

Tipsheet: Investigating war crimes in Ukraine

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In Ukraine, investigative journalists who previously investigated abuse of power and high-level corruption are now having to learn how to investigate war crimes in their own country. This requires learning new approaches, methods, other sources of information, and experimentation. My team and I have already conducted a series of investigations into crimes in the newly occupied or de-occupied territories of Ukraine.

Izium forest: In one of them, we talked to volunteers collecting bodies from the city and burying them in the Izium forest, to try investigation who was involved in the massacres, torture, and executions. We identified several of the Russian military involved in the killings, thanks to exclusive audio intercepts of conversations between soldiers discussing the killing of civilians in Kharkiv region.

We also managed to identify by name those soldiers who tried to recruit local people, and searched for victims for the torture chambers in Balakliya, as well as several FSB officers who supervised them.

Some tips :

- **Be on the ground, immediately after de-occupation:** Since there is no access to the occupied territories (this does not mean that we cannot investigate what is happening there - we have already done so, but this is the topic of another speech), the best way to reconstruct events is to report in the field immediately, while evidence might still lie on the ground.
- **Orientate yourself, structure and calm down.** After de-occupation, a lot of information can flow all at once. A journalist can get confused and grab for everything at once. Instead, identify which information is revealed, that can become the subject of a new investigation.

* **Collecting witness testimonies.**

- First, be a human being instead of a professional journalist. Avoid pressuring on a person who has experienced trauma and traumatizing them again. Pause, be empathetic, and navigate the situation.
- Do not automatically trust people's stories; verify them. For example, cross-check with other witnesses, or, for example, as happened with those who buried bodies in the Iziium forest, who secretly took photos of each corpse.
- Consider leaving your contact details with the locals. Sometimes they will tell you something that will become your next topic.

- **Structure:** Structure all your findings in one fact sheet on different topics. This will help you find the focus of the investigation from what you've documented.
It will also help you structure the findings and eventually tell the story, as well as decide what gets left out – you can always return to the unused material to use in future investigative stories.
- **Don't limit yourself:** Aside from the direct interviews, walk the streets, visit shops, aid distribution sites. Sometimes you can get an idea for an investigation or an interesting fact from very unexpected, random conversations. Leave yourself open to letting the conversation take you in different directions.
- **The position of “the other side” :** We regularly call Russian soldiers who we've identified as involved in crimes. Obtaining the position of the other side shouldn't be perceived as mandatory, but as additional fact-checking, research, and search for new clues. One Russian soldier we called to ask about whether he had shot at civilian houses in the Kharkiv region then told us about the killing of a civilian in Chernihiv.
- **Digital tools:** Smartphone data provide a wealth of information, for example camera photos and videos; combining satellite imagery with phone traffic.
- **Analog tools:** Among the tools we used in the Iziium investigation were handwritten notes from locals, and driving around the city looking for familiar places from photographs. In verifying electronic documents from the Russian military we found similar printed documents in a pile of rubbish at one location, signed by hand.

- **Look for relatives:** When it comes to identifying Russian military personnel, their relatives can always help you. We were looking for what an FSB officer looks like who had no profile on social media or databases. However, we found his face online in his relatives' social media.
- **Be lenient with yourself :** Allow for the possibility from the start that you may have to go back again and again, or look for evidence in a different way.
- **Be aware of Russian landmines in liberated territories:** Russian forces mine the territory before withdrawing. Carefully inspect the area, and avoid touching objects that have not been inspected by an explosive technician.

Case studies of our investigations:

<https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/skhemy-viyskovyy-rf-zlochyny-kharkivshchyna/32010766.html>

<https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/skhemy-spovid-kolaboranta-kharkivshchyna/32089484.html>

<https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/skhemy-spovidi-z-izyuma/32155419.html>

<https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/skhemy-sekretna-fleshka-okupantiv/32260312.html>

Further Reading/Resources

- **Stanislav Aseev "In isolation. Essays on Donbas".**

After the war starts and the occupation of Donetsk, RFE/RL journalist remained in the city and was detained by the fighters of the so-called "MGB of the DPR", the occupiers accused him of "espionage". After his release in 2019, he described in a book what is really happening in the occupation, which he saw with his own eyes.

- **The Reckoning Project : "The Scariest Days of My Life".**

Reports and testimonies about the events of the first year of the full-scale Russian invasion, written by an initiative of Ukrainian and international media, analysts and lawyers to document war crimes. An historical document of the war's first year.

