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Key takeaways:

- **Russia is using occupied Ukraine to support its domestic drone development and production industry.**
- **Russia is also integrating Ukrainian children into its wider drone operator training and drone production ecosystem.**
- **Russian occupation administrators are implementing projects to increase the birth rate in occupied Ukraine and further Russia's illegitimate claims to the territories it illegally occupies.**
- **Russia is deporting Ukrainian prisoners from prisons in occupied Ukraine to penal colonies throughout the Russian Federation.**

Russia is using occupied Ukraine to support its domestic drone development and production industry. The Ukrainian Eastern Human Rights Group (EHRG) and Institute for Strategic Research and Security (ISRS) released a report on April 3 detailing how Russia is using land, infrastructure, and people in occupied Ukraine to expand drone development, production, and operator training.[1] EHRG and ISRS reported that Russian state-owned defense conglomerate Rostec has seized the Luhansk Aircraft Repair Plant (occupied Luhansk City, Luhansk Oblast) and the Snizhne Machine-Building Plant (occupied Snizhne, Donetsk Oblast) and is producing drones at both enterprises.[2] The report noted that Russia is also using the Donbas Development Corporation, Vladimir Zhoga Republican Center for Unmanned Systems, LLC 3D-Techno, LLC NPO Front, LLC NPO Utesov, GC Almaz, and IP Grigoriadiadis (all in occupied Donetsk City) and the JSC Pervomaiske Mechanical Plant (occupied Pervomaiske, Luhansk Oblast) to produce components and assemble drone models for the Russian army. Russia is also using occupied Ukrainian land to build new drone training grounds, start technological preparatory courses in schools and colleges to train drone operators, and create new research and development centers. The Kremlin has routinely signaled its commitment to increasing Russian drone production capabilities and improving drone operations on the battlefield in Ukraine and appears to have plans to integrate Ukrainian infrastructure and production capabilities into its wider drone production campaign.[3]

Russia is also integrating Ukrainian children into its wider drone operator training and drone production ecosystem. The EHRG and ISRS report emphasized that Russia has instituted drone training curricula for over 10,000 teenagers in secondary schools throughout occupied Ukraine.[4] Primary school-aged children are also subjected to drone training in schools and

extracurricular programs.[5] Russia incentivizes children’s participation in drone training in part by “gamifying” the process and holding drone racing competitions throughout occupied Ukraine. The Kherson Oblast occupation Sports Ministry, for example, hosted its first drone racing tournament for children aged eight to 14 in occupied Skadovsk in May 2024.[6] The Ukrainian Resistance Center also previously reported that Russian officials began a “special engineering class” in occupied Mariupol’s School 47 to teach students how to design and manufacture drones for the Russian army.[7] Russian efforts to integrate Ukrainian children into drone production and operator training programs serve three main purposes: first to militarize Ukrainian children by exposing them to hyper-militarized ideals from a young age; second, to prepare Ukrainian children for potential future service in the Russian armed forces; and third, to support Russia’s domestic defense industrial base (DIB) output.

Russian occupation administrators are implementing projects to increase the birth rate in occupied Ukraine in order to stimulate population growth and further Russia’s illegitimate claims to the territories it illegally occupies. Zaporizhia Oblast occupation head Yevgeny Balitsky reported on April 11 that he issued draft orders for a regional program to increase the birth rate in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast.[8] The specifics of the proposed regional program are unclear, but Balitsky’s proposal is consistent with other projects that Russian occupation officials have undertaken to encourage population growth in occupied areas.[9] Kherson Oblast occupation head Vladimir Saldo stated on April 11 that Russia plans to reopen all kindergartens in occupied Kherson Oblast by 2030 and build 55 new preschools for 6,700 children by 2044.[10] Saldo noted that the planned new preschools “are designed for [to accommodate] population growth.”

Russia has been reckoning with a demographic crisis at home for several decades, caused by declining birthrates, relatively lower life expectancies, high emigration levels, and an aging population.[11] The war in Ukraine has exacerbated many of these factors, but Russia continues efforts to stimulate population growth to overcome pre-existing and new demographic challenges.[12] ISW previously assessed that Russia’s occupation of Ukraine is intended in part to offset Russia’s demographic decline, as Russia sees Ukrainian citizens as a demographic asset that can be forcibly integrated into the Russian Federation.[13] Russian occupation authorities have historically used methods such as the provision of social services like maternity capital (one-time payments made to women for the birth or adoption of a child beyond their first) to encourage higher birth rates in occupied Ukraine.[14] Higher birthrates in occupied areas mean that Russian occupation authorities will grant more Russian citizenships and raise a generation of children under Russian rule—ultimately creating the false impression that Russia has a right to these illegally occupied areas due to the prevalence of Russian citizens living there.

Russia is deporting Ukrainian prisoners from prisons in occupied Ukraine to penal colonies throughout the Russian Federation. Russian independent investigative outlet *Mozhem Obyasnit* (We Can Explain) published a story on April 11 examining how Russia has deported over 1,800 prisoners from Ukraine to penal colonies in Russia since the start of the full-scale invasion.[15] *Mozhem Obyasnit* found that Russian forces deported the prisoners from Kherson and Mykolaiv oblasts in the early days of the invasion and interned them in at least 11 penal colonies in Krasnodar Krai, Rostov Oblast, the Mordovia Republic, and occupied Crimea. Deported prisoners reported that Russian guards beat and tortured them for being Ukrainian. Russian guards also reportedly attempt to bribe Ukrainian prisoners with shorter and more lenient sentences if they take Russian passports —

suggesting that Russian efforts to deport Ukrainian prisoners are part of Russia's larger passportization campaign. Ukrainian human rights groups have previously raised concerns about Russia's treatment of deported prisoners and noted that Russia has purposefully made it very difficult for Ukraine to repatriate these individuals.[16] All of the prisoners that Russia has deported are Ukrainian citizens whom Ukrainian courts convicted of crimes under Ukrainian criminal law, so Russia has no legal basis on which to deport or re-convict these individuals, much less to forcibly change their citizenship.[17]

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[1] <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1WvNKzUm8WJIyRb2HgdMojLjzNL2E2il/view;http://www.vpg.net.ua/fullread/737>

[2] <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1WvNKzUm8WJIyRb2HgdMojLjzNL2E2il/view>

[3] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-september-19-2024>

[4] <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1WvNKzUm8WJIyRb2HgdMojLjzNL2E2il/view>

[5] <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1WvNKzUm8WJIyRb2HgdMojLjzNL2E2il/view>

[6] <https://tass dot ru/sport/20796667>

[7] <https://www.armyfm dot com.ua/u-shkolakh-tymchasovo-okupovanoho-mariupolia-budut-vyhotovliaty-bpla-dlia-viiny/>

[8] <https://t.me/BalitskyEV/5096>

[9] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-december-26-2023>; <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-%20offensive-campaign-assessment-january-11-2023>; <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-november-8-2023>; <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-august-7-2023>

[10] https://t.me/SALDO_VGA/6757

[11][11] <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/russias-demographic-crisis>; <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/russia-tomorrow/a-russia-without-russians-putins-disastrous-demographics/>

[12] <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/russia-tomorrow/a-russia-without-russians-putins-disastrous-demographics/>; <https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/24-210-01%20ISW%20Occupation%20playbook.pdf>

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

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

[15] <https://t.me/mozhemobyasnit/20368>; <https://pointmedia.io/story/67f8d903e25aea416748a773> dot

[16] [https://zmina.ua/en/event-en/90-without-documents-report-on-prisoners-deported-to-russia-presented-in-kyiv/#:~:text=In%20detention%20within%20the%20territory,without%20access%20to%20medical%20care.](https://zmina.ua/en/event-en/90-without-documents-report-on-prisoners-deported-to-russia-presented-in-kyiv/#:~:text=In%20detention%20within%20the%20territory,without%20access%20to%20medical%20care.;); https://zmina.ua/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2025/02/zvit_web.pdf; <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/ukrainian-prisoners-stuck-in-russia-forced-deportation-kherson-stolen-liberation/>

[17] <https://pointmedia.io/story/67f8d903e25aea416748a773>; <https://zmina.ua/en/event-en/90-without-documents-report-on-prisoners-deported-to-russia-presented-in-kyiv/#:~:text=In%20detention%20within%20the%20territory,without%20access%20to%20medical%20care.>