

PHOTO: ANDERS MATTSSON

Yurii Shapovalov, former civilian detainee, showing photos of those who remain in captivity during a demonstration in Stockholm, April 2026.

The voices of missing Ukrainians in Russian captivity

by **Ninna Mörner**

Ukrainian authorities estimate that at least 16,000 civilians have been abducted and are currently being unlawfully detained by Russia. Russia refuses to disclose the whereabouts of those it holds in captivity, with the obvious intention of placing these "disappeared" people outside the protection of the law. This is argued by the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group (KHPG),[1] a Ukrainian human rights organization that, among other things, tries to locate missing Ukrainians, documents disappearances, supports families, and collects evidence that can be used in future legal processes.[2] In a database[3] the KHPG has registered around 9,200 cases of missing persons.

Including both prisoners of war (POWs) – Ukrainian combatants who have fallen into the power of the Russian state – and civilian detainees, Ukrainian authorities estimate that there are currently 90,000 Ukrainians missing as a result of Russia's war against Ukraine. There are international legal frameworks in place that regulate the treatment of both POWs and civilians at war. International humanitarian law (IHL) requires parties to an armed conflict to always distinguish between civilians and combatants as well as between civilian and military objects. While combatants cannot be prosecuted for mere participation in hostilities because of so-called combatant privilege (as long as they comply with IHL), civilians may be prosecuted for crimes they have committed, subject to the guarantees of a fair and impartial trial.

"**ACCORDING TO** IHL, the possibilities of detaining civilians during an armed conflict or occupation are strictly limited", explained Yevhen Zakharov, the longtime director of the KHPG and a former dissident, speaking while in Stockholm in a seminar organized within the framework of the project "Restore Human Rights for Victims of Russia's War".[4] He continued: "Unlawfully detaining a civilian constitutes a serious violation of the 1949 Fourth Geneva Convention and is, therefore, classified as a war crime."

Norms of IHL require that both detained



PHOTO: ANDERS MATTSSON

Natalia Shilo and Yurii Shapovalov sharing their testimonies at a seminar in Stockholm, April 2026.



PHOTO: ANDERS MATTSSON

Back row: Mykhailo Romanov, Ausra Padskocimaite, Yurii Shapovalov, Kateryna Buriakovska. Front row: Natalia Shilo and Yevhen Zakharov.

civilians and POWs are treated humanely and guaranteed adequate food, clothing, and medical care. Families have the right to know the fates of their relatives. States are obliged to search for missing persons. Even during detention, civilians and POWs retain the right to communicate with the outside world, in particular with their families and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

There are thus fundamental rights that states must respect even during an ongoing armed conflict. International human rights law (IHRL) protects, among other things, the right to life, the freedom of expression, prohibits extrajudicial executions, and provides for an absolute prohibition of torture, inhuman, and degrading treatment. According to Yevhen Zakharov, enforced disappearance or deprivation of a person's liberty as a result of an abduction or kidnapping by state agents followed by the absence of information, is seen as one of the most flagrant violations of IHRL, as the individual is placed completely outside the protection of the law.

Missing Ukrainians and their families

Kateryna Buriakovska and Mykhailo Romanov are two human rights lawyers working for KHPG. We meet in a small room at the premises of Östgruppen för demokrati och mänskliga rättigheter (a Swedish NGO that supports democracy and human rights in Eastern Europe) in Stockholm together with the former civilian prisoners, Yurii Shapovalov[5] and Natalia Shilo.[6] Kateryna Buriakovska says that a large part of her working time is spent helping those who report their relatives as missing, and who fear that they have been captured by the Russian army and the regime. The relatives turn to the lawyers at KHPG to get some answers, some sign of life, or at least to talk about their concerns and meet someone who listens and makes an effort to help them. Buriakovska expresses a strong empathy for these relatives, for whom the uncertainty is draining. At every prisoner exchange, or whenever an area is retaken from Russian occupation, those seeking their relatives flock to try to get new information – has anyone seen my son in the picture? Has anyone heard anything about the inmates at this prison? Buriakovska says that the KHPG as an organization wants to convey a sense of hope to the relatives that those missing will one day be found and freed.

In 2018 medical doctor Yurii Shapovalov was abducted in occupied Donetsk while on his way from work. He was grabbed in the middle of the street with a black bag forced over his head. Yurii Shapovalov was accused of and later convicted in a sham trial for espionage, but the real reason for his detention was likely related to his participation in pro-Ukrainian rallies and tweets about how life in Donetsk has changed following the Russian occupation in 2014. Shapovalov was released in a prisoner exchange, after being detained for over seven years and subjected to violence, neglect, and torture. When he himself talks about his liberation from captivity, he prefers to return to and to advocate for those who did not participate in the prisoner exchange, and who were left behind when he and others were freed. Shapovalov says he can still see "their faces in front of him".

"FAMILIES HAVE THE RIGHT TO KNOW THE FATES OF THEIR RELATIVES. STATES ARE OBLIGED TO SEARCH FOR MISSING PERSONS."

TEACHER OF mathematics and physics, Natalia Shilo, was arrested in the spring of 2021 while trying to visit her sick mother in the city of Horlivka, also in Donetsk region. She has always been open about her pro-Ukrainian position and had anonymously expressed her views about the Russian occupation on Twitter. Natalia Shilo was falsely accused of espionage and spent four years in Russian captivity and, later, house arrest. In April 2025, she was released in a special operation by the Military Intelligence Service of Ukraine (HUR) and returned to Kyiv.

Natalia Shilo and Yurii Shapovalov say that those who have been held in Rus-



PHOTO: KHPG

Natalia Shilo aims to inform the world about what women experience in Russian captivity.



PHOTO: OMBUDSMAN OF UKRAINE

A prison exchange August 14, 2025 in which 84 Ukrainians returned home, 33 military personnel and 51 civilians – among them Yurii Shapovalov.

sian captivity, like themselves, are often asked by relatives of the missing and detained who else they have seen and heard about – where are they, how are they, are they alive?

Yurii Shapovalov also talks about how unbearable it was when he had been taken prisoner not to know how his elderly mother was doing. Sadly she passed away while he still was detained. He was not allowed to visit her funeral. Natalia Shilo, for her part, describes the worry she felt for her relatives and friends, and how difficult it was not knowing if her loved ones even knew that she was alive.

The abuses suffered by prisoners

Both Yurii Shapovalov and Natalia Shilo describe how, immediately after being captured, they were subjected to verbal, psychological and/or physical abuse, and how they were deprived access to food, sleep, hygiene products and basic sanitary facilities. This violent shock treatment seems to be the modus operandi of the Russian military, aimed at communicating to prisoners that they are completely at the mercy of their capturers. Shapovalov gives a detailed account of how he was locked in a room with a hood over his head, brutally beaten, subjected to mock executions and thrown around the room by soldiers. Guards came in in shifts to beat him. He was then taken to an ice-cold room without windows or toilets, where he was housed with around 50 other prisoners. He recalls how they were forced to stand for many hours, and how they were made to sing Russian songs.

“RUSSIA, HOWEVER, CLAIMS THAT ITS ACTS ARE NOT WAR BUT MERELY A ‘SPECIAL MILITARY OPERATION’ – IMPLYING THAT THE LAWS OF WAR DO NOT APPLY.”

The KHPG systematically documents the abuses suffered by POWs and illegally detained civilians, such as torture and inhumane treatment, collecting the information and storing it in its different databases. The KHPG is pushing for war crimes to be documented and evidence collected during the war so that justice can be done and those responsible held accountable. The abuses that have been committed are completely contrary to existing norms of international humanitarian law. Russia, however, claims that its acts are not war but merely a “special military operation” – implying that the laws of war do not apply. At the same time, in practice it is acknowledged that it is a war and that the captives are prisoners of war, because they are regularly exchanged for captured Russian troops.

It is also important to gather information and evidence regarding the abuses so that those who have been liberated can obtain the formal status of victims of the Russian regime’s aggression and thus access certain agreed rights provided by the Ukrainian state, such as financial compensation for the suffering they have endured.

THE KHPG follows a holistic approach, focusing on providing legal, psychological, financial, and humanitarian support to victims of Russia’s war-related crimes. This means that the KHPG offers support and provides networks so that those who have been illegally detained and suffered abuses can process their trauma, regain their dignity, and once again take part in everyday life.

Ausra Padskocimaite, Doctor of International Law and project manager at Östgruppen, underlines the crucial role that a strong civil society plays during times of crisis, stating that “when the state must focus on its survival and defence, the contribution of civil society becomes even more important”.

Life after liberation

Many of those who have themselves been captured also choose to help and support other victims, aware that their own traumatic experiences can be a valuable resource in the work of providing Ukrainian victims of Russia’s war with help and recognition. Yurii Shapovalov mentions December 29th and Alumni – two organi-

zations founded by former civilian prisoners' men who provide support to other former detainees.

After her release, Natalia Shilo started participating in the work of the organization Come on, sisters!, which supports current and former female prisoners, including Natalia herself while she was in captivity. The organization focuses on offering peer and psychosocial support and help reintegrating the women who have been released, for example, by ensuring that they are met by someone who understands what it is like to come out of captivity. "Many of them have not seen their children and families for a very long time, we also try to help them with reintegration", says Shilo, adding that, having been prisoners themselves, those working in the network understand the specific trauma, isolation, and abuse that these women have been subjected to. She shares that while she herself was not subjected to physical violence, she was constantly intimidated and humiliated, including by having to shower in front of male guards, and having 24-hour surveillance in her cell.

When asked what helped them survive Russian captivity, Yurii Shapovalov says that, from the very beginning, he decided that he needed to prioritize his physical survival. However, he also relied on the support of other inmates and even recalls small moments of humanity in the most unexpected places; how pro-Russian separatists who were imprisoned in the same cell, shared with him clothes, a blanket, and utensils – none of which were provided by the administration. Natalia Shilo says that in order to preserve her mental well-being she decided to focus strictly on the "here and now". She found strength in friendship with Ukrainian prisoners, particularly Natalia Vlasova[7] (still remaining in prison). Natalia Shilo says she also drew strength from the work of Vasyl Stus – a Ukrainian poet and dissident who died in the Soviet labor camp in 1985, citing the first words from his famous poem "Endure" (*Terpy*): "Endure, endure – endurance hones your soul [...]"

Despite their difficult experiences, both Yurii Shapovalov and Natalia Shilo are determined to rebuild the lives they once had and to continue supporting former prisoners, and not forgetting the ones still in captivity.

YURII SHAPOVALOV thought he was completely forgotten after being missing for over seven years but was overwhelmed by all the support and care he received following his release.

"Many of my friends and colleagues from Donetsk came to visit me and there was a lot of support and help available", he describes. Yurii Shapalov, who has relocated to Kyiv, hopes to eventually return to his work as a neurophysiologist, and to care for Ukrainian children affected by the war. Today, he is primarily committed to raising awareness about the difficult situation of those who remain in Russia's captivity, in order to make sure they are not forgotten by the wider world.

Ninna Mörner is the editor-in-chief of *Baltic Worlds*.

references

1 The Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group (KHPG) is one of the oldest and most respected Ukrainian human rights organizations; it traces its origins back to the Soviet-era dissident movement of the 1970s–1980s. See https://khpg.org/en/.

2 See for instance the report *Restoring the Rights of Ukrainian Victims of Russia's War* (Östgruppen and Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group [KHPG], 2026), available at: https://ostgruppen.se/wp24/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/Analytical_Report_SI_ENG.pdf. The report was presented by the KHPG and Östgruppen in April 2026 in Stockholm. The report was written as part of a 18-month long project, *Restoring Human Rights for Ukrainian Victims of Russian War-Related Crimes*, which was carried out within the framework of the Swedish Institute's Ukraine Cooperation Programme and concluded in May 2026. See https://si.se/en/si-project-brings-hope-to-ukrainian-families-searching-for-missing-loved-ones/.

3 The database was created with the financial support of the Swedish Institute.

4 A cooperation between a Swedish NGO Östgruppen för demokrati och mänskliga rättigheter [pro Democracy and Human Rights] and KHPG, funded by the Swedish Institute. See https://ostgruppen.se/vad-vi-gor/vara-projekt/.

5 To read more about the case of Yurii Shapovalov, please see: https://khpg.org/en/1608815371

6 To read more about the case of Natalia Shilo, please see https://khpg.org/en/1608815596

7 More about the case of Natalia Vlasova, who was sentenced to 18 years of prison, and the abuses she has been subjected to, see: https://khpg.org/en/1608814261

T4P (Tribunal for Putin) Database of Suspected War Crimes: Statistical information

The information contained in the database makes no claim to be complete and final. Statistical data derived from category "Type of Incident", September 30, 2026. Source: https://t4pua.org/en/stats

Disappearances, total:	**3086**
Kharkiv Region	1869
Donetsk Region	467
Zaporizhzhia Region	336
Kyiv Region	127
Kherson Region	95
Luhansk Region	44
Mykolaiv Region	32
Chernihiv Region	29
Sumy Region	27
Dnipropetrovsk Region	8
Odesa Region	2
Crimea	1

Unlawful detention, total:	**1312**
Kharkiv Region	274
Kherson Region	212
Donetsk Region	201
Kyiv Region	190
Zaporizhzhia Region	188
Chernihiv Region	101
Luhansk Region	87
Mykolaiv Region	32
Sumy Region	12
Odesa Region	6
Zhytomyr Region	3
Crimea	1