

# DOCUMENTING HATE MOTIVE IN RUSSIA'S WAR AGAINST UKRAINE

## Policy Brief



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## Introduction

The ongoing war waged by Russia against Ukraine has revealed the devastating impact of hate-driven violence, not only as a consequence of military aggression but as a core tactic used by the Russian Federation to incite division and justify atrocities. Through systematic propaganda and state-sponsored narratives, the Russian government has employed hate speech and dehumanizing rhetoric to target Ukrainians, ethnic minorities, religious groups, and marginalized communities, creating an environment where violence against these groups is normalized, encouraged and justified. These tactics have contributed to a series of international crimes that extend beyond traditional battlefield atrocities.

This policy brief aims to highlight the key findings from ongoing civil society organizations' documentation efforts, focusing on the role of hate in exacerbating violence during the conflict, and provides recommendations for international actors, including OSCE member states, CSOs, and judicial bodies, to address hate-motivated crimes and ensure accountability. By examining the systematic use of propaganda, the gaps in legal frameworks, and the need for enhanced prosecution mechanisms, this brief seeks to contribute to a [broader conversation](#) on the importance of addressing hate crimes in conflict settings.

## Background

The ongoing war against Ukraine, initiated by the Russian Federation, has not only been marked by large-scale military aggression but also by a deliberate campaign of hate-motivated crimes that target various marginalized groups. These include ethnic Ukrainians, Crimean Tatars, religious minorities, LGBTQ+ communities, and others. The patterns of hate-fueled violence are intertwined with Russia's systematic use of propaganda, which has been instrumental in inciting and legitimizing these atrocities. The relationship between propaganda, hate speech, and war crimes in the context of the Ukraine conflict is a critical issue that must be addressed in both the documentation and prosecution of international crimes, at the national and international level.

Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the escalation of military actions in eastern Ukraine, the Russian government has engaged in a campaign of anti-Ukrainian propaganda, portraying Ukrainians and other targeted groups as subhuman, traitors, or threats to national security. This narrative has been reinforced by Russian state-controlled media, which has consistently framed the Ukrainian government as a fascist regime that must be overthrown, and Ukrainian citizens as supporters of this so-called regime. Russian authorities have further dehumanized and vilified ethnic minorities, religious groups, and sexual minorities, labelling them as enemies of the state.

This environment has fostered the commission of hate-motivated crimes, including torture, extrajudicial killings, unlawful detentions, and other forms of violence. For instance, reports have documented the persecution of Crimean Tatars, who have been subjected to arrests, disappearances, and violence in the occupied territories due to their ethnic and religious identity. Similarly, LGBTQ+ individuals have faced violence and discrimination at the hands of Russian military forces and proxy groups, who view them as symbols of Western decadence and moral decay. Other minority groups, such as the Roma and non-Slavic ethnicities, have

Traditional war crime documentation focuses on the act itself—such as unlawful killing, torture, sexual violence, or destruction of property—without sufficiently considering the identity of the victims and the bias that may have driven the violence. As a result, these hate-motivated crimes are often treated as generic violations of international law, without acknowledging the underlying bias that exacerbates the severity of the crime and its societal impact.

To address these gaps, it is crucial to develop a robust system for documenting hate motives in war crimes and other international violations. This requires not only a procedural shift in how crimes are investigated but also legal reforms to ensure that crimes motivated by hatred are treated as aggravating factors in both national and international courts. Incorporating hate motives into the documentation of war crimes will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the patterns of violence and ensure that the perpetrators are held accountable for the full scope of their actions.

The role of Russian propaganda and hate speech in this context cannot be overstated. Russian media outlets, many of which are directly controlled or influenced by the state, have consistently [spread narratives that incite violence and intolerance to justify war crimes](#) against Ukrainians and other minorities, framing the violence as a necessary measure to protect the Russian state from perceived internal and external threats.

Ukraine's international partners and organizations like the OSCE and its member states, must prioritize the documentation and prosecution of hate-motivated crimes as part of their broader efforts to address the war in Ukraine. This requires a coordinated approach that brings together Ukrainian CSOs, human rights groups, and various international stakeholders to ensure that hate motives are systematically recorded and integrated into the all legal processes. Moreover, there must be an effort to combat Russian propaganda and hate speech, both in Ukraine and globally, to prevent

also been disproportionately targeted in areas of Russian control or influence.

further incitement of violence and to promote accountability for those who spread intolerance.

The legal frameworks currently used to document and prosecute these crimes, both within Ukraine and internationally, have often failed to fully capture the hate motives behind the atrocities.

## Key Findings

- Patterns of hate-motivated crimes:** The war against Ukraine has been accompanied by hate-motivated crimes in the context of armed conflict, particularly targeting Ukrainians, ethnic minorities, religious groups, and LGBTQ+ individuals. These crimes have been deeply intertwined with Russia's broader strategy of dehumanizing and vilifying certain groups through state-controlled propaganda. Documented incidents include extrajudicial killings, unlawful detentions, torture, forced disappearances, and religious persecution, all targeting individuals based on their identity.
- The role of Russian propaganda:** Russian state-controlled media has played a pivotal role in inciting hate and justifying violence. Propaganda narratives dehumanize Ukrainians, Crimean Tatars, and other minority groups, framing them as existential threats to Russian society. This hate-driven narrative has been systematically used to legitimize crimes against these groups and has contributed to creating an environment where violence against them is normalized.
- Gaps in international crime documentation:** Traditional frameworks for documenting international crimes often fail to adequately capture the hate motives behind many of the atrocities committed during the conflict. Many war crimes are documented based on the acts themselves (e.g., unlawful killings, destruction of property, etc.), without accounting for the identity of the victims or the bias driving these crimes. This results in a lack of recognition of the full scope and impact of hate-motivated violence.
- Lack of accountability for hate speech:** Despite the instrumental role that hate speech plays in inciting violence, there has been insufficient attention to prosecuting the individuals and entities responsible for spreading propaganda. Russian media outlets, political figures, and military personnel who perpetuate hate speech remain largely unaccountable, contributing to a climate of impunity and continued incitement of violence.
- Inadequate legal mechanisms for addressing hate motives:** Existing legal frameworks at both the national and international levels are inadequate for addressing hate-motivated crimes as aggravating factors. The current documentation and prosecution mechanisms focus on general war crimes, often neglecting the specific hate motives that exacerbate the severity and social impact of these crimes. This legal gap hinders the comprehensive prosecution of perpetrators and denies justice to victims targeted based on their identity.

## Recommendations

- Enhance documentation of hate motives in international crimes:** International organizations, civil society groups, and national authorities should collaborate to develop comprehensive methodologies

for documenting hate motives in war crimes and other international violations. National and international judicial bodies should work to recognize hate motives as aggravating factors in war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide.

2. **Promote international collaboration on hate crime documentation:** The prosecution of hate-motivated crimes requires cross-border cooperation. International human rights bodies, civil society, and national governments should collaborate on sharing evidence, best practices, and methodologies for documenting hate motives. OSCE, the United Nations, and other relevant bodies should establish joint mechanisms to enhance the exchange of information and foster collaboration in prosecuting individuals responsible for these crimes, ensuring accountability for both perpetrators on the ground and those in positions of authority.
3. **Establish clear legal standards for hate-motivated crimes:** This should involve legislative reforms to include bias-based crimes within the definitions of war crimes and related offences. Prosecutors and judges must be trained on the significance of these motives and how to incorporate them into legal proceedings.
4. **Hold perpetrators of hate speech accountable:** Stronger measures are needed to hold individuals, including media figures and political leaders, accountable for spreading hate speech that incites violence and war crimes. International mechanisms should investigate and prosecute individuals who use their platforms to incite intolerance and hatred, particularly in relation to the ongoing war in Ukraine. The OSCE and UN should develop policies that target hate speech in the context of armed conflict, with a focus on prevention, monitoring, and accountability.
5. **Combat Russian propaganda with strategic communication:** A coordinated global response is required to counter Russian propaganda that fuels hate and violence. The OSCE, along with other international bodies, should invest in strategic communication efforts that provide factual, counter-narratives to Russian disinformation. These campaigns should highlight the human impact of Russian propaganda, exposing its role in enabling hate-motivated crimes and fostering a culture of intolerance.
6. **Support Ukrainian civil society:** Ukrainian civil society organizations play a critical role in documenting hate-motivated crimes, providing legal aid to victims, and advocating for justice. The international community should invest in supporting these organizations to ensure they have the resources to effectively document crimes, particularly those with hate motives. This includes supporting collaborative initiatives with international human rights organizations to share expertise on documenting and prosecuting hate-motivated crimes.
7. **Integrate hate motives into post-conflict justice frameworks:** The reconstruction of Ukraine and its post-conflict justice framework must incorporate accountability for hate-motivated crimes. Peace-building and transitional justice efforts should focus not only on addressing the physical and material damage caused by the war but also on addressing the consequences of bias-driven violence. This can include establishing truth and reconciliation commissions that focus on the role of hate motives during the war, ensuring that justice is comprehensive and inclusive.

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