



Russian Occupation Update, April 7, 2025

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ISW is introducing a new product line tracking activities in Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine. The occupation updates will examine Russian efforts to consolidate administrative control of annexed areas and forcibly integrate Ukrainian citizens into Russian sociocultural, economic, military, and governance systems. This product line is intended to replace the section of the Daily Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment covering activities in Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine.

Read ISW's assessment of how Russian activities in occupied areas of Ukraine are part of a coerced Russification and ethnic cleansing campaign, click [here](#).

Key takeaways:

- **The Kremlin is using the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) to consolidate social control over occupied areas of Ukraine and destroy any semblance of religious freedom.**
- **Russian officials discussed plans for the continued forced absorption of occupied Ukraine into the Russian economy during the “Integration-2025” forum.**
- **Russian federal censor Roskomnadzor issued an order on March 31 that will likely contribute to further crackdowns against pro-Ukrainian sentiment and dissent in occupied Ukraine.**
- **Russia continues to weaponize the school system in occupied Ukraine to Russify and militarize Ukrainian children and eradicate Ukrainian identity.**

The Kremlin is using the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) to consolidate social control over occupied areas of Ukraine and destroy any semblance of religious freedom. Russian opposition outlet *Novaya Gazeta Evropa* published a report on April 3 detailing how the Kremlin-controlled ROC is targeting religious communities, particularly those affiliated with the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), thereby serving as a tool of the Russian occupation administration throughout occupied Ukraine.[1] *Novaya Gazeta Evropa* found that Russian shelling and airstrikes, as well as bans and other repressive measures, decreased the total number of religious communities in occupied Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhia, and Kherson oblasts from 1,957 before the

full-scale invasion to 902 currently operating. This figure does not include data on religious communities in occupied Crimea, which have faced Russian religious oppression for over a decade.[2] *Novaya Gazeta Evropa* noted that Ukrainian Christians, especially members of the OCU, face particularly intense oppression at the hands of the ROC. The investigation found that over 51 percent of churches destroyed since 2022 have been OCU churches, likely because the ROC sees the OCU as its biggest “competitor.” The OCU has been entirely independent from the ROC Moscow-Patriarchate since 2019.[3] The ROC frequently seizes OCU churches that remained undamaged and appropriates them for ROC services or to cater to the needs of occupying Russian military personnel. Russian forces have also kidnapped, tortured, deported, and even killed OCU priests in a campaign of “systemic repression” against OCU clergy.[4] *Novaya Gazeta Evropa* found that as a result of the ROC’s repressive policies, OCU functions in occupied Ukraine have “been completely stopped.” *Novaya Gazeta Evropa* also found that Russia has essentially “eliminated” the presence of non-Orthodox religious communities in occupied Ukraine, including those associated with Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism, with Catholic and Protestant communities facing types and levels of oppression similar to those the OCU faces. ISW has reported at length on Russian efforts to persecute religious minorities, particularly Christian communities, in occupied Ukraine as part of the Kremlin’s wider occupation campaign.[5]

Click here to read ISW’s 2023 report on Russia’s religious repressions throughout occupied Ukraine.

Russian officials discussed plans for the continued forced absorption of occupied Ukraine into the Russian economy during the “Integration-2025” forum. “Integration-2025” took place in Russia’s Rostov-on-Don, Rostov Oblast, from April 4 to 5 and focused on “prospects for the development of the historical regions of Russia.”[6] Russian officials frequently invoke the concept of “historical regions” of Russia to further their illegitimate and illegal claims to occupied Ukraine. The forum placed particular emphasis on Russian investment into industrial enterprises in occupied Ukraine, Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) Head Denis Pushilin, for example, claimed that the Russian government plans to invest eight billion rubles (\$93 million) into the restoration and modernization of metallurgical enterprises in occupied Donetsk Oblast alone.[7] The Russian Ministry of Construction, Housing, and Communal Services reported during the forum that 29 Russian state companies and 82 Russian federal subjects (regions) are providing financial assistance to development projects in occupied Ukraine.[8] Russian investment in economically productive industries in occupied Ukraine allows Russia to take ownership of Ukraine’s industrial assets, which forcibly integrates these assets into the Russian economy while robbing Ukraine of the potential to benefit from them in the long term. ISW has previously reported on Russian efforts to use infrastructure projects and investment into industry in occupied Ukraine in order to create multigenerational economic dependencies on the Russian government.[9] This issue is particularly salient as the Russian economy continues to struggle as the costs of the war in Ukraine mount.[10] Russia will continue to use the economic potential of occupied Ukraine as an offset for its domestic economic struggles.

Russian federal censor Roskomnadzor issued an order on March 31 that will likely contribute to further crackdowns against pro-Ukrainian sentiment

and dissent in occupied Ukraine.[11] The Roskomnadzor order, which has not yet entered into force as of April 7, will require all telecommunications operators to continuously collect and send information about users' internet activity to Russian federal control bodies in all Russian regions, including those which Russia has illegally occupied.[12] The collected information includes users' IP addresses, geolocation data, device identifiers, and software information.[13] Representation of the Ukrainian President in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea warned that the Roskomnadzor order will lead to a total loss of anonymity amongst internet users, expand censorship, and increase pressure on pro-Ukrainian residents of occupied territories.[14] Roskomnadzor has made other efforts to consolidate control over the media and information space in occupied Ukraine, for example registering local media outlets in summer 2023.[15]

Russia continues to weaponize the school system in occupied Ukraine to Russify and militarize Ukrainian children and eradicate Ukrainian identity.

A recent report by the Crimean “Almenda” Center of Civil Education found that at least 590,900 children are studying in schools in occupied Ukraine that are operating according to “Russian standards.”[16] The report notably found that Russian occupation authorities are using the school system to militarize Ukrainian children via pro-Russian military-patriotic education programs and exposure to Russian military training, consistent with ISW’s long-standing assessment of Russia’s use of school curricula to indoctrinate Ukrainian children.[17] “Almenda” also found that the occupation regime in Crimea formed the “Young Sevastopolians” movement in 2024, which aims to “instill moral and patriotic values” in pre-school to kindergarten-aged children. ISW reported on April 3 on the formation of the “Gryphon” club in occupied Simferopol, Crimea, which seeks to teach children as young as seven basic military intelligence skills and competencies.[18] The continued indoctrination of very young children in occupied Ukraine suggests that Russia seeks to eventually prepare these children for service in the Russian military — a clear violation of international law.

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[9] <https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/24-210-01%20ISW%20Occupation%20playbook.pdf>

[10] <https://understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russias-weakness-offers-leverage>

[11] <https://ccl.org dot ua/news/nynishnya-rf-ye-imanentnym-vorogom-svobody-sovisti-u-kyievi-vidbulasya-preskonferenciya-shhodo-zlochyniv-okupantiv-proty-religijnyh-gromad-ta-svyashhennosluzhyteliv/>;

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