdicts in these cases must be open and public, which is not the case in the 'closed' cases against Crimean women.

It should also be noted that judicial authorities often adhere to a policy of concealing information on their official websites regarding the personal details of defendants under certain articles of the Criminal Code. In 9 out of 18 cases, the information was concealed. This complicates the ability to determine the date, time and place of court hearings in a timely manner, which also significantly affects the openness of these trials. A distinctive feature of this policy is that information is concealed on the websites of the occupation courts, while the website of the Southern District Military Court, located on the territory of the Russian Federation, has not yet resorted to such measures.

Judicial impartiality and independence

Since most of the trials were held in closed session, there is almost no verified information about what signs of dependence or bias the court demonstrated during the consideration of cases against Crimean women. However, the known facts indicate that this standard was not properly ensured in individual cases against Crimean women.

For example, the trial against Iryna Danylovykh demonstrated the judge's total dependence on the position of the FSB, as well as his openly hostile attitude towards the defendant. And in the case against Z.A., the judges actually mocked the woman and her physical condition. At the same time, they did not ensure equal treatment of the parties, seating the representative of the prosecution next to them, and the defence and the defendant in the far corner of the room.

Other factors that cast doubt on the impartiality and independence of judges include information about the judges themselves involved in the proceedings. In seven cases, judges who had betrayed their oath to Ukraine and were wanted on charges of treason participated in the proceedings. The impartiality of such judges towards people accused of having ties to Ukrainian special services or sympathising with Ukraine seems rather doubtful.

In 11 other cases, the judges are Russian citizens and have long been representatives of the Russian judicial system, who, in accordance with the requirements of the Fourth Geneva Convention, cannot participate in proceedings concerning residents of the occupied territories. The impartiality of citizens of a state that is waging war against Ukraine towards defendants who are involved in resistance to Russian occupation or simply hold pro-Ukrainian views also appears questionable.

Presumption of innocence

In many cases, Russian media presented information about the involvement of detained women in crimes as established fact. This information was disseminated by both local and leading Russian media outlets. Given this information background, the persecuted women had no chance of benefiting from the presumption of innocence from the outset.



В Севастополе задержали двух шпионок за передачу Украине секретных данных

В Севастополе задержали двух шпионок за передачу Украине информации о военных объектах

11:02 01.10.2024 (обновлено: 11:23 01.10.2024)

Article in Russian media with the headline 'Two spies detained in Sevastopol'

The effect of violating the presumption of innocence was significantly exacerbated by the use of excessive security measures – an FSB special convoy, handcuffs, transport from the detention centre in a special prison vehicle (autozak), detention in special boxes in the court's convoy rooms before the start of the trial, and detention in cages or boxes during

court hearings. The public appearance of a person in handcuffs and under escort creates the impression of guilt. In addition, the excessive and unmotivated use of security measures can be seen as humiliating, which also affects the perception (and self-perception) of a person as a criminal at a time when the verdict has not yet been announced.



Annex

List of known cases of motivated persecution of women in Crimea after the start of the full-scale invasion:

Name and surname	Date of detention	Article of the Criminal Code
Danylovyh Iryna	29.04.2022	222.1
Goldenberg Valeria	09.04.2022	244
Arifova Evelina	04.04.2022	208 (conviction in absentia)
Voinarovskaya Elena	April 2023	222.1 (trial ongoing)
Kravchuk Olga	April 2023	222.1 (trial ongoing)
Umerova Leniy*	05.05.2023	275 (investigation ongoing)
Bublik Karolina	16.08.2023	214
Svetlishina Ksenia	December 2023	275
Tymoshenko Nina	December 2023	275
Strilets Victoria	3.10.2024	275
Strilets Alexandra	3.10.2024	275
Butsykina Yulia	12.09.2024	222.1
Senedzhuk Oksana	15.08.2024	275
Shevchenko Oksana	01.02.2024	205, 222.1
Grekova Nadezhda	01.03.2024	205, 222.1, 275, 205.3

Samoilova Yevgeniya	April 2024	205, 275, 205.3 (trial ongoing)
Grek Alina	16.05.2024	205, 275, 205.3
Bibik Tetiana	10.07.2024	280
Kolesnikova Lyudmila	03.10.2024	275
Lisovska Valeria	13.11.2024	275 (investigation ongoing)
Dzhemilova Lera	20.03.2025	275
Kozlan Oleksandra	08.01.2025	205, 275, 222.1 (investigation ongoing)
Buyukhchan Khatidze	09.07.2025	275, 205 (investigation ongoing)
Guseva Olena	11.03.2025	280
Unidentified	18.04.2025	280
Ersmambetova Niyara	04.06.2025	275 (investigation ongoing)
Vladimirova Irina	June 2025	280, 280.3 (trial ongoing)
Fomenko Kateryna	07.07.2025	207.3 (investigation ongoing)
Unidentified	04.06.2025	275 (investigation ongoing)
Oleksina Dorogan	11.08.2025	208 (investigation ongoing)
Unidentified	29.09.2025	275 (investigation ongoing)

*Leniy Umerova is currently the only civilian woman from Crimea who has been released as a result of efforts by the Ukrainian authorities. However, it is likely that her criminal prosecution has not been terminated after her release, but has been transferred to an in absentia format.