



# Global Investigative Journalism Conference

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## Tipsheet: Uncovering War Crimes in Occupied Territories of Ukraine

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**Session:** Uncovering War Crimes in Occupied Territories of Ukraine: Developing New Methods

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Investigating war crimes in occupied or newly liberated areas requires a hybrid approach: remote intelligence during occupation and fast fieldwork immediately after liberation. This tipsheet outlines practical methods our team used to document Russian military and PMC activity in the temporarily occupied regions of Ukraine.

### List of Reporting Tips:

#### 1. Use a hybrid model

During occupation work remotely using OSINT, GEOINT and SIGINT (Sentinel Hub, Planet, Maxar, Google Earth Pro, Telegram OSINT tools).

After liberation, arrive early to document physical evidence, search abandoned buildings, collect documents, and speak to locals before information disappears.

#### 2. Build layered verification

You are not on the ground at a moment, so try to strengthen all findings by combining them: satellite imagery, phone metadata, intercepted calls, device-extracted files, social media traces (VK/TG search engines, YouTube DataViewer), and eyewitness accounts.

When independent sources confirm the same detail, evidence becomes significantly more reliable.

### **3. Structure fieldwork**

Create a single, organized fact sheet (Google Sheets, Pinpoint) to manage chaotic information after liberation. Walk the area, compare landmarks with imagery, check basements and schools used as bases, and leave your contact with locals - many follow-up tips come later.

Human advice: right after the liberation, local people don't have much - you might want to bring some water or wet wipes with you.

### **4. Interview witnesses safely**

Approach survivors with empathy and avoid retraumatization.

Mandatory (!) verify each claim from locals (through imagery, metadata, or additional testimonies) - sometimes people do want attention or are having troubles after trauma and may not be sincere.

Be empathetic: consider trauma-informed journalism training to work ethically with affected communities.

### **5. Gather documents & digital forensics**

Photograph any paper traces - rosters, orders, notes - left at abandoned positions. You never know what you will need in the future.

Extract data from devices, when possible. Analyze metadata, timestamps and deleted files (ExifTool). Use simple coding or spreadsheets (Python, SQL) to spot patterns.

### **6. Exploit OSINT/GEOINT/SIGINT tools**

Map movements through satellite imagery (Sentinel Hub, Planet), analyze unit networks via social OSINT, and verify identities or structures through controlled calls to soldiers or recruiters.

Device and billing metadata often reveal routes, timelines and coordination.

### **7. Prioritize safety & evidence integrity**

Use encrypted communication (Signal), store files securely (VeraCrypt), maintain a clear chain of custody, and avoid touching objects in recently liberated areas due to mine risk.

### **8. Take care of your mental health**

Reporting on war crimes is psychologically exhausting, so plan recovery time in advance: notice when you're overwhelmed, take breaks, and assess honestly whether you can handle a specific assignment.

## **Examples/Case Studies of investigative stories**

[https://youtu.be/zBXj1dp46PQ?si=AnFFBy8P\\_9ml9lyu](https://youtu.be/zBXj1dp46PQ?si=AnFFBy8P_9ml9lyu) (English subtitles available)

<https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/chvk-redut-gru-skhemy-systema/32708817.html>

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

## **Further Reading/Resources**

Before every new case, I recommend to learn the newly established instruments here:

- <https://gijn.org/resource/>
- <https://www.bellingcat.com/category/resources/>
- <https://datajournalism.com/read/longreads/spreadsheets-for-journalism>

And don't forget about the mental health:

- <https://ijnet.org/en/resource/mental-health-tips-and-resources-journalists>