



**HAL**  
open science

# Mapping ownerless property housing appropriation as a dimension of russian occupation-in ukrainian cities

Guénola Inizan

► **To cite this version:**

Guénola Inizan. Mapping ownerless property housing appropriation as a dimension of russian occupation-in ukrainian cities. 2024. halshs-04833464

**HAL Id: halshs-04833464**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04833464v1>**

Submitted on 20 Dec 2024

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## Mapping “ownerless property”: Housing appropriation as a dimension of Russian occupation in Ukrainian cities

28. November 2024 Guénola Inizan

URL : <https://blog.leibniz-ifl.de/2024/11/mapping-ownerless-property-housing-appropriation-as-a-dimension-of-russian-occupation-in-ukrainian-cities/>

Since the beginning of the armed conflict in 2014 in the Donbas region and even more since the 2022 full scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia, several dwellings (mostly flats in multi-story buildings, but also individual houses) have been characterised as „*abandoned*“ by the occupying Russian administration which presented that as a major issue in spring 2023. For example, both the heads of the government of the “*Donetsk People’s Republic*” (DNR) and “*Luhansk People’s Republic*” (LNR) (the Russian names for the Donetsk and the Luhansk regions occupied by (pro)Russian forces) publicly stated that the lack of payment for common services in thousands of flats was an issue that needed to be addressed (1).

These declarations paved the way for the seizure of these dwellings, which was officially implemented in 2021 when the first decree on “*ownerless property*” (бесхозяйное имущество) was adopted in the “DNR”. This seizure – in general, officially called “*recognition as municipal property*” in the legal documents – was accelerated and extended with the adoption of similar laws and decrees in the four occupied regions in March 2024 (fig 1). Now, the occupying administration publishes very regularly – several times per month – updated lists of “*ownerless properties*” in the different Russian websites of occupying municipalities. These lists are accompanied by a small text referring to the decrees and laws and specifying that if the former residents of the dwellings do not come forward within thirty calendar days, with a title deed or lease contract recognised by the Russian administration, the dwellings will first be considered “*ownerless property*” and then became the property of the municipalities.

REGION	DATE	DECREE OR LAW
Donetsk oblast	28/04/2021	“On identification, registration and acceptance into municipal property ownerless immovable things and escheated property” (decree n°116 approved by the Head of the “DNR”)
	21/03/2024	“On the peculiarities of the identification, utilisation and recognition of the right of municipal property of municipalities of the Donetsk People’s Republic of Donetsk on residential premises having the signs of ownerless property, located on the territory of the Donetsk people’s republic territory of the Donetsk People’s Republic” (law RZ-N°66)
Luhansk oblast	27/03/2024	“On the peculiarities of identification, use and recognition of the right of municipal ownership of municipal entities of the Luhansk People’s Republic for residential premises having the signs of ownerless property located on the territory of the Luhansk People’s Republic” (law I n°52)
Kherson oblast	22/03/2024	“On Approval of the Procedure for Identification and Use of Residential Premises with Characteristics of Ownerless Property on the Territory of Kherson Oblast” (decree n°22)
Zaporizhzhya oblast	13/09/2023	“On approval of the temporary procedure for recognizing property located on the territory of Zaporizhzhya region as ownerless and on acquiring the right of state ownership of Zaporizhzhya region to such property” (decree n°328)
	20/05/2024	“On the peculiarities of the regulation of property rights in respect of ownerless movable objects on immovable objects located on the territory of the Zaporizhzhya – region” (law n°28)

Fig. 1: Examples of decrees and laws adopted by the Russian administration on “ownerless properties” in the occupied regions in Ukraine

The regions that have been annexed by Russia are not recognized as Russian territories by most states and, first and foremost, by Ukraine. From this perspective, this seizure, as all the practices of the Russian administration in occupied territories, is illegal. They are nonetheless justified by a seemingly legal apparatus which echoes the recurrent and misguided instrumentalization of the law by the Russian government to justify its invasion of Ukraine (Allison, 2024). Besides, this labelling of dwellings as “*ownerless property*” may regulate housing allocation *de facto*. Journalist investigations have already reported situations when Ukrainian citizens, whose identity documents are not recognised by the occupying administration, find themselves in a legal stalemate (2): they used to occupy and/or own legally these dwellings, but these property titles don’t have any value for the occupying administration that is now in the capacity to seize these dwellings.

### **Dwelling seizure as a dimension of occupation and production of “quasi-statehood”**

This practice of seemingly legal dwelling seizure shows that housing policies are an important dimension of **occupation** and **production** of “*quasi-statehood*” (Anghel-Sienerth, 2024).

In the context of war, the most striking dimension of the appropriation of housing space by the invader is probably the demolition of infrastructures and buildings, as well as its reconstruction as part of occupation. War demolition does not only mean the destruction of the materiality of the city but also of the landmarks and habits of the people who used to live within these walls (Azzouz & Gubkina, 2023). War demolition of housing has thus been interpreted as an intentional targeting of the population’s identities, which had been shaped by practices and representations of urban space, as shown by the literature on urbicide (Shaw, 2004; Coward, 2009), that Ukraine has also tragically experienced (Mezentsev & Mezenstev, 2022). Compared to the destruction of houses, legal seizure is, at the first sight, less tangible. Yet, it also contributes to the alienation of the rights of the former residents and deprives them from their capacity to live in their housing space as they used to do. This can also lead to the reallocation of the dwellings to other people and thus contributes to a general dispossession that operates at every level of the occupied territories in Ukraine (Wanner, 2024).

The legal apparatus regulating housing space also participates in the legitimisation of a “quasi-statehood”. Alongside “*seemingly democratic instruments*” and “*propaganda*”, the “*centralisation of political power and institutional consolidation*” (Anghel-Sienerth, 2024) is indeed a way to reinforce the effective administration of the territory by the occupying forces. This function of legitimisation might explain the publication of the lists of dwellings that are accessible online.

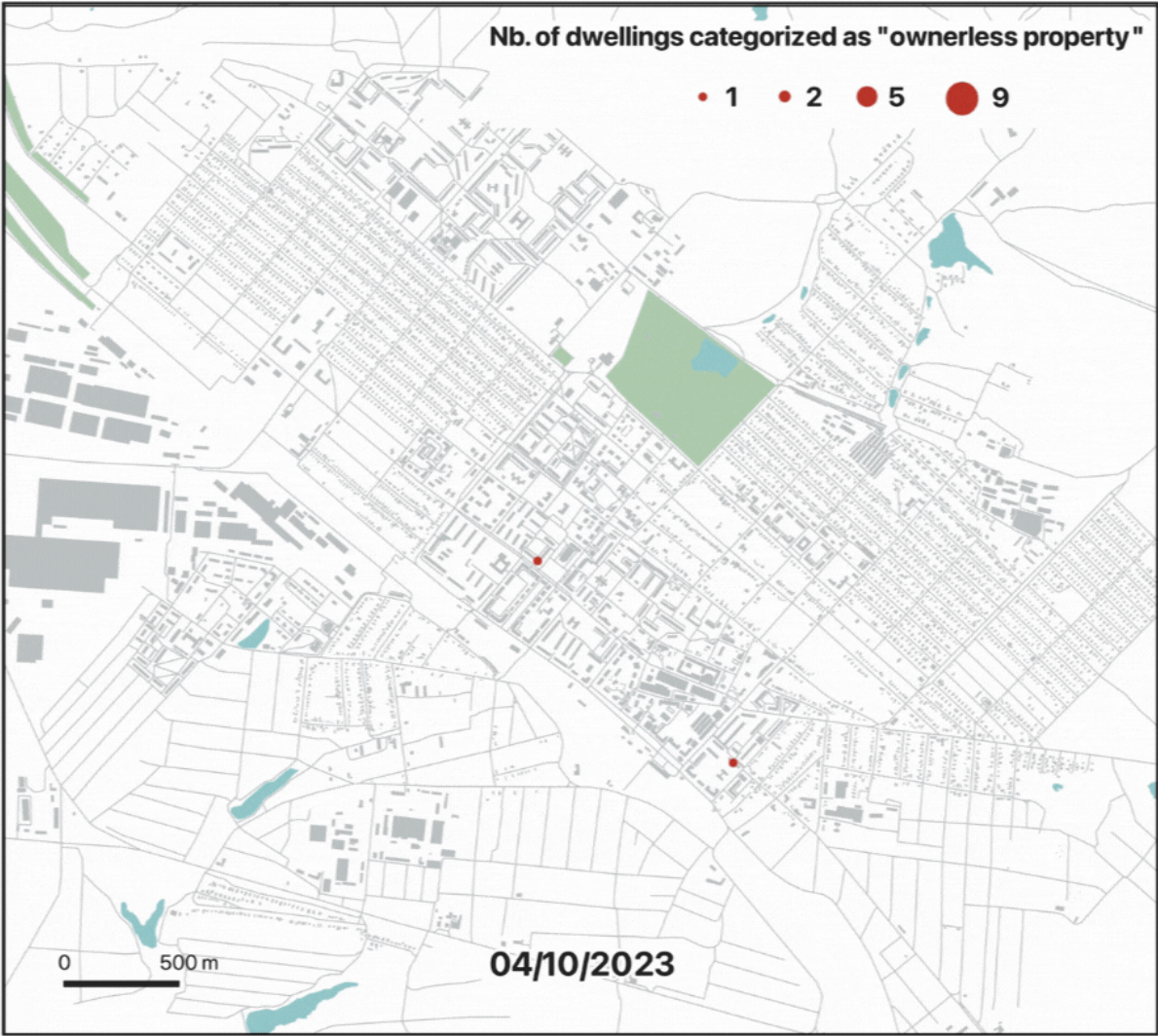
### **Mapping “ownerless property”: case study and methodology**

This publication makes it possible to identify the spatial extent of the phenomenon by mapping the dwellings that are labelled as “*ownerless property*” by the occupying administration.

An article in the Russian independent newspapers *Novaya Gazeta* was devoted to this phenomenon in May 2024 (3) thus enlightening some of its geographical patterns:

most of it is located in the cities of Mariupol (Donetsk oblast), Melitopol (Zaporizhzhia oblast) and Svatove (Luhansk oblast). The paper also shows that the seized dwellings are more concentrated in the cities-centres or along the main roads whereas by contrast, there are few on the disadvantaged areas or on the frontline.

During a fellowship at the KVK department, I have been collecting this data and mapping it in order both to **document** this practice of seizure and to analyse its **spatial patterns**. The task is to map these “ownerless properties” through scraping and geocoding the addresses available on the websites of the municipalities. A first stage of the study is focused on the sixteen municipalities of the “DNR”. This allows to map the different dwellings for each day when a list is published, as we can see on the animated map of the city of Khartsyzk (**fig. 2**), an industrial town known for its metallurgy, located in the Donbas region, 25 kilometres southeast of Donetsk and under the control of the (pro)Russian forces since 2014.



Source : website of the municipality of Khartsyzk of the “DNR”  
Realisation : G. I (2024), with QGIS

**Fig 2: Dwellings categorized as “ownerless properties” by the (pro)Russian administration in the city of Khartsyzk**

**Open questions and further investigation**



These lists are interesting to study and map *per se* as they allow us to analyse the spatial dimension of the urban policies of the occupying administration and their legal framework. Nevertheless, the legal framework does not reflect practices. In addition to the geographical and diachronic dimensions of the phenomenon that these lists make it possible to study, several questions remain open.

First, the distribution of dwellings by the Russian administration is unclear. Newspapers report that they may be distributed to war veterans, displaced people whose dwellings have been destroyed (on the condition that they hold Russian passports) or new settlers coming from Russia (4).

Second, legal resources for people facing dispossession are still to be investigated and documented. Several testimonies in the press and on social networks suggest that it will be very difficult for people of Ukrainian citizenship who have been forced to flee to recover them or obtain any compensation, if the occupation remains.

A field survey with the people directly concerned will therefore be carried out to investigate these issues.

**This blog post presents research conducted by Guénola Inizan during a research fellowship in the Kartographie und Visuelle Kommunikation (KVK) Department and is part of the VisLab of the [KonKoop project](#). The author is grateful to E. Nyamador for his help with geocoding and to Sofia Gavrilova and Jana Moser for their guidance.**

## Notes

(1), (2), (3) *Україна квартиру дала, а Росія тепер отбирає* [Ukraine gave the apartment, and now Russia is taking it away.] *Novata Gazeta* 13/05/2024. URL:

<https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2024/05/20/ukraina-kvartiru-dala-a-rossiia-teper-otbiraet>

(4): *Russia Moves to Expropriate Homes in Occupied Regions*, *Der Spiegel*, 19/11/2023. URL :

<https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/the-landgrab-in-ukraine-russia-moves-to-expropriate-homes-in-occupied-regions-a-9418d3e7-66c9-4b84-b6d4-15e7e514063f>

## Bibliography

ALLISON, Roy (2024): Russia's Case for War against Ukraine: Legal Claims, Political Rhetoric, and Instrumentality in a Fracturing International Order. *Problems of Post-Communism*, 71/3, p. 271-282.

ANGHEL-SIENERTH, Karla (2024): Quasi-statehood architecture in eastern Ukraine: The case of 'Donetsk People's Republic'. *Journal of Romanian Literary Studies*, 37, p. 986-1006.

AZZOUZ, Ammar et Evgeniia GUBKINA (2023): Narratives of Destruction. E-flux, en ligne: <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/reconstruction/556969/narratives-of-destruction>

COWARD, Martin (2009): *Urbicide: the politics of urban destruction*, Routledge advances in international relations and global politics. London; New York, Routledge.

MEZENTSEV, Kostyantyn et Oleksii MEZENTSEV (2022): War and the city: Lessons from urbicide in Ukraine. *Czasopismo Geograficzne*, 93/3, p. 495-521.

SHAW, Martin (2004): New wars of the city: "urbicide" and "genocide". Stephen Graham. In: *Cities, War, and Terrorism: Towards an Urban Geopolitics*. Wiley, p. 141-153.

WANNER, Catherine (ed.) (2024): *Dispossession: anthropological perspectives on Russia's war against Ukraine*. *Anthropology of now*, New York London, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.