



UK FRIENDS OF UKRAINE | JOHANNA BAXTER MP

Returning the Stolen Children of Ukraine



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Foreword - Johanna Baxter MP

There are moments in our work as Parliamentarians that stay with us forever. My recent visit to Ukraine was one of those moments. On the ground, amidst the ruins of war and the unbroken spirit of a people fighting for their freedom, I had the honour of meeting with the Ukrainian Parliamentary Commissioner for Human Rights, Dmytro Lubinets. What we discussed was devastating - the systematic abduction of Ukrainian children by Russian forces. A grave crime that continues unabated.

These children - stolen from their families, their schools, their homes - have become the innocent victims of a brutal campaign to erase an identity and hope. Families are being torn apart. Childhoods are being stolen. This isn't just a tragedy; it's a war crime, playing out in real time, with profound human consequences.

The Commissioner told me how a child as young as eight months old was ripped from their home by Russian forces, with Russia denying the very Ukrainian identity of this child and many thousands more.

The world has failed to stand up to these crimes. Despite clear evidence, despite international condemnation, the global response has fallen far short of what is needed.

Today, the situation is getting worse. Russia's efforts to relocate, re-educate,

militarise and effectively erase the identity of Ukrainian children have intensified. These acts are not just violations of international law - they are a calculated attempt to destroy the future of Ukraine by targeting its youngest citizens.

This report lays bare the scale of that horror. It serves as a reminder that our response cannot be passive. It must be loud, it must be consistent, and it must be urgent. We have a duty to shine a light on what is happening, to amplify the voices of those calling for justice, and to push our allies to take meaningful action.

Let me be clear: before any ceasefire is considered, before any peace agreement is signed, every stolen Ukrainian child must be safely returned home. There can be no true peace - not in Ukraine, not anywhere - until that fundamental justice is delivered. Anything less would be a betrayal of those children, their families, and the very principles we claim to defend.

It is my hope that this report not only informs, but also ignites a renewed sense of urgency. For the children of Ukraine, for their future and ours - we must not look away.

Johanna Baxter MP
Member of Parliament for Paisley and Renfrewshire South

Executive Summary

This report, co-authored by Johanna Baxter, Member of Parliament for Paisley and Renfrewshire South and UK Friends of Ukraine, is the first comprehensive report by a Parliamentarian in three years to shine a spotlight on the mass abduction and unlawful transfer of Ukrainian children, crimes against humanity that have not received the attention they demand. Despite the severity of these war crimes, the international response to this aspect of the war has been neither swift nor comprehensive enough to ensure justice, accountability and the return of all Ukraine's forcibly deported children.

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine began on 24 February 2022, official estimates indicate that at least 19,546 children have been forcibly deported by Russian forces. However, independent sources, including the Yale Humanitarian Research Lab (HRL), suggest the true figure may be closer to 35,000¹. Others place it even higher, with Ukraine's Regional Centre for Human Rights reporting in December 2024 that approximately 40,000 Ukrainian children had been deported to Russia during the summer of 2024². Behind every child deported is a child and family torn apart.

Many of these children have been separated from their families and placed in Russian controlled institutions, foster care systems, or even with Russian military families. Disturbingly, we know that some are conscripted into Yunarmiya, the Russian Youth Military and there are also

¹<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/trump-ukraine-children-russia-war-kidnap-ping-evidence-b2717730.html>

²<https://rchr.org.ua/en/publications/kateryna-rashevskya-addresses-un-security-council-on-forced-deportation-and-political-indoctrination-of-ukrainian-children-by-russia/>

reports of some receiving draft papers to conscript them into the Russian Army. This widespread and systematic abduction programme is a grave violation of international law and constitutes a war crime under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC).

The international community has condemned these actions, prompting the ICC to issue arrest warrants for Russian President Vladimir Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova, Russia's Commissioner for Children's Rights, for their direct involvement in the abductions. However, despite these legal measures, the return of Ukraine's abducted children remains an urgent and complex challenge requiring stronger diplomatic pressure, intelligence sharing and international coordination.

The United Kingdom (UK) has taken some action, imposing 22 sanctions, including measures against 19 individuals and 3 entities involved in these crimes. While these efforts are part of a broader strategy to hold Russia accountable, it is our view that further punitive and preventive measures must be pursued. This includes expanding economic sanctions and travel bans on those officials and entities involved in the abduction of Ukrainian children, legal initiatives to recover abducted children and ensuring those responsible face justice.

The abduction of Ukrainian children is not only a humanitarian problem, but also a deliberate attempt to erase Ukrainian identity and undermine the nation's future. The long-term psychological, social and cultural impacts on these children and their families are devastating. While military and diplomatic efforts remain a priority, the same urgency must be applied to securing the return of Ukraine's stolen children. The UK must strengthen its

diplomatic, legal and economic response to ensure accountability and facilitate the safe return of every abducted child.

Failure to act decisively will only embolden those responsible and allow these grave violations of international law to continue.

Timeline

2014 - 2022: Russian annexation of Crimea and areas of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts

In February and March 2014, Russian forces, without insignia, seized key infrastructure and military bases across the Crimean peninsula. Following a 'referendum', in which Russia attempted to recognise the occupied territory of Crimea as Russia, on 18th March 2014, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution calling on states not to recognise the annexation.³

Russia's annexation violated multiple agreements, including the 1994 Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances for Ukraine, whereby Ukraine gave up its nuclear weapons that were on its territory in exchange for an undertaking from Russia, the United States of America (USA) and the UK that its territorial integrity would be respected.

Following the annexation and 'referendum', Russia enacted Law No. 6-FKZ, which, under Article 4,⁴ automatically granted Russian citizenship to individuals in the occupied territories, an unlawful extension of Russian law. This automatic recognition included children in Ukraine's foster care system and those without parental care, placing them in Russia's regional database of children without guardians. As a result, families

³<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cdp-2019-0093/>

⁴https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_160618/59da020c960aea094ca62da3b868bf1d3789d92f/

from any region of Russia could adopt Ukrainian children under Russian law.⁵

In one incident in June 2014, Russian forces intercepted a bus carrying 16 Ukrainian orphans from Snezhnoye, Crimea, to the Dnipropetrovsk region. The children were taken and transferred to Russia's Rostov region.⁶

In another incident, more than 80 children from Luhansk were stopped at checkpoints and abducted. Ukraine took legal action in the European Court of Human Rights, which found that children were taken into Russia **"without medical support or the necessary paperwork."** The children were returned to Ukraine before a final decision.⁷

By 2015, Russia had significantly escalated these unlawful deportations.⁸ According to the Russian state owned news agency TASS, 500 Ukrainian children were forcibly relocated from Crimea to various regions in Russia under the pretext of receiving medical care.⁹

According to human rights organisations, it was estimated that up to 4,000 parentless minors were present in Crimea at the time of occupation.¹⁰ Some of these children were moved to the families of Russian citizens under the Train of Hope – Crimea framework, a project established to

⁵http://internet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=INT%2FCRC%2FNGO%2FRUS%2F56849&Lang=en

⁶ [Детей-сирот из Снежного Донецкой области доставили под Кривой Рог - РИА Новости. 14.06.2014](#)

⁷<https://apnews.com/article/ukrainian-children-russia-7493cb22c9086c6293c1ac7986d85ef6>

⁸<https://european-resilience.org/analytcs/how-west-tolerated-russias-kidnapping-ukrainian-children>

⁹ <https://detfond.com/deti-donbassa-2022/>

¹⁰<https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/a/b/342901.pdf>

facilitate the adoption of children in Ukraine's foster care system and those dispossessed of parental care. These children, who are Ukrainian citizens, were living in Russian-occupied territory. Ukraine's Government does not know the whereabouts of these children currently.¹¹

Furthermore, the law following the annexation made registration of births more complicated, particularly for children born in occupied territories. Under Ukrainian law, registering a birth requires a hospital certificate, which is retained when a birth certificate is issued. However, due to restrictions on freedom of movement following the occupation, new parents could only obtain a Russian birth certificate and had no access to the necessary hospital certificate. In response, the Ukrainian Government introduced a process to recognise births in Crimea using documents issued by the occupation authorities.

In August 2016, the Russian Defence Minister, Sergei Shoigu, established the All-Russian Children's and Youth Military-Patriotic Movement "Yunarmia" in the occupied territories of Ukraine, to teach military skills and basic 'patriotic' education.¹²

A 2017 review of court records estimated that only 38% of children born in territories occupied by Russian proxies—the so-called Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and so-called Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) in parts of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts—received a birth certificate issued by the Ukrainian government. In occupied Crimea, that number was fewer than 10%.

¹¹<https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Ukraine-Crimea.pdf>

¹² <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/521787>

Without birth registration in Ukraine, these children face significant challenges in obtaining the necessary documentation to prove their nationality. This could have long-term consequences, particularly affecting their ability to acquire a Ukrainian passport.¹³

2022 - Before the full-scale invasion:

July 2021: President Putin writes an article entitled "*On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*", in which he frequently claims that Russians and Ukrainians are "*one people*" and questions the legitimacy of Ukrainian borders and culture.¹⁴

After months of Russian forces gathering along Ukraine's border and within Belarus, the governors of the so-called DPR and LPR ordered the evacuation of parentless minors and children in Ukraine's foster care system.

16th February 2022: Around 200 children taken from Donetsk and Luhansk arrive in Rostov, Russia.¹⁵

18th February - 23rd February 2022: Russia deported children from Donetsk Oblast to Rostov and Kursk Oblasts, including 234 children from a boarding school in Donetsk and 626 others from the foster care system. Within 6 months, some

¹³<https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/briefing-note-birth-registration-ukraine-december-2017-enuk>

¹⁴

<http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>

¹⁵<https://liberalforum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Opportunities-for-All-Solutions-for-Liberals-to-Own-the-Social-and-Human-Rights-Agenda-Again-1.pdf>

of these children appeared in Russia's child placement database.¹⁶

Western intelligence officials warned that Russia will launch an attack on Ukraine aimed at removing the Government, degrading the Ukrainian military and weakening the ability of Ukrainian citizens to resist a subsequent invasion.¹⁷

2022 - Present: Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine

24th February 2022: Russia launches its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

9th March 2022: Russian President, Vladimir Putin meets with Maria Lvova-Belova, the Commissioner for Children's Rights under the President of the Russian Federation, to identify bureaucratic obstacles and streamline the process of placing children from Ukraine in Russia and in occupied Ukrainian territories.

At the meeting, Putin confirmed that he would work with the Russian State Duma to 'remove' these barriers. Lvova-Belova also stated that since the full-scale invasion, 1,090 orphans from Donbas Oblast have been taken from various childcare facilities.¹⁸

28th March 2022: Ukrainian intelligence suggests that Russia could be preparing to use 17 and 18 year olds, recruited from

¹⁶<https://medicine.yale.edu/news-article/russia-s-systematic-program-of-coerced-adoption-and-fostering-of-ukraines-children/>

¹⁷<https://www.understandingwar.org/background-russia-ukraine-warning-update-new-indicators-imminent-russian-attack>

¹⁸<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67949>

'Yunarmia' for combat missions in Ukraine.¹⁹

6th April 2022: Lvova-Belova reaches agreements with the Commissioners for Children's Rights of the so-called DPR and LPR to 'synchronise the activities and legislation' with Russia.²⁰

10th April 2022: Lvova-Belova signs a Protocol of Intent, with the so-called DPR and LPR to 'coordinate on the protection of orphans and children without parental care'.²¹

23rd April 2022: Lvova-Belova meets with the first group of 27 children to be placed under the temporary guardianship scheme in Moscow Oblast. The youngest child was 3 and the oldest 17.²²

26th May 2022: An open source intelligence investigation by Yale University HRL, shows that 31 children from basements in the bombed city of Mariupol in Donetsk Oblast are transported to Rostov Oblast and flown by Putin's presidential aircraft to Moscow Oblast.²³ The presidential aircraft is operated by the Special Air Squadron, part of the Directorate of the President of the Russian Federation, which is directly overseen by Putin.

30th May 2022: Putin signs an amendment to decree the simplification of citizenship for orphans, children left without parental care and incapacitated

¹⁹<https://x.com/EmineDzheppar/status/1508528452999258115>

²⁰<http://www.en.kremlin.ru/catalog/persons/673/events/68170>

²¹<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/administration/67984>

²²<http://www.en.kremlin.ru/catalog/persons/673/events/68286>

²³<https://medicine.yale.edu/news-article/russia-s-systematic-program-of-coerced-adoption-and-fostering-of-ukraines-children/>

persons in occupied territories in Luhansk and Donetsk, allowing the unlawful adoption of some children by Russian families across different regions of Russia.²⁴

12th-14th July 2022: Lvova-Belova visits the occupied territories in the Donbas Oblasts. During the trip, she sets out Russia's intention to create a 'unified republican database' of orphans and parentless minors, aiming to streamline the process for Russian families to adopt Ukrainian children. She also announced the establishment of the 'Into the Hands of Children' project²⁵ - a scheme that facilitates the deportation of children under the false auspices of humanitarian aid. On this visit, she also identifies 13 children for unlawful transfer to Moscow.

15th July 2022: Lvova-Belova confirms that she wants a 'systematic' approach to the transfer, deportation and naturalisation of children.²⁶

6th August 2022: Lvova-Belova held a meeting on 'integrating' legislation of the Russian Federation and the occupied territories in Donetsk and Luhansk on custody and guardianship. She confirms that children can receive Russian citizenship through a simplified procedure, which included allowing a dual-track to allow for Russian citizenship to be granted to children alongside the transfer of children. On that visit, Russian authorities agreed to prepare for the unlawful

deportation of children into the custody of Russian citizens from 11 regions.²⁷

14th September 2022: the European Parliament adopted a resolution on human rights violations in the context of the forced deportation of Ukrainian civilians and the forced adoption of Ukrainian children in Russia.²⁸

22nd September 2022: Russian authorities confirm children have been transferred to 13 regions across Russia including Astrakhan, Voronezh, Kursk, Moscow, Murmansk, Nizhny Novgorod, Omsk, Penza, Rostov, Ryazan, Samara and Chelyabinsk regions and Moscow.²⁹

26th December 2022: Putin issues Decree 951, setting out a formal process for Ukrainian citizens residing in Russian occupied territories to renounce their Ukrainian nationality. The decree also authorises heads of institutions to carry out this renunciation on behalf of children under the age of 14.³⁰

9th February 2023: The ICC states the deportation of civilians, including children, will be a priority investigation area.³¹

16th February 2023: Lvova-Belova reveals in a meeting with Putin that she

²⁴https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-9-2022-0388_EN.html

²⁵<http://www.en.kremlin.ru/catalog/persons/673/events/69043>

²⁶https://rg.ru/2022/07/15/mariia-lvova-belova-semi-iz-shesti-regionov-rf-vozmuzt-pod-opeku-108-detej-sirot-iz-donbassa.html?utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F

²⁷<https://medicine.yale.edu/news-article/russia-s-systematic-program-of-coerced-adoption-and-fostering-of-ukraines-children/http://www.en.kremlin.ru/catalog/persons/673/events/69138>

²⁸https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2022-0388_EN.html

²⁹<http://www.en.kremlin.ru/catalog/persons/673/events/69414>

³⁰<https://medicine.yale.edu/news-article/russia-s-systematic-program-of-coerced-adoption-and-fostering-of-ukraines-children/>

³¹https://ukrainianvictory.org/wp-content/uploads/brief_children_ICUV_en-version-1.pdf

recently adopted a 15-year old from Mariupol.³²

22nd February 2023: The United Nations (UN) Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights warns that Russia has systematically removed cultural symbols, destroyed Ukrainian language education, and attempted to overwrite Ukrainian history with a Russian narrative in occupied territories.³³

15th March 2023: The UN backed Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine released a report that Russia has perpetrated large-scale war crimes, including the forced deportation of Ukrainian children.³⁴

17th March 2023: The ICC issues an arrest warrant for the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin and Putin's Commissioner for Children's Rights, Maria Lvova-Belova, for the war crime of unlawful deportation of population (children) and that of unlawful transfer of population (children) from occupied areas of Ukraine to the Russian Federation (under articles 8(2)(a)(vii) and 8(2)(b)(viii) of the Rome Statute).³⁵

18th March 2023: The Russian Duma amended legislation to allow parents and/or guardians to renounce the Ukrainian citizenship of deported children.³⁶

³²<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/02/16/putins-childrens-envoy-reveals-she-adopted-child-from-mariupol-a80249>

³³<https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/02/targeted-destruction-ukraines-culture-must-stop-un-experts>

³⁴https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrCouncil/coiukraine/A_HRC_52_62_AUV_EN.pdf

³⁵<https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/situation-ukraine-icc-judges-issue-arrest-warrants-against-vladimir-vladimirovich-putin-and>

³⁶<https://t.me/readovkanews/54961>

29th March 2023: Lvova-Belova confirms that the so-called DPR has connected to the Federal Database of Orphaned children in Russia, meaning that families from across Russia can adopt Ukrainian children.

31st May 2023: Ukraine's Ombudsman, Dmytro Lubinets, confirms that some abducted children were transferred through Belarus, with the direct involvement of Belarusian authorities.³⁷

13th October 2023: Lvova-Belova confirms that all children who have been stolen from Ukraine's foster care system are naturalised with Russian citizenship.³⁸

1st November 2023: Lvova-Belova confirms in a meeting with Boris Gryzlov, Russia's Ambassador to Belarus, that children from occupied territories are transferred to children's camps in Belarus.³⁹

1st December 2023: The International Federation of the Red Cross suspends the Belarus Red Cross Society for refusal to dismiss its Secretary General, Dimitry Shevtsov, over his publicly admitted involvement in the deportation of Ukrainian children to Belarus.⁴⁰

4th January 2024: President Putin signs a decree expediting Russian citizenship for foreigners and stateless persons, alongside allowing a citizenship application for a child to be submitted by their legal guardian or the head of a

³⁷<https://kyivindependent.com/ombudsman-ukrainian-pows-and-abducted-children-transferred-through-belarus/>

³⁸<https://deti.gov.ru/uploads/magic/ru-RU/Document-0-259-src-1697376467.3807.pdf>

³⁹<http://www.en.kremlin.ru/catalog/persons/673/events/72716>

⁴⁰<https://www.ifrc.org/article/statement-suspension-belarus-red-cross-member-ifrc>

Russian organisation responsible for the child. ⁴¹

25th January 2024: The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) issues Resolution 2529 supporting the ICC arrest warrants and calls for parties to the Council of Europe to acknowledge the deportations and transfers of children by Russia as genocide. ⁴²

8th February 2024: The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child urges Russia to end forcible transfer of Ukrainian Children. ⁴³

30th September 2024: Lithuania submits a referral against Belarus and senior Belarusian officials alleging crimes against humanity, including deportation, persecution and other inhumane acts to the ICC, regarding amongst other matters, the deportation of Ukrainian children to Belarus. ^{44 45}

17th November 2024: The UK sanctions 10 Russian officials and state linked youth organisations for the indoctrination of Ukrainian children into Russia's military apparatus. ⁴⁶

20th March 2025: President Putin signed a decree requiring Ukrainian citizens residing in Russia and Russian-occupied

territories of Ukraine to either leave by 10 September 2025 or legalise their residency status. This measure has led to reports of Ukrainian parents being pressured into accepting Russian citizenship to access essential services. As a result, Ukrainian children are being naturalised as Russian citizens, which facilitates changes to their identities and makes it significantly more difficult for Ukrainian authorities to trace and recover abducted minors. ⁴⁷

23rd March 2025: Russia's Military Intelligence Veterans opened the 'Gryphon' military patriotic club in occupied Simferopol, which will teach children between the ages of seven and 17 "basic military skills" and "foster patriotism and respect for military service". ⁴⁸

3rd April 2025: A report reveals that Russia is using children from occupied parts of Ukraine to support its domestic drone development and production industry. ⁴⁹

9th April 2025: A report reveals that as many as 590,000 Ukrainian children are currently enrolled in schools within Russian-occupied territories, where education is being delivered under so-called 'Russian standards'. The findings highlight a trend of occupation authorities actively using the school system to indoctrinate and militarise children, pushing pro-Russian, military-patriotic agendas and even

⁴¹<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-67901567>

⁴²https://ukrainianvictory.org/wp-content/uploads/brief_children_ICUV_en-version-1.pdf

⁴³<https://www.ictj.org/latest-news/un-committee-urges-russia-end-%E2%80%9Cforcible-transfer%E2%80%9D-ukrainian-children>

⁴⁴ <https://www.icc-cpi.int/lithuania-belarus>

⁴⁵<https://www.justiceinfo.net/en/136628-sudde-nly-belarus-wakes-up-with-two-complaints-before-the-icc.html>

⁴⁶https://www.reuters.com/world/uk-sanctions-russian-officials-indoctrination-ukrainian-children-2024-11-19/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

⁴⁷<https://kyivindependent.com/putin-issued-a-decree-now-millions-of-ukrainians-face-an-impossible-decision/>

⁴⁸<https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Occupation%20Update%20C%20April%203%2C%202025%20PDF.pdf>

⁴⁹<https://www.understandingwar.org/background/russian-occupation-update-april-14-2025>

exposing them to elements of Russian military training. ⁵⁰

9th April 2025: The Conference of International NGOS (CINGO) adopts a resolution and recommendation to the Council of Europe and its Member states, including the UK, condemning Russia's war of aggression and demanding the return of all Ukrainian children deported to Russia. ⁵¹

16th April 2025: UK Foreign Secretary, David Lammy MP, says ***“Children should never be pawns of war. In 2024 I spoke to Ukrainian children who had been forcibly deported by Russia, but were later returned to their families. There can be no lasting or just peace unless Russia returns the Ukrainian children it has abducted.”*** ⁵²

27th April 2025: The Russian First Deputy Education Minister Alexander Bugayev stated that about 53,000 children from occupied Ukraine will “spend their summer holidays” in children’s camps throughout occupied Ukraine and the Russian Federation. ⁵³

8th May 2025: The European Parliament adopts a resolution condemning the “genocidal strategy” carried out by Russia, with the support of Belarus, designed to erase Ukrainian identity. ⁵⁴

⁵⁰<https://understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-occupation-update-april-8-2025>

⁵¹<https://rm.coe.int/recommendation-russias-war-of-aggression-final-draft-bil-eng-fr/1680b523fb>

⁵²<https://x.com/DavidLammy/status/1912481464316313983>

⁵³<https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-occupation-update-april-28-2025>

⁵⁴<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20250502IPR28224/human-rights-breaches-in-tanzania-russia-and-tibet>

9th May 2025: The UK Foreign Secretary calls for a Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine from March 2022 supported by 37 states to deliver a united position on justice and accountability. ⁵⁵

⁵⁵<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-and-international-partners-confirm-support-for-special-tribunal-on-crime-of-aggression-as-foreign-secretary-visits-lviv>

Mass deportation of Ukrainian children

Data on children from 24th February 2022 - 23rd April 2025

As of 19th April 2025, at least 619 children have been killed and 1,900 children have been wounded or injured;⁵⁶

- At least 19,546 children have been unlawfully deported and forcibly displaced to Russia as of 11 April 2024;⁵⁷
- 1,274 children have been returned from deportation, forced transfers, or from the temporarily occupied territories;⁵⁸
- At least 19 children have been sexually abused;⁵⁹
- 43 're-education' camps have been identified across eight time zones, stretching from the Crimean Peninsula to Magadan Oblast in Russia.⁶⁰

Estimated number of children unlawfully deported or forcibly transferred from Ukraine to Russia

The estimated number of Ukrainian children forcibly transferred or deported by Russia varies considerably across different sources. Ukraine has verified the deportation of 19,546 children,⁶¹ while the Yale HRL estimates the number to be closer to 35,000.⁶²

⁵⁶ <http://childrenofwar.gov.ua/en>

⁵⁷ https://ukrainianvictory.org/wp-content/uploads/brief_children_ICUV_en-version-1.pdf

⁵⁸ <https://www.bringkidsback.org.ua/>

⁵⁹ <http://childrenofwar.gov.ua/en>

⁶⁰ <https://openpress.digital.conncoll.edu/beingukraine/chapter/chapter-11/>

⁶¹ <http://childrenofwar.gov.ua/en>

⁶² <https://medicine.yale.edu/news-article/russia-s-systematic-program-of-coerced-adoption-and-fostering-of-ukraines-children/>

Russia's Children's Commissioner, Maria Lvova-Belova, claims that Russia has 'accepted' up to 700,000 Ukrainian children between February 2022 and July 2023.⁶³ Meanwhile, Ukraine's Commissioner for Children's Rights, Daria Gerasymchuk, suggests the figure could be between 200,000 and 300,000.⁶⁴

This significant discrepancy makes it difficult to determine the true scale of the crime and formulate a concrete plan to ensure the return of every child. However, the available data confirms that at least tens of thousands and possibly hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian children remain missing and as the timeline (see pages 7-13) highlights there is significant evidence of a 'systematic' approach to transferring, assimilating, naturalising and in some cases, conscripting Ukrainian children in Russia.

Where are the missing children today?

Russia has developed a systematic approach to the 'filtration' of children, in which thousands of young Ukrainian children are forcibly relocated, 're-educated' and adopted into Russian families.

Once in Russia, extensive reports indicate that Ukrainian children undergo 'psychological rehabilitation' as part of re-education projects and camps operating in Russia and occupied areas of Ukraine.⁶⁵ Thousands of Ukraine's

⁶³ <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-children-taken-ukraine/32527298.html>

⁶⁴ See 47, OSCE, Report on Violations and Abuses of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights Law, War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity Related to the Forcible Transfer and/or Deportation of Ukrainian Children to the Russian Federation

⁶⁵ <https://2021-2025.state.gov/russias-filtration-operations-and-forced-relocations/>

stolen children have been taken to repurposed summer camps or boarding schools, where they face psychological coercion aimed at convincing them to stay.⁶⁶ A report by the Yale HRL found that up to 6,000 children - including one as young as 4 months old - were taken to 43 camps in 16 oblasts across Russia and occupied Ukrainian territories, ranging the Crimean Peninsula to the Magadan Oblast in Far East Russia.⁶⁷

There are grave concerns that some children were not returned from the so-called 're-education' summer camps. Disturbingly, in cases where parents were present and willing to care for their children, communication was restricted, and in some instances, parents were compelled to sign over power of attorney to unidentified individuals or entities, thus obstructing the rightful return of their children to their families .⁶⁸

A later report by the same institution found that, after legislative changes pushed through by President Putin, the State Duma and Maria Lvova-Belova, Ukrainian children taken from the foster care system were added to Russia's Federal State Child Placement Database. This permits Russian families to adopt Ukrainian children and fast-track their naturalisation as Russian citizens. It is reported that Lvova-Belova and several other high-profile Russian figures have 'adopted' stolen children from Ukraine.⁶⁹

⁶⁶<https://liberalforum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Opportunities-for-All-Solutions-for-Liberals-to-Own-the-Social-and-Human-Rights-Agenda-Again-1.pdf>

⁶⁷<https://ysph.yale.edu/news-article/russias-systematic-program-for-the-re-education-and-adoption-of-ukraines-children/>

⁶⁸ As above

⁶⁹<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/12/24/ukraine-stolen-children-maria-lvova-belova/>

Belarus has also played a key role in the mass deportation of Ukrainian children. In May 2023, Ukraine's Ombudsman Dmytro Lubinets stated that abducted children were transferred through the territory of Belarus, with the direct involvement of Belarusian Authorities.⁷⁰

In June 2023, Belarusian opposition members provided the ICC with evidence alleging to show 2,150 Ukrainian children from at least 15 Russian-occupied Ukrainian cities, including orphans between 6 and 15, who were forcibly relocated to recreation camps and sanatoriums in Belarus. In the evidence submitted, Belarus' President, Aleksandr Lukashenko is accused of personally facilitating the deportation of Ukrainian children to Belarus.⁷¹ In 2022, the Belarussian Government also passed legislation mandating pro-regime education, to which children from Ukraine were subjected.⁷²

Evidence provided by Yale HRL in a report of 12th December 2023, highlighted that at least 2,442 children from Ukraine between the ages of 6 and 17 from at least 17 cities across occupied parts Ukraine in Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia regions had been taken to 13 facilities in Belarus between 24 February 2022 and 30 October 2023. This includes over 2,050 children from Ukraine who were transported to the Dubrava facility in Belarus between September 2022 and May 2023.

⁷⁰<https://kyivindependent.com/ombudsman-ukrainian-pows-and-abducted-children-transferred-through-belarus/>

⁷¹<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/19/children-arrive-in-belarus-after-being-illegally-removed-from-ukraine>

⁷²<https://files-profile.medicine.yale.edu/documents/a5414357-e145-47de-90e3-f5625305e089>

The Investigative Committee and the Ministry of Education of the former so-called LPR and DPR have identified and targeted children from Russia-occupied Ukraine to be sent to various facilities in Belarus, at least one of which subjected children from Ukraine to military training. Additionally, The Ministry of Education of the former so-called LPR also prepared a power of attorney for 30 purported orphans to be transported from Ukraine to Belarus.⁷³

Moreover, a report in the Guardian of 19th September 2023 highlights that 48 children arrived in Belarus from occupied parts of Ukraine in Zaporizhzhia, Luhansk and Donetsk regions, where Belarusian state news organisation Belta showed Ukrainian children waving Belarusian flags surrounded by police. Belta also reported that the removal of children from occupied territories in Ukraine was organised by a Belarusian charity supported by Lukashanenko. ***“The President, despite external pressure, said this important humanitarian project should continue”, Alexei Talai, the Charity’s Head, told Belta.*** He added that ***“All the Belarusian people want to help children from dilapidated cities and towns in the new territories of Russia.”***⁷⁴

⁷³<https://files-profile.medicine.yale.edu/documents/a5414357-e145-47de-90e3-f5625305e089>

⁷⁴<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/19/children-arrive-in-belarus-after-being-illegally-removed-from-ukraine>

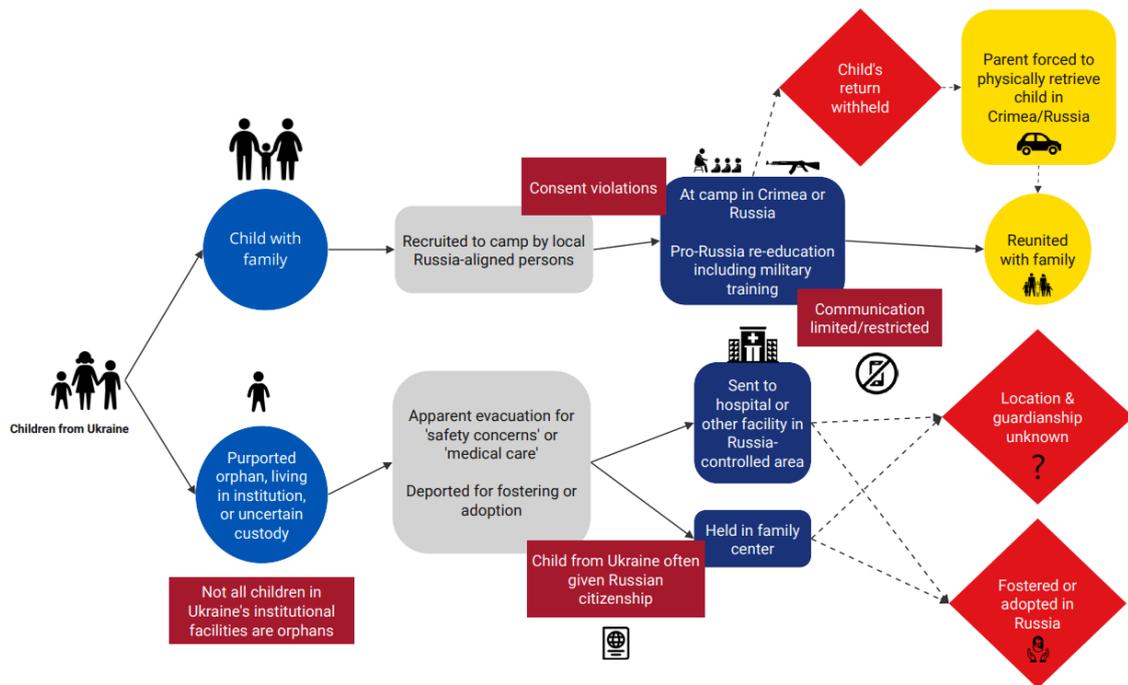
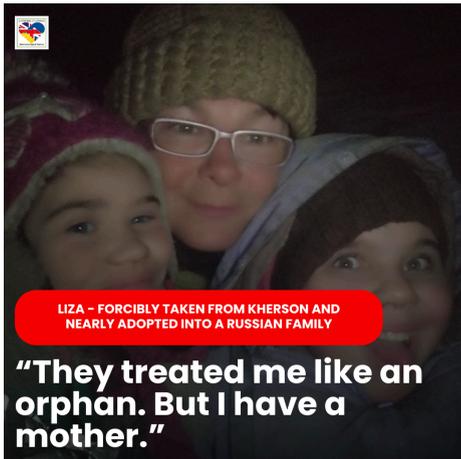


Fig 1: A child's journey through Russia's system of re-education and adoption.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ <https://files-profile.medicine.yale.edu/documents/8c54abb4-3c6d-4b5c-be05-727f612afccc>



Who are the targeted children?

Personal testimonies of those since returned to Ukraine provide insight into the methods of abduction, including deceit, coercion, removal from orphanages, targeted due to being physically disabled and separation from families, as well as why they were vulnerable to being forcibly deported by Russia.

Liza and Zorik

A detailed investigation by Reuters provides further evidence of the systematic deportation of Ukrainian children by Russian authorities, highlighting both the scale of the operation and its deliberate psychological and cultural impact.⁷⁶

The case of Liza Batsura and Zorik Ibrian, two 16 year old Ukrainian nationals from Kherson, illustrates the mechanisms employed by Russia to target and exploit vulnerable minors, particularly orphans and children with limited family support. Kherson, which has since been liberated, was among the first Ukrainian cities to fall following the Russian Federation's full-scale invasion in 2022.

⁷⁶<https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/ukraine-crisis-children/>

The two teenagers were initially transferred from Kherson to recreational camps in Russian-occupied Crimea. These facilities served as sites of ideological conditioning, where Ukrainian cultural identity was actively suppressed. The children were reportedly forbidden from wearing Ukraine's national colours and were compelled to learn and recite the Russian national anthem.

Following several months in Crimea, Liza, Zorik and other children were relocated to Henichesk, a port city under Russian control on the Sea of Azov.

While in Henichesk, Liza - who had been placed in a children's home due to a difficult domestic situation - was approached by a visitor to the camp, later identified as Maria Lvova-Belova, the Russian Commissioner for Children's Rights. Lvova-Belova informed her that she could be adopted into a Russian family.

According to Liza's testimony, provided to Reuters after her return to Ukraine, ***"They treated me like an orphan. But I have a mother."*** She further stated, ***"They wanted to issue me a Russian passport and place me with a Russian family."***

This case demonstrates the systematic use of psychological manipulation by Russian officials, who sought to sever children's ties to their Ukrainian identity by portraying them as stateless and integrating them into Russian society under the guise of humanitarian care.

To date, only a small number of deported Ukrainian children have been successfully repatriated. Liza is among that minority, due to the efforts of her mother, Oksana

Halkina, who located her in Henichesk and secured her return to Ukraine in May 2023.

Sadly, the story of Liza's schoolmate Zorik remains unclear, as Zorik and his brother Danylo who were both living at the college in Henichesk with Liza, remain in Russian custody. However, what we do know about Zorik is that in June 2023 he attended a summer camp in Crimea organised by the Poslezavtra Youth Project, organised by the office of Russia's Children's Commissioner, Maria Llova-Belova. This provides further evidence that the deportation of Ukrainian children is organised or facilitated by the highest levels of Government in Russia.

Both Zorik and Danylo were notably vulnerable as they were orphaned in 2021. Currently, they are held in Russian held territory made possible by the support of the Russian state, with little chance of them being returned to Ukraine.⁷⁷

Margarita

A BBC Panorama investigation, in collaboration with Ukrainian human rights investigator Victoria Novikova, uncovered the forced adoption of Margarita Prokopenko, a Ukrainian child taken from Russian-occupied Kherson in 2022.⁷⁸

Margarita was just 10 months old when she was seized from the Kherson Regional Children's Home - where she was the youngest resident - and later adopted by Sergey Mironov, a senior Russian MP and close ally of Vladimir Putin. Her identity was erased and rewritten. She was renamed Marina

Mironova, her birthplace was changed to a Russian city and she was registered as Mironov's daughter in December 2022. Mironov has since been sanctioned by the UK, EU and others.

Margarita was taken under the pretense of medical care in Moscow by Inna Varlamova, now Mironov's wife, who falsely claimed to represent Moscow's child welfare department. Witnesses described men in military-style clothing escorting Margarita out. She was placed on a midnight train to Moscow.

Weeks later, a Russian Member of Parliament, Igor Kastyukevich, personally oversaw the deportation of remaining children from the home, including Margarita's half-brother Maxym, presenting the operation as a 'humanitarian mission'. Of the 48 children taken from the home, at least 17 remained in Crimea as of late 2023. All have relatives in Ukraine.

What happened to Margarita is a significant indicator of the advanced stage of her forced assimilation into the Russian system. Given her young age and the legal erasure of her Ukrainian identity, there is a high risk that she will grow up unaware of her true nationality and origins.

Anastasia

In March 2023, Sky News covered the story of 15 year old Anastasia Motychak, whose mother, Lyudmiola Motychak, was tricked into sending her child into a Russian 'indoctrination camp'.⁷⁹

⁷⁷<https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/ukraine-crisis-children/>

⁷⁸<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-67488646>

⁷⁹<https://news.sky.com/story/ukraine-war-mother-tricked-into-sending-daughter-to-russian-indoctrination-camp-reveals-rescue-and-emotional-reunion-12836571>

Lyudmila explained to Sky News how she was tricked into letting her daughter go on what was framed as a school trip organised by then Russian supporting Occupation Authorities in Kherson and Occupation Authorities in Crimea. She told Sky News that ***“We were told that it will be a camp and that the children were going there for two weeks and they told us not to worry, that they would bring our children back, that a lot of children were going. I was afraid to let her go from the beginning. I was saying it’s a war, she shouldn’t go, but they insisted everything would be OK.”***

However Anastasia didn’t return after the allotted 2 weeks. Lyudmila described how she contacted teachers and the Director of the educational college, who assured her that Anastasia would be returned at some point, but that it had turned into an evacuation because of the war.

Anastasia told Sky New that after leaving Kherson, she was part of a convoy of 100 buses, carrying 3,000 children. Children were told they were going to a summer camp despite it being October.

However, what Anastasia experienced was far from a summer camp. Like children in other similar camps, Anastasia and other children were forced to sing Russia’s national anthem. Additionally, Anastasia stated that ***“They were confiscating balloons we had in the colours of the Ukrainian flag and they were also shouting at us, saying: ‘We are ungrateful and to go back to your fascists’.”***

This shows clear evidence of those involved in the forced deportations of Ukrainian children trying to undermine their Ukrainian identity and to spread

disinformation that those running Ukraine were fascists.

Thankfully the story of Anastasia unlike so many deported children has a happy ending, as Anastasia was reunited with her mother Lyudmila after months apart in a Russian children’s facility in Crimea and then taken back to Ukrainian held territory in Kyiv.



Kira

According to the Bring Kids Back UA Initiative, Kira, an 11 year old girl from Mariupol, lost her mother at the age of 10. When the full-scale invasion of Ukraine began, she was living with her father, Yevhen. During an attempt to relocate their belongings to a safer location, Yevhen was shot and killed by Russian forces on the balcony of their home. Kira witnessed his death. She and her father's partner, Anna, then walked for an entire day to reach the home of her grandfather, Oleksandr.⁸⁰

⁸⁰<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-i8JBHg nDM&t=23s>

While travelling with another family, a landmine was triggered, prompting the arrival of Russian soldiers. Kira, another child and their mothers were forcibly taken to a hospital in a Russian occupied part of Donetsk Oblast. Kira was separated from Anna and informed she would be sent to a remote orphanage in Russia if no one came for her.

Traumatized and disoriented, Kira initially forgot she had a phone. After several weeks, she managed to contact her grandfather, who located her and found her in severe psychological distress. In October 2022, he was granted guardianship and brought her home to Ukraine, where she continues her recovery.

Kira was among the first Ukrainian children to be repatriated under the Bring Kids Back UA Initiative, a coordinated effort by the Ukrainian Government, partner nations, and international organisations to return children who have been forcibly deported.

Kira later said that ***“The Russians took my childhood, my city, and my dad from me.”***

Mykola and Anastasiya

Mykola and Anastasiya Volodin, two Ukrainian children with autism and cerebral palsy, were among 46 children forcibly taken from the Kherson Children’s Home following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The state run home in Kherson city, housing children with disabilities, was unprepared for sustained war. Despite efforts by the Director, Olena Korniyenko, to secure safety, Russian forces seized the children on 25th April 2022 and placed them under occupation control.

The children were eventually relocated over 180 miles away to Simferopol, Crimea. Mykola and Anastasiya, who had living parents in Ukraine with unresolved custody cases, were taken without consent. Their parents, Roman and Valentyna Volodin, only discovered their children’s location 6 months later, after a New York Times investigation.

In Crimea, occupation authorities attempted to erase the children’s Ukrainian identity. Russian birth certificates were issued, Mykola’s name was changed to ‘Nikolay’ and they were given Russian social security numbers. These measures paved the way for Russian citizenship, a prerequisite for adoption under Russian law. This was made legally possible by a decree signed by President Vladimir Putin in December 2022, allowing guardians in occupied territories to renounce Ukrainian citizenship on behalf of children.

By September 2023, Mykola and Anastasiya appeared on a Russian federal adoption registry as orphans from Crimea. Their mother was eventually able to travel to Moscow in February 2024, recovering both children with the aid of Ukrainian authorities and Qatari mediators.

Tragically, Anastasiya died from an epileptic seizure shortly after her 6th birthday. Mykola has returned to Ukrainian care while courts determine the future of his guardianship.⁸¹

This was not an isolated case, as seen in the treatment of children at Kupyansk Special School - many more disabled children have faced forced deportation.⁸²

⁸¹<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/02/world/europe/ukraine-children-russia-war.html>

⁸²<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-65641304>

Bohdan

Bohdan Yermokhin, an orphaned Ukrainian teenager, was living in a boarding school in Mariupol when Russian forces fully occupied the city in May 2022. At age 17, he was forcibly deported - first to a part of the Russian-occupied Donetsk Oblast, and then to Moscow on a Russian Government plane. There, he was placed with a Russian foster family and sent to a so-called 'patriotic camp', where staff promoted pro-Kremlin ideology and sought to instil a Russian identity.⁸³

Bohdan was issued a Russian passport, enrolled in a Russian school and told repeatedly that Ukraine did not exist - that Mariupol was Russian. In the autumn of 2023, shortly before his 18th birthday, he received a military draft summons. He told CNN that ***"I was told Ukraine was losing, that children were used for organ donations, and that I would be sent to war. I said if I fight, I'll fight for my own country."***

His experience is emblematic of a broader Russian policy of forced assimilation and militarisation of deported Ukrainian children. Russia's Children's Commissioner, Maria Lvova-Belova, confirmed on Telegram that such military summonses were standard, though deferment was possible for students. Bohdan's best friend, Filip, was similarly deported and adopted by Lvova-Belova herself, as confirmed in a 2024 ITN documentary by Shahida Tulaganova called Ukraine's Stolen Children.⁸⁴

⁸³<https://edition.cnn.com/2024/03/14/europe/ukrainian-teenagers-russian-soldiers-cmd-intl/index.html>

⁸⁴<https://www.itv.com/watch/ukraines-stolen-children/10a5054a0001B/10a5054a0001>

Ukraine's Ombudsman, Dmytro Lubinets, condemned the practice, stating that deported Ukrainian teenagers are systematically placed on Russian military recruitment lists once they turn 18. He described this as part of a deliberate effort to erase Ukrainian identity.

Bohdan's account was further corroborated by Professor Nathaniel Raymond of Yale HRL, who noted in January 2025 that the deportation of Ukrainian children is a ***"systemic policy planned at the highest levels of the Russian government."***⁸⁵ Their research tracked flight routes and locations used to facilitate these transfers.

This strategy disproportionately targets vulnerable children, including orphans, those from difficult family circumstances, and children with disabilities - whom Russian officials may view as more easily indoctrinated. However, it is important to note that many of those stolen come from stable families as well. In a January 2024 decree, President Putin authorised fast-tracked Russian citizenship for Ukrainian orphans without standard legal procedures, further implicating the Kremlin in this strategy of demographic engineering.

The stories of the children covered in this report are not isolated incidents. It reflects a calculated campaign to forcibly transform Ukrainian children into Russian citizens, severing their cultural and national ties and in doing so, undermining Ukraine's future, one stolen child at a time. You can read about further stories of those who were forcibly deported at the Children

⁸⁵<https://www.genocidewatch.com/single-post/ukraine-highlights-ongoing-forced-deportation-of-children-by-russia-at-the-world-economic-forum-cal>

of War website, an initiative of the Ukrainian Government.

<https://childrenofwar.gov.ua/en/>

Testimonies from Ukrainian and International Officials



Testimonies from Ukrainian and international officials highlight that the situation of the forced deportations of Ukrainian children is worsening, not improving.

Ukraine's Ombudsman, Dmytro Lubinets, said in October 2024 that ***"There is a high risk of deportation of another 1.5 million children who remain in the temporarily occupied territories. Forcibly displaced and deported persons have their data changed so that their relatives and homeland cannot find them and return them."***⁸⁶

In November 2024, he outlined how Russia attempts to coerce the Ukrainian children they have deported into being conscripted into the Russian military.

⁸⁶<https://newsukraine.rbc.ua/news/russia-abducted-over-20-000-ukrainian-children-1727868152.html>

Russia attempts this through a number of policies including military education and psychological manipulation at 're-education' camps that attempts to teach them pro-Kremlin narratives regarding the conflict with Ukraine and Ukrainian statehood.

Describing the whole process of the deportation of Ukrainian children, Lubinets explained that once Ukrainian children are deported to Russia, the process of erasing any connection those children have to their homeland begins. He pointed out that this starts with attempts to manipulate the children through formal and informal schooling in Russia.

In addition to the coercive and manipulative tactics employed, the Russian Federation also utilises legal and bureaucratic mechanisms to systematically erase the Ukrainian identity of deported children. This process involves the alteration of official documentation - including birth certificates, passports, and identity records - making it exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, for Ukrainian relatives or international authorities to trace and repatriate these children.

As highlighted by Lubinets and corroborated by personal testimonies from affected children, these legal manoeuvres often accompany forced adoptions into Russian families. In many cases, the children's names are changed to ones with distinctly Russian phonetics, further severing their connection to their heritage and complicating efforts to restore their true identity.⁸⁷

⁸⁷<https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/11/13/russia-deports-ukrainian-children-to-raise-a-new-generation-of-russian-army-ombudsman-says>

After the legal status of Ukrainian children are changed, the attempts to militarise these children begins. Describing this Lubinets stated **“All the Ukrainian children must be a member of youth military organisations of the Russian Federation.”**⁸⁸ Describing Russia’s whole policy of forcibly deporting Ukrainian children, Lubinets said that **“We see (in that) all the details of the colonial policy of (the) Russian Federation against Ukraine and I really believe that the main goals for Russians for the deportation of Ukrainian children is to raise a new generation of the Russian Army.”**⁸⁹

Lubinets comments are echoed by Daria Zarivna, Advisor to the Head of the Office of the President of Ukraine and Chief Operating Officer of Bring Kids Back UA, who in January 2025 outlined how the mass abductions are an attempt to destroy Ukrainians as a nation.

Zarivna said that **“The children are deported by Russia, as well as those on temporarily occupied territories, are subjected to brainwashing, forced to forget their roots, forbidden from speaking their native language, placed in Russian families and institutions and later used for propaganda and military purposes. Russia sees them as an additional mobilization resource and turns them into weapons against their homeland.”**⁹⁰

⁸⁸<https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/11/13/russia-deports-ukrainian-children-to-raise-a-new-generation-of-russian-army-ombudsm-an-says>

⁸⁹<https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/11/13/russia-deports-ukrainian-children-to-raise-a-new-generation-of-russian-army-ombudsm-an-says>

⁹⁰<https://www.genocidewatch.com/single-post/ukraine-highlights-ongoing-forced-deportation->

International human rights activists, including the Director of the International Bar Association’s Human Rights Institute and Chair of the Bring Kids Back UA Taskforce, Baroness Helena Kennedy LT KC, stated at the same talk as Zarivna that **“Russia weaponises deported children, conditioning them to believe they are Russians too, that their part is a lie and that their future is tied to the Russian Federation.”**⁹¹

The situation for Ukrainian children living in Russian occupied territories has only worsened since these statements. On 5 March 2025, the Russian Interior Minister issued 3.5 million passports to residents of occupied territories in Ukraine, which have included many children through a forced passportisation campaign aimed at providing them with a certified Russian identity to wipe out their Ukrainian identity.⁹²

Putin’s decree of 20th March 2025 orders that Ukrainians living in territory in the parts of Ukraine occupied by Russia face mandatory registration with the territorial branches of Russia’s Ministry of Internal Affairs. Individuals who do not obtain Russian citizenship in these occupied parts of Ukraine or in Russia itself must register themselves as a Russian citizen by December 2025 or risk being unable to access vital services such as banking,

[of-children-by-russia-at-the-world-economic-forum-cal](https://www.genocidewatch.com/single-post/ukraine-highlights-ongoing-forced-deportation-of-children-by-russia-at-the-world-economic-forum-cal)

⁹¹<https://www.genocidewatch.com/single-post/ukraine-highlights-ongoing-forced-deportation-of-children-by-russia-at-the-world-economic-forum-cal>

⁹²<https://ies.lublin.pl/en/comments/decree-of-vladimir-putin-on-regulating-the-status-of-ukrainian-citizens-in-the-russian-federation-dated-march-20-2025/>

owning a car and potentially facing deportation.⁹³

Russian citizenship is being enforced on millions of Ukrainians, paving the way for Russia to extend its scheme of mass deportations, manipulation and coercion of children and conscription of Ukrainian children to fight in the Russian military against Ukraine.⁹⁴



On 10th April 2025, Zarivna said that ***“For Ukraine, the return of deported children is an extremely important humanitarian priority. Children must not become a bargaining chip.”***⁹⁵

Zarivna also highlighted that one of the largest impediments that the Bring Kids Back UA initiative, the Ukrainian Government, their international partners and mediators face is locating the children abducted by Russia. This is why as of 23

⁹³<https://ies.lublin.pl/en/comments/decreed-of-vladimir-putin-on-regulating-the-status-of-ukrainian-citizens-in-the-russian-federation-dated-march-20-2025/>

⁹⁴<https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/03/25/get-passport-or-leave-russias-ultimatum-ukrainians>

⁹⁵<https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/spravedlivij-mir-nemozhlivij-bez-povernennya-vikradnih-rf-u-97161>

April 2025, Ukraine has only been able to bring home 1,274 children, which represents less than 10% of the at least 19,546 children abducted by Russia.⁹⁶

On 27th March 2025, as part of a Ukrainian delegation to the UK, to highlight the masses of Ukrainian children abducted by Russia, Ukraine’s Deputy Foreign Minister, Mariana Betsa called on the UK Government to continue advocating for the rights of Ukrainian children abducted by Russia, maintain sanctions on the perpetrators of the programme of abducting en masse Ukrainian children and to develop new mechanisms of international accountability.⁹⁷

⁹⁶<https://www.bringkidsback.org.ua/>

⁹⁷<https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/ukraїnskomu-parlamenti-delegaciya-bring-kids-back-ua-obgov-96873>

War on Ukrainian identity

Russia's long-standing foreign policy under Putin has aimed to reassert Russia's status as a major global power and focuses on reclaiming Russia's cultural, economic and military influence in Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union's key institutions.⁹⁸

Putin has justified the so-called 'special military operation' - or full-scale invasion - under the pretext of correcting what he claims are 'historic and strategic mistakes' in the formation of Eastern Europe's borders. In a July 2021 article, he outlined a policy aimed at unifying Russian and Ukrainian culture, positioning it as a response to what he described as the forced promotion of Ukrainian language, culture and identity following the Soviet Union's collapse.⁹⁹

This context is vital to explain why Russia employs strategies to weaken and erase Ukrainian identity through the mass transfer of children, re-naming, re-educating and indoctrinating Ukrainian children in line with Russian patriotic values.

Re-education camps

Yale HRL has reported that over 8,400 Ukrainian children have been forcibly transferred to at least 57 facilities across Russia, Russian-occupied territories and Belarus. Within these facilities, children are subjected to systematic re-education programs designed to impose Russian-centric values. This includes narratives that legitimise the invasion of

Ukraine and promote Russian state propaganda.

This process, known as *Russification*, seeks to erase Ukrainian cultural identity by removing the Ukrainian language from education, replacing textbooks, and suppressing national history. It represents a targeted attempt to dismantle Ukrainian identity at its roots - beginning with the youngest generation.¹⁰⁰

In addition, the educational system is used to militarise children. Organised events are held to familiarise them with the Russian armed forces and expose them to military equipment, normalising military engagement from a young age.

Military training

As well as militarisation within the education system, training also takes place at specialised centres. For teenage boys, the imposition of Russian citizenship frequently results in immediate eligibility for military conscription, including deployment against Ukraine - constituting a separate and serious violation of international law.

Evidence shows specialised centres, portrayed as 'summer recreation camps', are being used to house Ukrainian children taken from Russian occupied-territory. There, they are subject to a strict, militarised daily regime. Children are dressed in Russian military uniforms, made to perform the Russian national anthem and required to raise the Russian flag.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Keir Giles (2019). Moscow Rules: What Drives Russia to Confront the West.

⁹⁹<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/press/222>

¹⁰⁰https://almenda.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Children_web_ENG.pdf

¹⁰¹https://almenda.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Children_web_ENG.pdf

More recently, evidence has emerged that Russia has instituted drone training curricula for over 10,000 children in schools in occupied Ukraine, incentivising participation in training via “gamifying” the process and developing a “special engineering class” to teach students how to design and manufacture drones for the Russian army.¹⁰²

By removing children and immersing them in a foreign militaristic framework, it is evident that Russia is attempting to undermine the national identity of Ukrainian children and replace it with a manufactured loyalty to Russia via a program of indoctrination and coercion.

Forced adoptions

The adoption procedures implemented by Russia systematically strip Ukrainian children of their national identity by replacing their Ukrainian names and places of birth with Russian documentation, including new birth certificates and new names. This process eliminates any official record that can be used by Ukrainian authorities or family members to trace or recover the children.

The Russian adoption system functions as a mechanism of administrative erasure, whereby Ukrainian children are absorbed into a bureaucratic framework designed to obliterate their cultural and national identity. Particularly for younger children adopted in infancy, this practice ensures that an entire generation may grow up in Russia with no awareness of their Ukrainian origins.

¹⁰²<https://www.understandingwar.org/background-runder/russian-occupation-update-april-14-2025>

Broader Implications of Cultural Genocide

While territorial conquest may seem to be Russia’s chief ambition in Ukraine, the reality is far more harrowing. Beneath Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine lies a systematic campaign aimed at erasing Ukrainian identity - an effort that fits the definition of genocide, including a cultural genocide.¹⁰³

According to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Russia’s actions amount to the targeted destruction of Ukraine’s culture.¹⁰⁴ This is not hyperbole. At the heart of this campaign is the mass abduction and forced assimilation of Ukrainian children. Thousands have been taken from occupied territories and placed in Russian orphanages, foster homes, or adopted by Russian families. In these environments, their names are changed. Their language is forbidden. Their heritage is erased. They are being reprogrammed to identify as Russian - often through an education system explicitly designed to wipe out Ukrainian history and memory.

This is not an unfortunate by-product of war. It is a deliberate strategy of Russia’s war. One aimed not just at dismantling a state, but at deleting a people.

The OHCHR has documented how Russian authorities have actively removed cultural symbols, destroyed Ukrainian-language education and rewritten historical narratives in occupied

¹⁰³ NOVIC, Elisa, The concept of cultural genocide : an international law perspective, New York ; Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2016, Cultural heritage law and policy
¹⁰⁴<https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/02/targeted-destruction-ukraines-culture-must-stop-un-experts>

territories. This isn't subtle. It's direct. It's deliberate.¹⁰⁵

By targeting children - the carriers of culture, memory, and future - Russia is weaponising assimilation as a tool of war. The deportation of these young Ukrainians serves a dual purpose: it weakens Ukraine by severing generational ties, and simultaneously strengthens Russia by absorbing a new generation into its national ideology.

History has seen such atrocities before - most notably in the cultural pillaging carried out by the Nazis during World War II and Nazis forcible deportation of children as part of an attempted programme of Germanization. The legacy of that era is one of deep trauma, irreparable loss and generational efforts toward national and cultural healing. Yet what is unfolding today in Ukraine is unprecedented in its visibility and audacity, occurring in an age when international norms and human rights laws should offer protection against exactly what we are witnessing.

The consequences are profound. Families have been left devastated and grieving, with no information on their children's whereabouts. Entire communities have been robbed of their future. These children - raised in a culture not their own,¹⁰⁶ may grow up unaware of who they truly are - their language, their ancestry and the nation from which they were stolen.

Russia's ambition is not just military - it is ideological. This is about erasing Ukraine as a culture. As Azeem Ibrahim, Director

¹⁰⁵<https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/02/targeted-destruction-ukraines-culture-must-stop-un-experts>

¹⁰⁶<https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/02/targeted-destruction-ukraines-culture-must-stop-un-experts>

of the New Lines Institute, stated in 2023 that ***“Russia is attempting to destroy the Ukrainian nation, one child at a time.”***

¹⁰⁷

The systematic program of forcibly deporting Ukrainian children cannot be dismissed as humanitarian or protective. Russian legislation has been tailored to facilitate this cultural erasure - under the guise of adoption, re-education, and naturalisation. The testimonies of abducted children, public statements from Russian officials and investigative reports reveal a deeper truth, which is about indoctrination and militarisation.¹⁰⁸

Putin himself has repeatedly denied Ukraine's legitimacy, claiming Ukrainians are really Russians. In April 2023, Dmitry Medvedev, former Russian President and current Deputy Chairman of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, echoed this revisionist narrative, stating that Ukraine was ***“established by accident in the 20th century.”*** According to the UN, one of the defining features of genocide is the denial of the existence or identity of a protected group.¹⁰⁹ Russia is doing exactly that - through its actions, its rhetoric and its state media propaganda machine.¹¹⁰

This is a war not just on territory, but on memory, on identity, on the very possibility of a sovereign Ukraine. All the evidence - from Yale University research,

¹⁰⁷<https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/01/russia-takes-children-kidnapping-ukraine-genocide/>

¹⁰⁸<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukraine-alert/putins-russia-is-trapped-in-genocidal-denial-over-ukrainian-independence/>

¹⁰⁹https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/about-us/Doc.3_Framework%20of%20Analysis%20for%20Atrocity%20Crimes_EN.pdf

¹¹⁰<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukraine-alert/new-report-highlights-evidence-of-escalating-russian-genocide-in-ukraine/>

investigative journalism, Ukraine's Ombudsman's Office and initiatives like Bring Kids Back UA - points to a singular goal: to uproot Ukrainians from their homeland, erase their cultural heritage, and recast them as Russians.

Putin laid out the blueprint in his 2021 article, where he argued for the cultural and historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians.¹¹¹ He reaffirmed this in September 2022, during the illegal annexation of Ukrainian territories, when he claimed that ***“There is nothing stronger than the determination of millions... who consider themselves part of Russia... determined to return to their historical homeland.”***¹¹²

This strategy is echoed across the Russian state apparatus. In March 2024, Dmitry Medvedev, former Russian President and Deputy Chairman of Russia's Security Council, explicitly rejected the idea of Ukrainian sovereignty, saying: ***“Ukraine is definitely Russia.”***¹¹³

The systematic erasure of culture - especially through the targeting of children - is not simply a tragedy of the moment. It is a slow-burning catastrophe that unfolds over generations.

The severing of language, memory and belonging has consequences far beyond today's war against Ukraine. It distorts identity, fractures continuity and hollows out the soul of a nation. In time, the physical scars of war may be rebuilt. However, the cultural wounds - the ones

carved into minds too young to resist - are harder to heal.

What is at stake is more than sovereignty. It is the right of a people to remember who they are, to speak their own name in their own language, to see themselves reflected in their future.

¹¹¹<http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>

¹¹²<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/9465>

¹¹³<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukraine-alert/ukraine-is-russia-medvedev-reveals-imperial-ambitions-fueling-invasion/>

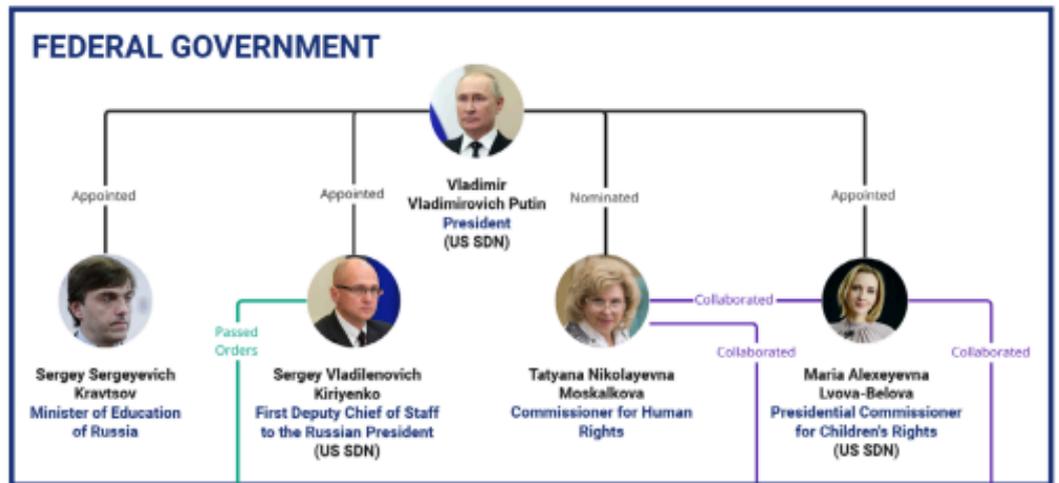


Fig 2: Political leadership with alleged involvement in the systemic relocation, reeducation and adoption of Ukrainian children. ¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ <https://files-profile.medicine.yale.edu/documents/8c54abb4-3c6d-4b5c-be05-727f612afccc>

Applicable International Legal Standards for war crime, crime against humanity and genocide

Arrest warrants issued for President Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova

On 17th March 2023, the Pre-Trial Chamber of the ICC issued arrest warrants for the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin and the Children's Rights Commissioner for the President of the Russian Federation, Maria Lvova-Belova. ¹¹⁵

The court set out that Putin and Lvova-Belova are allegedly responsible for the war crime of unlawful deportation of population (children) and that of unlawful transfer of population (children) from occupied areas of Ukraine to the Russian Federation, under Articles 8(2)(a)(vii) and 8(2)(b)(viii) of the Rome Statute).

The court assesses that Putin bears individual criminal responsibility for the the crimes set out under Articles 8(2)(a)(vii) and 8(2)(b)(viii) of the Rome Statutes, (i) for having committed the acts directly, jointly with others and/or through others (article 25(3)(a) of the Rome Statute) and (ii) for his failure to exercise control over civilian and military subordinates who committed the acts, or allowed for their commission, and who were under his effective authority and control, pursuant to superior responsibility (article 28(b) of the Rome Statute).

The court assesses that Lvova-Belova bears individual criminal responsibility for the crimes set out under articles 8(2)(a)(vii) and 8(2)(b)(viii) of the Rome

¹¹⁵<https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/situation-ukraine-icc-judges-issue-arrest-warrants-against-vladimir-vladimirovich-putin-and>

Statutes, for having committed the acts directly, jointly with others and/or through others (article 25(3)(a) of the Rome Statute).

Notably, since the arrest warrant for Putin and Lvova-Belova was issued, the ICC has found that Mongolia prevented the Court from exercising its functions and powers by failing to arrest Putin when he was in Mongolia in September 2024, while he was on its territory and surrender him to the Court. Contrary to the assertion by Mongolia, the ICC has set out that personal immunity afforded to Heads of State within the norms of international law, is not applicable before the ICC. ¹¹⁶

International Criminal Law

The definitions of crimes against humanity, war crimes and genocide are laid out in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. These definitions reflect established principles of customary international law. Although neither the Russian Federation nor Ukraine are parties to the Rome Statute, Ukraine has taken significant steps to accept the ICC's jurisdiction.

Through declarations made under Article 12(3) of the Rome Statute - on 9 April 2014 and again on 8 September 2015 - Ukraine accepted the Court's authority to investigate and prosecute crimes against humanity and war crimes committed on its territory between 21 November 2013 and 22 February 2014, and from 20 February 2014 onward, respectively. ¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶<https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/ukraine-situation-icc-pre-trial-chamber-ii-finds-mongolia-failed-cooperate-arrest-and>

¹¹⁷ [Moscow Mechanism: Report on violations and abuses of international humanitarian and human rights law, war crimes and crimes against humanity, related to the forcible transfer and/or deportation of Ukrainian](#)

It is critical to note that unlike International Humanitarian Law and International Human Rights Law, International Criminal Law deals with the individual responsibility for acts of genocide, war crimes, crimes of aggression and crimes against humanity.

War Crime

As previously set out under the section ***Arrest Warrants issued for President Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova***, the ICC set out charges for War Crimes under Articles 8(2)(a)(vii) and 8(2)(b)(viii) of the Rome Statute. It assesses that Putin bears individual criminal responsibility under Article 25(3)(a) and Article 28(b) of the Rome Statute. Lvova-Belova bears individual criminal responsibility under Article 25(3)(a) of the Rome Statute.

For this crime to be established, three key elements must be present:

1. The acts must occur within the specific context of a widespread or systematic attack directed against a civilian population;
2. The perpetrators must be aware that their actions form part of such an attack; and
3. There must be a deportation or forcible transfer of civilians. Crucially, such displacement does not always require the direct use of physical force. It may also result from threats, coercion, duress, abuse of power, or exploitation of a coercive environment that leaves affected persons with no real choice.¹¹⁸

[children to the Russian Federation - Russian Federation | ReliefWeb](#)

¹¹⁸ ICC, Prosecutor-v-Bosco Ntaganda, ICC-01/04-02/06, Judgement, 8 July 2019, para 1056.

As previously noted, Lvova-Belova has openly advocated for a systematic approach to the mass deportation of children. There is consistent evidence indicating that her calls have been backed by an organised bureaucratic structure involving so-called regional Governors in occupied territories in Ukraine, Duma and Federal organisations actively carrying out this alleged crime on a large scale.

Furthermore, apart from a few isolated cases where the transfer of children might be legitimately justified due to an immediate threat to life from ongoing armed conflict, this report clearly concludes that the widespread nature of the deportations of children cannot be considered voluntary. Even in situations where children were sent to so-called 'recreation camps' with parental or guardian consent, that consent cannot be considered fully voluntary. Russian authorities employed pressure, manipulation and deception - including separating children from their parents during filtration processes - making it evident that these transfers were carried out by force.

In light of the scope and severity of these actions, as demonstrated in the available evidence, there is a compelling basis to conclude that this attack meets the threshold of a war crime and as such warrants a full investigation and potential prosecution.

Crime against Humanity

In addition to the charges set out under Article 8 of the Rome Statute, this report assesses the potential relevance of Article 7(1)(d) of the Rome Statute in relation to Crimes Against Humanity. This provision applies where deportation or forcible transfer of population occurs in the context

of a widespread or systematic attack against a civilian population, where the perpetrator has knowledge of the attack, and where the deportation or transfer has, in fact, taken place.¹¹⁹

The jurisprudence of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in *Prosecutor v Krstic (2001)* held that the forcible displacement of civilian population under military threat, constituted forcible transfer as a crime against humanity. The ruling highlighted that it is not necessary for the transfer to be physically violent. Coercion can be inferred from the surrounding circumstances.¹²⁰

The reported scale of forcible child transfers, the systematic and organised methods employed and the separation of children from their parents and family members - when considered alongside Russian legislation enabling expedited citizenship and adoption procedures - strongly suggest that the threshold for crimes against humanity may well be met in this context. Furthermore, the forcible transfer of Ukrainian children could also constitute the crime against humanity of enforced disappearance, as defined under Article 7(1)(i) of the Rome Statute.¹²¹

In summary, the evidence supports a reasoned basis to investigate and potentially prosecute both Vladimir Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova and others for crimes against humanity, due to their roles in the forcible transfer of children which

¹¹⁹<https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/2024-05/Rome-Statute-eng.pdf>

¹²⁰ ICTY, *Prosecutor v Krstic*. IT-98-33-T, Judgement 2 August 2001, paras 519-533. See

<https://www.icty.org/x/cases/krstic/tjug/en/krs-tj010802e.pdf>

¹²¹<https://lieber.westpoint.edu/russias-forcible-transfer-children/>

could constitute a violation of Article 7(1)(d) of the Rome Statute.

Genocide

In addition to the charges set out under Article 8 of the Rome Statute, this report assesses the potential relevance of Article 6 in relation to genocide. Article 6 sets out that the forcible transfer of children from one group to another, when carried out with genocidal intent, constitutes an act of genocide in itself.¹²² This assessment is subject to Article 30 of the Statute, which defines the mental element of criminal responsibility. Article 30 provides that intent exists where the accused either means to engage in the conduct (Article 30(2)(a)) or is aware that it will occur in the ordinary course of events (Article 30(2)(b)).

Criminal responsibility may be established where the individual directly commits the crime (Article 25(3)(a)); orders, solicits, or induces its commission (Article 25(3)(b)); or aids, abets, or otherwise assists in its commission (Article 25(3)(c)).

This report asserts that President Putin, in his capacity as President of the Russian Federation, played an active role in supporting and promoting the policy of child transfers. This included signing decrees that expedited the relocation of Ukrainian children to Russia and making public statements that justified and praised these actions. His knowledge of these operations, along with his ability to prevent or stop them, engages command responsibility under Article 28 of the Rome Statute. The jurisprudence of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in *Prosecutor v. Delalić*

¹²²<https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/2024-05/Rome-Statute-eng.pdf>

et al. (1998) confirms that leaders who fail to act despite having knowledge of crimes committed by their subordinates can be held liable under international law.¹²³

The considerations that this report asserts in relation to Maria Lvova-Belova, that as Russia's Commissioner for Children's Rights, she has played a vital operational and public role in facilitating the transfer of Ukrainian Children. Her actions, including overseeing their relocation from occupied territories, involvement in the adoption process and promotion of their assimilation into Russian society suggests direct perpetration or ordering under Article 25(3)(a)-(b) of the Rome Statute. Lvova-Belova herself has made multiple public statements (see Timeline), which may constitute admissions of conduct relevant to the mental element of criminal responsibility (Art.30) and carrying out the act (Art.25).

This report supports the view that Putin and Lvova-Belova may bear individual criminal responsibility for the forcible transfer of children under Article 6(e) of the Rome Statute. The element of intent may be inferred from the systematic nature of the transfers, the high-level coordination, and public expressions of ideological motivation aimed at erasing Ukrainian national identity. The *Prosecutor v. Akayesu* case before the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) reaffirmed that genocidal intent can be inferred from the pattern of conduct, scale, and statements by officials.¹²⁴

¹²³ ICTY, *Prosecutor v. Delalić et al.* (Čelebići Case), Case No. IT-96-21-T, Judgment, 16 November 1998, paras. 333–346. See https://www.icty.org/x/cases/mucic/tjug/en/981116_judg_en.pdf

¹²⁴ ICTR, *Prosecutor v. Jean-Paul Akayesu*, Case No. ICTR-96-4-T, Judgment, 2 September 1998, para 523. See

In summary, the evidence supports a reasoned basis to investigate and potentially prosecute both Vladimir Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova for their roles in the forcible transfer of children. If proven to have been carried out with genocidal intent, such acts would constitute a violation of Article 6(e) of the Rome Statute. Their positions, conduct and public communications place them within the scope of both direct and command responsibility, as recognised under international criminal law.

International Humanitarian Law

International Humanitarian Law governs the conduct of armed conflict as established by the Geneva Conventions, with the primary objective of safeguarding victims of war and ensuring adherence to fundamental humanitarian principles. Russia and Ukraine are both State parties to the Geneva Conventions of 12th August 1949.

Article 24 sets out the provisions relating to child welfare. The Parties to the conflict should take the necessary measures to ensure that children under 15 who are orphaned or are separated from their families as a result of the war, are not left to their own resources, and that their care, religious practice and education are facilitated in all circumstances.¹²⁵

Article 49 sets out that the individual or mass forcible transfers, as well as deportation of protected persons from

<https://www.refworld.org/jurisprudence/casela/w/ict/1998/en/19275>

¹²⁵ See Article 24, Geneva Convention 1949 Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War: <https://www.icrc.org/sites/default/files/external/doc/en/assets/files/publications/icrc-002-0173.pdf>

occupied territory to the territory of the Occupying Power or to that of any other country are prohibited, regardless of their motive.¹²⁶

Article 50 applies International Humanitarian Law in respect of children, which sets out that an Occupying Power should take all necessary steps to facilitate the identification of children and the registration of their parentage. It may not, in any case, change their personal status, nor enlist them in organisations subordinate to it.

Should the local institutions be inadequate for the purpose, the Occupying Power should make arrangements for the maintenance and education, if possible by persons of their own nationality, language and religion, of children who are orphaned or separated from their parents as a result of the war and who cannot be adequately cared for by a near relative or friend.¹²⁷

Article 438 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine, 'Violation of the Laws and Customs of War' sets out legal qualifications for crimes committed by the Russian military and politicians against Ukrainian children during war. The Article refers to provisions of Ukraine's international treaties, including the Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Wartime.¹²⁸

This document sets out a clear timeframe underscored by credible reporting that during its occupation of Ukrainian territory:

(i) Thousands of children have been removed from occupied Ukrainian

territories, including from state institutions, care facilities, hospitals and families.

(ii) Many of these children have been granted Russian citizenship under expedited procedures and subsequently placed into Russian foster or adoptive families.

(iii) Reports as set out in the timeframe indicate efforts to erase or suppress Ukrainian national, linguistic and cultural identity in re-educational programmes.

Children in occupied territories in Ukraine by Russia have been subjected to forced transfers and displacements.

These relocations violate international law, particularly Article 49 of the 4th Geneva Convention, which prohibits forcible transfers and deportations - amounting to grave breaches of international humanitarian law.

Family separations have occurred as a result of Russian "filtration" of civilians with Ukrainian loyalties. Instead of staying with their families, some children were taken to Russia under the guise of humanitarian aid. These non-consensual transfers breach international humanitarian law and demonstrate a pattern of unlawful deportation.

Russia's failure to track and report the whereabouts of these children further deepens the violations. Facilitating adoptions or granting Russian citizenship to unaccompanied Ukrainian children breaches Article 50 of the Geneva Convention, undermining their identity, and confirms a broader effort of

¹²⁶ See Article 49, as above

¹²⁷ See Article 50, as above

¹²⁸ https://ukrainianvictory.org/wp-content/uploads/brief_children_ICUV_en-version-1.pdf

assimilation - pointing again to the grave breach of deportation.¹²⁹

All Ukrainian children in Russian custody should be repatriated or reunited with their families as quickly as possible. Even when consent is claimed, it must be treated with caution. Any unnecessary delays or obstructions to reunification breach the legal obligation to protect family unity.

International Treaties and Conventions

Article II (e) of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide defines genocide to include the forcible transfer of children from one (national) group to another. Under this definition, the Ukrainian population clearly constitutes a protected group. According to the jurisprudence of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, a 'national group' includes individuals bound by shared citizenship and mutual legal obligations - a definition that encompasses the citizens of Ukraine.

The forcible transfer of Ukrainian children to Russia does not end with their physical relocation. It continues with their legal and cultural assimilation into Russian society, through the granting of Russian citizenship, ideological reeducation and systemic efforts to erase their Ukrainian identity. This process constitutes a form of group destruction not by killing, but by erasure of identity.¹³⁰

¹²⁹ [Moscow Mechanism: Report on violations and abuses of international humanitarian and human rights law, war crimes and crimes against humanity, related to the forcible transfer and/or deportation of Ukrainian children to the Russian Federation - Russian Federation | ReliefWeb](#)

¹³⁰ [Transferring of the Ukrainian Children to Russia as Genocidal Act](#)

Evidence shows that these transfers are not incidental or isolated. They are widespread, systematic and carried out at the highest levels of the Russian state. Presidential decrees, laws passed by the Duma and the direct involvement of officials such as President Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova reveal the state-sponsored nature of the programme. The scale and coordination of these actions suggest intent, planning and a chilling precision.

Testimonies from children who have been returned from Russia, including in this report, underscore this intent. They speak of coercion, suppression of identity and cultural indoctrination aimed at binding children to their captors and severing ties to their homeland.

UN guidelines affirm that such forced reprogramming - especially when tied to the forcible transfer of children - can amount to genocide. It is not only about removing a child from their community but about replacing their identity entirely. The objective is clear - to erase their memory of origin and embed them within the identity of the perpetrator group.

Children, as a protected class, receive special protection under international law. The Genocide Convention and Rome Statute recognises that the destruction of a group can occur not only through violence but through the assimilation of its children, thereby severing the continuity of the group's heritage and future.

What makes Russia's actions especially egregious is the calculated targeting of the most vulnerable. Ukrainian children - many orphaned or separated by war - are easily isolated, have their documentation erased and are subjected to repatriation under false pretences. The creation of

digital databases, the streamlining of Russian citizenship procedures, and changes to family law in both Russia and the occupied territories all point to a bureaucratized machinery of identity erasure. These children were not rescued - they were processed.

The law is unambiguous. Vulnerability does not lessen legal protection, it increases it. Furthermore, in light of the evidence, Russia's systematic targeting, transfer and assimilation of Ukrainian children constitutes a clear violation of Article II (e) of the Genocide Convention.

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child are applicable to Russia's action with respect to international humanitarian law:

Article 3: The best interests of the child must be a top priority in all decisions and actions that affect children.

Article 8: Every child has the right to an identity. Governments must respect and protect that right, and prevent the child's name, nationality or family relationships from being changed unlawfully.

Article 9: Children must not be separated from their parents against their will unless it is in their best interests (for example, if a parent is hurting or neglecting a child). Children whose parents have separated have the right to stay in contact with both parents, unless this could cause them harm.

Article 10: Governments must respond quickly and sympathetically if a child or their parents apply to live together in the same country. If a child's parents live apart in different countries, the child has the right to visit and keep in contact with both of them.

Article 12: Every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously. This right applies at all times, for example during immigration proceedings, housing decisions or the child's day-to-day home life.

Article 14: Every child has the right to think and believe what they choose and also to practice their religion, as long as they are not stopping other people from enjoying their rights. Governments must respect the rights and responsibilities of parents to guide their child as they grow up.

Article 17: Every child has the right to reliable information from a variety of sources, and governments should encourage the media to provide information that children can understand. Governments must help protect children from materials that could harm them.

Article 20: If a child cannot be looked after by their immediate family, the government must give them special protection and assistance. This includes making sure the child is provided with alternative care that is continuous and respects the child's culture, language and religion.

Article 21: Governments must oversee the process of adoption to make sure it is safe, lawful and that it prioritises children's best interests. Children should only be adopted outside of their country if they cannot be placed with a family in their own country.

Article 24: Every child has the right to the best possible health. Governments must

provide good quality health care, clean water, nutritious food, and a clean environment and education on health and well-being so that children can stay healthy. Richer countries must help poorer countries achieve this.

Article 28: Every child has the right to an education. Primary education must be free and different forms of secondary education must be available to every child. Discipline in schools must respect children's dignity and their rights. Richer countries must help poorer countries achieve this

Article 30: Education must develop every child's personality, talents and abilities to the full. It must encourage the child's respect for human rights, as well as respect for their parents, their own and other cultures and the environment,

Article 31: Every child has the right to relax, play and take part in a wide range of cultural and artistic activities.

Article 37(b): Governments must protect children from all other forms of exploitation, for example the exploitation of children for political activities, by the media or for medical research.

Russia has committed numerous and overlapping violations of the rights of children deported from Ukraine. These actions disregard the best interests of the child and breach their rights to identity, family life, education, access to information, rest, leisure, cultural participation, freedom of thought, conscience, religion, health, liberty and security.

These violations contravene multiple articles of the UN Convention on the

Rights of the Child (UNCRC), specifically Articles 3, 8-10, 12, 14, 17, 20–21, 24, 28-29, 31, and 37(b). The cumulative impact of these breaches raises grave concerns that the children's right to be protected from torture, inhuman, or degrading treatment (Article 37(a)) has also been violated.

In addition, Russia has violated UN Security Council Resolution 1261 (1999) related to the targeting of children in situations of armed conflict, including killing, sexual violence, abduction and forced displacement.¹³¹

¹³¹ [Resolution 1261 \(1999\)](#) / - supplemented and reinforced by UNSC 1882, 1998 and 2225.

What has the UK done to date?

The UK's commitment to supporting Ukraine remains strong and unwavering. This is reflected in public sentiment. Recent YouGov polling from February 2025 shows that 77% of the British public hold Russia entirely or mostly responsible for the ongoing war in Ukraine, while just 3% believe Ukraine bears such responsibility. This clear consensus underscores the enduring solidarity of the UK with the Ukrainian people in the face of aggression.¹³²

This is also reflected by the ongoing political backing that support for Ukraine continues to receive across all major political parties. In regards to the mass abduction of children and forcible transfer of children, the Prime Minister, Sir Keir Starmer KC MP, has said that ***“The abduction of Ukrainian children is a terrible crime and the UK will make every effort to bring them home. This is a stark reminder that any peaceful settlement must include holding Russia accountable for its shameful actions.”***

¹³³

Moreover, other politicians from across the political parties have spoken out against Russia's mass abduction of Ukrainian children. For example, on 15 March 2025, the Conservative MP, Tom Tugendhat MP and former Home Office Security Minister, told the i Newspaper that, ***“Russia has stolen an estimated 20,000 children from Ukraine in what can only be described as a slave raid on Ukrainian young people for Putin's wars. This is one of the most brutal crimes we're***

¹³²<https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/survey-reports/daily/2025/02/19/285d6/1>

¹³³<https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/u-brit-anskomu-parlamenti-delegaciya-bring-kids-back-ua-obgov-96873>

seeing in Ukraine today. Every country should make every effort to help get these children back.”¹³⁴

Steve Darling MP, the Liberal Democrat MP for Torbay, was part of the UK Friends of Ukraine cross-party delegation to Ukraine in February 2025. Reflecting on his visit, he wrote that he was particularly struck by Russia's abducted children. He highlighted that in addition to the at least 19,546 Ukrainian children who have been deported by Russia since the start of the full-scale invasion, around 1.5 million children are also living under Russian propaganda and militarisation. Many have had their names changed to Russian equivalents—part of a deliberate effort to erase Ukrainian identity. Darling has committed himself to urging the Ukrainian Government to do everything in its powers to help facilitate the return of Ukraine's stolen children.¹³⁵

The report's co-author, Johanna Baxter MP, Labour MP for Paisley and Renfrewshire South, has been a leading voice in Parliament on this issue, having also joined UK Friends of Ukraine on the delegation in February 2025. Johanna has called for a National Day of Action for the Stolen Children of Ukraine¹³⁶ and has written in articles for the i Newspaper,¹³⁷

¹³⁴<https://inews.co.uk/news/world/ukraines-stolen-children-how-uk-help-find-them-3585966>

¹³⁵<https://www.facebook.com/CllrSteveDarling/posts/pfbid0UdsnhLmgyr5g145GatFs2Bs4cCegNKYSpFZkgEflZJBiw8pnM1vw5zP8QGZ88YJqI>

¹³⁶<https://x.com/JohannaBaxter/status/1904516897833353449>

¹³⁷<https://inews.co.uk/news/world/ukraines-stolen-children-how-uk-help-find-them-3585966>

Politics.co.uk¹³⁸ and Politico¹³⁹ on the matter. Here, Johanna explained how there can be no true peace in Ukraine until all the children abducted by Russia are returned, the need for Russia to provide a full register of Ukrainian children currently in their custody as mandated by the Geneva Conventions and supporting Ukraine in the return of their children.

Overview of the total support UK has provided to date¹⁴⁰

In total, the UK has committed £15 billion for Ukraine:

- £10 billion in military support (including a £2.26 billion Extraordinary Revenue Acceleration Loan contribution);
- £5 billion in non-military support (including £4.71 billion in World Bank loan guarantees and £977 million in Bilateral Assistance).¹⁴¹

Legal support for Ukraine

As part of the Government's efforts to seek justice for war crimes committed during Russia's full-scale invasion, the UK has contributed £10.7 million to domestic war crimes investigations. This supports Ukraine's documentation, investigation and prosecution of war crimes, and complements the UK's work with the USA

¹³⁸<https://www.politics.co.uk/mp-comment/2025/04/10/johanna-baxter-there-can-be-no-true-peace-in-ukraine-without-the-return-of-the-children-putin-has-stolen/>

¹³⁹<https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-uk-allies-warn-of-appeasement-as-us-donald-trump-talks-to-vladimir-putin/>

¹⁴⁰<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-support-to-ukraine-factsheet/uk-support-to-ukraine-factsheet>

¹⁴¹<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-support-to-ukraine-factsheet/uk-support-to-ukraine-factsheet>

and European Union (EU) counterparts via the Atrocity Crimes Advisory Group.¹⁴²

The previous Government had also announced an additional £2.3 million to the ICC to support investigations into alleged war crimes in Ukraine. The UK provides a specialist legal and policing team to support the investigation, including a dedicated Metropolitan Police Officer stationed within the ICC, with access to further British police and military expertise. Seven UK lawyers with experience in international criminal law have also assisted in uncovering evidence and prosecuting those responsible for war crimes.¹⁴³

Officers from the Metropolitan Police War Crimes Team, which is part of its Counter Terrorism Unit, have provided forensic and technical capabilities including biometrics and examinations of digital devices, as part of evidence gathered from potential witnesses in the UK.¹⁴⁴

Additionally, the UK has joined the International Coalition for the Return of Ukrainian Children led by Canada, which is a coordinated international effort between Ukraine and 41 member states, sharing information, capacity and communication on addressing the unlawful deportation of and forced transfer of Ukrainian children. It supports the reunification of children with their families and the rehabilitation of children. The Coalition also works to raise awareness of the forced deportations at meetings and in

¹⁴²<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-continues-to-step-up-for-ukraine-as-new-funding-announced-to-bring-war-criminals-to-justice>

¹⁴³<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-provides-lawyers-and-police-to-support-icc-war-crimes-investigation>

¹⁴⁴<https://www.counterterrorism.police.uk/met-police-refreshes-appeal-for-evidence-of-war-crimes-in-ukraine/>

international forums via high level diplomatic engagements.¹⁴⁵

Sanctions

The UK's Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018 (SAMLA), along with amendments introduced under the Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Act, provides the Government with a framework to impose sanctions where it considers them appropriate to comply with international obligations, protect civilians in war zones and promote adherence to international humanitarian law.

The framework provides a transparent and robust system of legal challenge and review, ensuring designated individuals and entities have the right to legal challenge and request key relevant information or bring a challenge to court.

¹⁴⁶

According to the Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation (OFSI), there are currently 2,332 sanctions imposed on Russia. 2,105 of these sanctions have been imposed since 2022, including 1,587 individuals and 368 entities, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

However, to-date, only 19 individuals (0.8%) and 3 entities (0.1%) have been sanctioned for engaging and providing support for the forced deportation of children across three tranches of

¹⁴⁵https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_development-enjeux_developpement/responses_conflict-reponse_conflits/crisis-crisis/ukraine-children-enfants.aspx

¹⁴⁶<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/deter-disrupt-and-demonstrate-uk-sanctions-in-a-contested-world-uk-sanctions-strategy/deter-disrupt-and-demonstrate-uk-sanctions-in-a-contested-world-uk-sanctions-strategy#section-4-a-robust-sanctions-system-dueprocess>

sanctions between March 2023 and November 2024 (See Annex i).

Tranche 1: 21st March 2023: 1 individual sanctioned;

Tranche 2: 17th July 2023: 9 individuals and 1 entity sanctioned;

Tranche 3: 19th November 2024: 9 individuals and 2 entities sanctioned.

Note: Some individuals alleged to be involved in the forced deportation of children from Ukraine may have been sanctioned for actions that destabilise Ukraine or threaten its territorial integrity, sovereignty, or independence, rather than specifically for their role in the forced deportation of children itself.

The UK's sanction regime on Russia does show some differences with counterparts in the USA, EU and its member states and Canada in relation to the timing and specific individuals and entities targeted by their sanctions.

For example, in August 2023, the United States designated 13 individuals and organisations for their alleged role in the forcible deportation of children from Ukraine. However, of the 13 sanctioned by the United States, only 3 appear on the UK's sanctions list.^{147 148}

Further, in February 2025, the EU sanctioned Julia Baranovskaya for her alleged role in promoting the abduction of Ukrainian children and Fidail Bikbulatov for his alleged role in the forced deportation of Ukrainian children to

¹⁴⁷<https://2021-2025.state.gov/imposing-sanctions-and-visa-restrictions-on-individuals-and-entities-to-promote-accountability-for-forced-transfer-and-deportation-of-children-during-russias-illegal-war-against-ukraine/>

¹⁴⁸<https://sanctionssearchapp.ofsi.hmtreasury.gov.uk/>

Russia, however neither have been sanctioned by the UK yet.¹⁴⁹

The rationale for those differences in approach is unclear.

There is also a difference between the sanctions regimes of the USA, EU and the UK in relation to Belarusian officials and organisations, with alleged involvement in the mass transfer of Ukrainian children. For example, the Secretary General of the Belarus Red Cross, Dzmitry Shautsou, was sanctioned in December 2023 after visiting Mariupol in June 2022, where he appeared to have admitted to the organisation's involvement in child abductions.¹⁵⁰ The International Committee of the Red Cross suspended Belarus Red Cross from the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in January 2023 following these allegations.¹⁵¹ The U.S. Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned Shautsou on 5 December 2023 for being complicit in transporting Ukrainian children to Russia.¹⁵² On 19th February 2024, The EU sanctioned Shautsou and 3 other Belarusians for child deportations - Dmitriy Demidov, Alexei Talai and Olga Volkova.¹⁵³ The UK by contrast has not sanctioned Shautsou, or the other 3 individuals sanctioned by the EU.¹⁵⁴

¹⁴⁹https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L_202500389

¹⁵⁰<https://euroradio.fm/en/belarusian-red-cross-admits-involvement-taking-ukrainian-children-belarus>

¹⁵¹<https://www.ifrc.org/article/ifrc-releases-findings-belarus-red-cross-secretary-general-call-dismissal>

¹⁵²<https://www.rferl.org/a/us-sanctions-belarus-red-cross-revenue-generators-russia-ukraine/32715826.html>

¹⁵³<https://www.eureporter.co/world/belarus/2024/02/19/eu-sanctions-against-the-head-of-belarus-red-cross/>

¹⁵⁴<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/67dab1ce1a60f79643028404/Belarus.pdf>

Recommendations:

Returning the children

In line with the recommendations set out by various organisations, including Yale HRL, Ukraine's Ombudsman's Office, the Bring Kids Back UA Taskforce, the Council of Europe, Children of War, The PR Army and others, this response the following urgent measures to secure the safe and immediate return of all Ukrainian children unlawfully taken by Russia: ¹⁵⁵

1. Russia must publish a full register of all Ukrainian children currently in its custody, as required under the Geneva Conventions.
2. Russia should provide Ukraine with a framework, jointly agreed upon by both parties, for the return of every Ukrainian child who has been forcibly deported. This should cover the conditions for return - including timing, location and procedures to ensure safe repatriation.
3. In coordination with Ukraine, the UK must assist the families and in other cases the legal guardians of children abducted by Russia to file cases with the Russian Prosecutor General's Office. Relatives of the children should be encouraged to first register their cases to Ukraine's Prosecutor's General's Office and then send a letter to Russia's equivalent, to Russia's Children's Rights Commissioner, to Russia's Ombudswoman for Human rights and to any regional Social Service offices. This would help create an audit trail and put more pressure on Russia, who would find it harder to claim that

¹⁵⁵<https://files-profile.medicine.yale.edu/documents/a7cf7b6a-3418-4e74-a716-3f049323d728>

- Ukrainian parents, grandparents and legal guardians are not attempting to return their children.
4. Ukraine, supported by its allies and partners, must establish a clear framework to govern the return process for these children.
 5. As a sovereign and independent nation, Ukraine should determine the protocols for placement of returning children who do not have an identifiable parent or guardian. They should be supported in this by allies of Ukraine, including the UK.
 6. All returned children - whether to Ukraine or a neutral third country - must receive comprehensive reintegration support, including mental health and psychosocial care, financial assistance and other essential services. The UK and other allies of Ukraine should assist in this. Resources from the Trust Fund for Victims should be utilised, which is part of the ICC's mission to support and implement programmes that address the harms resulting from alleged genocide, crimes of humanity, war crimes and aggression in the forced deportations of at least 19,546 Ukrainian children by Russia. This fund can support the implementation of measures to assist victims and their families who have suffered physical, psychological, or material harm. ¹⁵⁶
 7. The report supports efforts by the Bring Back Kids UA Taskforce, co-chaired by Andriy Yermak and Lady Helena Kennedy LT KC, to introduce a high-level strategy for the reintegration of stolen children in line with international best

¹⁵⁶ <https://www.trustfundforvictims.org/node/50>

practice and standards, including the adoption of a trauma-informed approach to justice, extending socio-economic support to affected families, providing mental health and psychosocial support and a commitment to large scale reform of the social care system.¹⁵⁷

International diplomacy

This report commends the UK's leadership in spearheading a proposal for an international coalition of the willing to support a post-conflict peacekeeping mission.

This coalition of the willing must continue to maintain its military support to Ukraine to ensure that Ukraine is in the strongest possible position to negotiate the return of Ukrainian territories and the citizens of Ukraine currently living within Russian occupied territories. This includes ensuring that Russia is in the weakest position possible when it comes to negotiations, based on giving Ukraine the ability to win both its war of survival and any final status negotiations.

In addition, the coalition of the willing must show the same spirit in developing an international consensus on ensuring that the immediate return of Ukrainian children serves as a precondition for any future ceasefire or final status negotiations aimed at bringing an end to Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine. The UK should extend its leadership by rallying a coalition of the willing to secure the return of Ukraine's stolen children.

¹⁵⁷[671baeedc6ea0cd6053ef30_REINTEGRATION_OF_CHILDREN_AFFECTED_BY_DEPORTATION_AND_FORCIBLE_TRANSFERS.pdf](https://www.reintegrationofchildren.org/Portals/0/Reintegration_of_Children_Affected_by_Deportation_and_Forced_Transfers.pdf)

The report also calls on the UK Government to consider urging the International Criminal Court to investigate alleged crimes of genocide and crimes against humanity, specifically relating to the unlawful transfer of populations—including children—from occupied areas of Ukraine and the unlawful deportation of children, as outlined in the Rome Statute.

It also calls on the UK to use its diplomatic standing to further extend membership of the International Coalition for the Return of Ukrainian Children.

In addition, the report proposes that the UK also supports the joint initiative between the European Commission and Poland alongside UN agencies to collect evidence, find the kidnapped children and prosecute those responsible for these crimes.¹⁵⁸

Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression

The current jurisdiction of the ICC does not allow for the prosecution of the crime of aggression unless both the aggressor and the victim state have accepted the Court's authority over this specific crime, or unless the UN Security Council refers to the matter. Given Russia's permanent member status and veto power within the Council, this route remains blocked. Compounding this, neither Russia nor Ukraine had ratified the Rome Statute at the onset of the war.

While Ukraine accepted the ICC's jurisdiction in 2015 for war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity committed on its territory, this acceptance specifically excluded the crime of

¹⁵⁸https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KRK4Er_b0C8M

aggression. As clarified by the ICC Prosecutor, Ukraine's declaration does not empower the Court to prosecute Russia for this overarching offence¹⁵⁹—what Liberal Democrat MP Richard Foord rightly called the “original sin” from which all other atrocities, including the mass abductions of Ukrainian children, flow.¹⁶⁰

However, there has been crucial progress. On 25 October 2024, Ukraine deposited its ratification of the Rome Statute, which entered into force on 1 January 2025, reflecting Ukraine's dedication to upholding international law and justice. This was made possible through bold leadership by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Ukraine's Parliament (the Verkhovna Rada).¹⁶¹

The UK Government could assist this motion by outlining its position on the creation of a special tribunal - whether it should be international or domestically led with international support.¹⁶²

At present, the UK Government has not set out any plans regarding the establishment of a tribunal.¹⁶³

Therefore, this report recommends that the United Kingdom appoint an independent Ombudsman to actively support the establishment of an international Special Tribunal for the

¹⁵⁹<https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/statement-icc-prosecutor-karim-aa-khan-qc-situation-ukraine-i-have-been-closely-following>

¹⁶⁰<https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2024-09-03/debates/51A764EB-99F4-486B-A5B0-4A0D10381864/InternationalSpecialTribunalUkraine>

¹⁶¹<https://www.icc-cpi.int/situations/ukraine>

¹⁶²<https://www.coalitionfortheicc.org/ukraine-be-comes-125th-ICC-state-party>

¹⁶³<https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2024-09-03/debates/51A764EB-99F4-486B-A5B0-4A0D10381864/InternationalSpecialTribunalUkraine>

Crime of Aggression, with Ukrainian backing and judicial participation.

Such a tribunal would enable Ukrainian authorities to refer ongoing investigations and evidence related to aggression and the forcible deportation of children directly to the tribunal's Prosecutor. It would also create a clear path to accountability for Russian and Belarusian political and military leaders implicated in forced deportations and other grave violations.

As emphasised in the House of Commons debate in September 2024 by Members of Parliament, Jim Shannon and Alicia Kearns, a Special Tribunal could not only ensure justice for victims but also serve as a mechanism for identifying key individuals responsible - who should face international sanctions and travel bans.¹⁶⁴

This is about setting a precedent. The crime of aggression cannot be left unpunished. The UK must lead, as it has in the past, in the defence of international law and the sovereignty of nations.

Sanctions

The UK has stepped up its targeted sanctions on Russia - working closely with the EU, the USA, the G7 and other partners - to disrupt and deter Russia's military supply chains, revenues fuelling Russia's illegal war and kleptocrats driving profits for the Kremlin following its unlawful invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

However, this report stresses that the same urgency and determination must be applied to identifying and disrupting those responsible for enabling serious violations of international humanitarian and criminal

¹⁶⁴<https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2024-09-03/debates/51A764EB-99F4-486B-A5B0-4A0D10381864/InternationalSpecialTribunalUkraine>

law—particularly in relation to the unlawful transfer and mass deportation of children.

As set out in *LLC Synesis v Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (2023)*, the High Court ruled that the Secretary of State is not limited to evidence that would be admitted to a court of law. The Court confirmed that the Secretary of State may take into account hearsay, allegations, and intelligence and that a ‘suspicion’ does not require a finding of fact. Rather, it involves assessing the available information and material, drawing reasonable inferences from the circumstances, and then forming a state of mind in good faith based on that evaluation.¹⁶⁵

While the report recognises that unilateral sanctions must be justified and proportionate, it also emphasises that the acts perpetrated by the Russian Federation represent some of the gravest breaches of international law and therefore warrant a response aimed at disrupting and deterring further Russian and Belarusian involvement in these egregious crimes.

This report therefore argues that, in line with the UK’s international obligations and the purpose of the Russia (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, the Government should investigate whether further sanctions should be imposed on all regional, federal, military and law enforcement agencies who made the mass abduction of Ukrainian children possible—as well as others—who may be involved in, or are complicit with, these crimes. At the very least, it is vital that the UK aligns its sanctions against individuals involved in the forcible transfer and mass

¹⁶⁵<https://www.blackstonechambers.com/news/llc-synesis-v-secretary-of-state-for-foreign-commonwealth-and-development-affairs/>

deportation of children with those imposed by the USA and the EU.

Coordinated international action is essential to hold the perpetrators accountable for the forced deportation of at least 19,546 children and to prevent further violations of international law. In parallel, the UK Government should work with the International Coalition to coordinate sanctions against all those involved, making it significantly harder for them to evade justice.

Funding

The UK has played a vital role in ensuring that Ukraine has the necessary military resources and training to prevent a full-scale occupation of Ukraine, providing more than £10 billion in military assistance and more than £5 billion of non-military assistance, including to support the work of reuniting stolen Ukrainian children with their families.

The report notes the Government's decision to increase defence spending to 2.5% of GDP by 2027 and its ambition to spend 3% of GDP on defence in the next parliament, funded by reducing Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) from 0.5% to 0.3% of GNI and reinvesting it into defence. It welcomes confirmation by Baroness Chapman that bilateral ODA support for Ukraine will remain exempt from the funding decrease, in line with the UK's commitment to securing the future of Ukraine.¹⁶⁶

However, the report highlights that recent shifts in the prioritisation of development assistance to Ukraine by some allies, particularly in the United States, have led to the suspension of funding for key

¹⁶⁶committees.parliament.uk/publications/47275/documents/245059/default/

tracking initiatives - most notably the Yale HRL, which plays a crucial role in reuniting abducted Ukrainian children with their families and documenting evidence of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

While this funding has since been temporarily restored until 8th May 2025, the absence of long-term support for such work will have deeply damaging consequences and risks undermining international efforts to hold perpetrators to account.

Therefore, this report calls on the Government to engage in a sustained diplomatic effort with international partners to ensure that every possible avenue is pursued in the urgent task of returning Ukraine's stolen children to their families.

In regard to the Yale HRL, we encourage the UK Government and its allies to explore ways of working collaboratively with institutions possessing specialist expertise in this area. The continued involvement of such organisations is vital to the international community's shared commitment to justice and accountability, and the UK should remain open to supporting this work through appropriate and proportionate means.

The UK should explore options to assist the International Coalition led by Canada to pay for the vital investigations work by Yale University and other organisations working in this area, who face or have experienced cuts in funding from the U.S.'s aid budget.

The UK, EU and all nations who are Ukraine's allies should follow Canada's lead in seizing frozen Russian state assets, using part of this money to help fund those leading the investigations into Russia's mass deportations of Ukrainian

children and aiding organisations like Europol. At present around £237 billion of sanctioned Russian assets is sitting in Western bank accounts, including around £25 billion of the funds held in UK banks, including the Bank of England, whilst most of it, roughly £174 billion is held in the Belgium based bank Euroclear.¹⁶⁷

At present, the UK has committed to seizing the interest on frozen sanctioned Russian state assets, however this report believes that if the UK took the lead in this area by seizing the entirety of sanctioned Russian assets in its jurisdiction, it could encourage the EU to follow in ensuring that Russia is held accountable for its crimes.

UK National Day of Action

The UK rightly recognises the severity of the crimes being committed in Ukraine and the importance of the International Criminal Court in prosecuting those responsible.

17th July is observed as **International Criminal Justice Day**, a moment to spotlight the global system of justice for the most serious crimes. In that spirit, the report urges the Government to officially recognise this date as a **National Day of Action for the Stolen Children of Ukraine** - to shine a light on the gravity of these ongoing crimes and to reaffirm our collective demand for accountability and meaningful action.

Recognition of Genocide

While the ICC has issued arrest warrants for Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russian Children's Rights Commissioner

¹⁶⁷<https://www.thisismoney.co.uk/money/markets/article-14456581/Seize-Russian-cash-help-Ukraine-MPs-call-237bn-assets-used-war-effort.html>

Maria Lvova-Belova - citing the alleged war crimes of unlawful deportation and transfer - this must not be seen as the end of legal categorisation. As Dr. Yulia Ioffe, an expert in international law and children's rights highlights the ICC has precedent for adding or requalifying charges when considering accountability for alleged crimes under international criminal law. The gravity and targeted nature of these allegations merit investigation within the legal framework of crimes against humanity and genocide.

Ukraine has initiated proceedings before the International Court of Justice under the Genocide Convention, to investigate Russia's claims of genocide in the Donbas region of Ukraine, as pretext for aggression. While this case does not specifically address Russia's alleged role in the forcible transfer of children, there is a clear opportunity for Ukraine - and the broader international legal community - to expand the scope of the investigation to confront the mass deportation and forcible transfer of Ukrainian children within the framework of international criminal law.

The forcible transfer of children, particularly when it targets their identity, language and heritage, constitutes an attack on the national group itself. It is not simply the removal of children from one place to another - it is the destruction of their very identity.

Accordingly, this report recommends:

1. Parliament: A formal debate should be held in Parliament to consider whether the forcible transfer of Ukrainian children could be considered as an act of genocide.
2. Government: The UK should support the ICC and any future Special Tribunal to pursue a

rigorous legal evaluation under the framework of genocide. Whilst the evidentiary standard is high, the pattern of conduct, combined with demonstrable intent, warrants a full investigation.

3. Local Government Engagement: Local councils, councillors and devolved administrations across the UK should work with UK Friends of Ukraine to adopt formal motions to consider whether the forcible transfer of Ukrainian children could be considered a genocide as recognised within international criminal law. There is clear precedent for this, as many councils have already done so in recognising the Holodomor as a genocide.

Conclusion

This multi-level approach - spanning international law, national policy and local action - reflects the UK's enduring commitment to justice, human rights and the protection of vulnerable populations in the face of these egregious crimes.

The systematic abduction, deportation and indoctrination of Ukrainian children by the Russian state is not merely a humanitarian crisis, it is a grave violation of international law, a calculated war crime, crime against humanity and a cultural genocide which warrants a full investigation.

Tens of thousands of Ukrainian children have been removed from their homes and placed in Russian institutions, foster families, or so-called re-education camps. Many have had their identities changed, their nationalities erased, and their voices silenced. These are not isolated incidents, but part of a centrally coordinated state policy supported at the highest levels of the Russian Government.

Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, has made the stakes of the mass abduction of Ukrainian unequivocally clear, stating before the UN General Assembly on 19 September 2023 that ***“Those children are taught to hate Ukraine and all ties with their families are broken and this is clearly a genocide.” The UK and the world must heed his words—not merely with sympathy, but with action to help return the stolen children.***

This report and UK Friends of Ukraine's and Johanna Baxter MP's campaign, **Return the Children Now**, calls for:

- The urgent return of every abducted Ukrainian child;
- Stronger UK and international sanctions, as well as diplomatic pressure, with the UK working in close partnership with other allies of Ukraine and global institutions to hold the perpetrators accountable;
- The expansion of legal mechanisms, including full support for the ICC's efforts to bring those responsible to justice and putting in place a Special Tribunal to investigate the charges of crimes against humanity and genocide, in regard to the forced deportations of Ukrainian children by Russia;
- Full investigation of whether these crimes meet the threshold of genocide under international humanitarian law;
- A coordinated international effort to help Ukraine track, identify and reunite children with their families through intelligence sharing and cooperation.

This is a defining moment. The return of Ukraine's stolen children must be a non-negotiable demand in any peace settlement. No ceasefire or final peace agreement can be considered just until every Ukraine child is brought home.

This campaign is not only about accountability. It is about restoration. It is about safeguarding the right of a nation to exist, and the right of every child to grow up knowing who they are, where they come from and to whom they belong.

Annex i: List of sanctioned individuals and entities by the United Kingdom for engaging and providing support for the Government of Russia's programme for the forced deportation and re-education of Ukrainian children

OFSI Group ID	Name	Position	Type	Designation source	Date Designated	Sanctions Imposed
15411	Maria Lvova-Belova	(1) Commissioner for Children's Rights under the President of the Russian Federation	Individual	United Kingdom	21/03/2023	Asset freeze, Travel Ban, Trust Services Sanctions
16010	Vladimir Viktorovic Solodov	(1) Governor of Kamchatka	Individual	United Kingdom	19/11/2024	Asset freeze, Travel Ban, Trust Services Sanctions
16011	Sergey Sergeyvich Kravstov	(1) Minister of Education for the Russian Federation	Individual	United Kingdom	17/07/2023	Asset freeze, Travel Ban, Trust Services Sanctions
16012	Murat Karalbiyevich Kumpilov	(1) Head of the Republic of Adygea	Individual	United Kingdom	17/07/2023	Asset freeze, Travel Ban, Trust Services Sanctions
16013	Eleanor Mikhailovna Fedorenko	(1) Adviser on Children's Rights to the Head of the so-called DPR	Individual	United Kingdom	17/07/2023	Asset freeze, Travel Ban, Trust Services Sanctions
16014	Vitaliy Konstantinovich Ganchev	(1) Head of the Military-Civilian Administration of the Kharkiv Region	Individual	United Kingdom	17/07/2023	Asset freeze, Travel Ban, Trust Services Sanctions
16015	Vladimir Vladisovic Kovalenko	(1) Chief of Staff of Yunarmia in Sevastapol	Individual	United Kingdom	17/07/2023	Asset freeze, Travel Ban, Trust Services Sanctions

16016	Ksenia Vladimirovna Mishonova	(1) Commissioner for Children's Rights in the Moscow Region	Individual	United Kingdom	17/07/2023	Asset freeze, Travel Ban, Trust Services Sanctions
16017	Daria Vasilevna Morozova	(1) Commissioner of Human Right's for the so-called DPR	Individual	United Kingdom	17/07/2023	Asset freeze, Travel Ban, Trust Services Sanctions
16018	Vyacheslav Vyacheslavovich Duhkin	(1) Deputy Head of the Moscow Oblast Regional Government	Individual	United Kingdom	17/07/2023	Asset freeze, Travel Ban, Trust Services Sanctions
16019	Lenara Khakimovna Ivanova	(1) Deputy Prime Minister of the Government of the Republic of Baskhortostan (2) Minister of Family, Labour and Social Protection of the Republic of Baskhortostan	Individual	United Kingdom	17/07/2023	Asset freeze, Travel Ban, Trust Services Sanctions
16023	The Federal State Budget Educational Institution Artek International Children's Center	involved entity	Entity	United Kingdom	17/07/2023	Asset freeze, Trust Services Sanctions
16683	All-Russian Young Army Military Patriotic Social Movement (Yunarmia)	involved entity	Entity	United Kingdom	19/11/2024	Asset freeze, Trust Services Sanctions

16684	Nikita Vladimirovich Nagorny	(1) Chief of the General Staff of the All-Russian Young Army Military Patriotic Social Movement (Yunarmia)	Individual	United Kingdom	19/11/2024	Asset freeze, Travel Ban, Trust Services Sanctions
16685	Igor Kazarezov	(1) Director of the Warrior Centres	Individual	United Kingdom	19/11/2024	Asset freeze, Travel Ban, Trust Services Sanctions
16686	Andrey Sabinov	"involved person"	Individual	United Kingdom	19/11/2024	Asset freeze, Travel Ban, Trust Services Sanctions
16687	Serafim Vikentevich Ivanov	(1) Press Secretary of the "Volunteer Squad" and the Head of the regional headquarters of Yunarmia VVPOD in the Kherson Region	Individual	United Kingdom	19/11/2024	Asset freeze, Travel Ban, Trust Services Sanctions
16688	Avangard	involved entity	Entity	United Kingdom	19/11/2024	Asset freeze, Trust Services Sanctions
16689	Olena Oleksandrivna Shapurova	(1) Russia-appointed Minister of Education and Science in Russian-occupied areas of Zaporizhzhia	Individual	United Kingdom	19/11/2024	Asset freeze, Travel Ban, Trust Services Sanctions
16690	Valentina Vasilyevna Lavrik	(1) Minister of Education, Science and Youth for occupied Crime	Individual	United Kingdom	19/11/2024	Asset freeze, Travel Ban, Trust Services Sanctions

16691	Tetiana Zaval'ska	(1) Director of Kherson Children's Home	Individual	United Kingdom	19/11/2024	Asset freeze, Travel Ban, Trust Services Sanctions
16692	Vitaliy Aleksandrovich Suk	(1) Director of the Oleshki Boarding School for Disabled Children	Individual	United Kingdom	19/11/2024	Asset freeze, Travel Ban, Trust Services Sanctions

Annex ii - Arrest warrants issued by the International Criminal Court in relation to Ukraine conflict

Name	Position	Date Arrest Warrant Issued	Alleged War Crime(s)	Relevant Statute	Prosecutor
Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin	President of the Russian Federation	17/03/2023	(1) War crime of unlawful deportation of population (children) and unlawful transfer of population (children) from occupied areas of Ukraine to the Russian Federation	(1) Article 8(2)(a)(vii) and Article 8(2)(b)(viii) of the Rome Statute (2) Article 25(3)(a) of the Rome Statute (3) Article 28(b) of the Rome Statute	Karim A.A. Khan KC
Maria Lvova-Belova	Commissioner for Children's Rights under the President of the Russian Federation	17/03/2023	(1) War crime of unlawful deportation of population (children) and unlawful transfer of population (children) from occupied areas of Ukraine to the Russian Federation	(1) Article 8(2)(a)(vii) and Article 8(2)(b)(viii) of the Rome Statute (2) Article 25(3)(a) of the Rome Statute (3) Article 28(b) of the Rome Statute	Karim A.A. Khan KC
Sergei Ivanovich Kobylash	Lieutenant General, Armed Forces (Commander of the Long-Range Aviation of the Aerospace Force) of the Russian Federation	05/03/2024	(1) War crime of directing attacks against Civilian Objects (2) War crime of Causing excessive incidental harm to civilians or damage to civilian objects (3) Crime against humanity of inhumane acts	(1) Article 8(2)(b)(ii) of the Rome Statute (2) Article 8(2)(b)(iv) of the Rome Statute (3) Article (7)(1)(k) of the Rome Statute	Karim A.A. Khan KC

Viktor Nikolayevich Sokolov	Admiral, Russian Navy (Commander of the Black Sea Fleet) of the Russian Federation	05/03/2024	(1) War crime of fireting attacks against Civilian Objects (2) War crime of Causing excessive incidental harm to civilians or damage to civilian objects (3) Crime against humanity of inhumane acts	(1) Article 8(2)(b)(ii) of the Rome Statute (2) Article 8(2)(b)(iv) of the Rome Statute (3) Article (7)(1)(k) of the Rome Statute	Karim A.A. Khan KC
Sergei Kuzhugetovich Shoigu	Minister of Defence of the Russian Federation	24/06/2024	(1) War crime of fireting attacks against Civilian Objects (2) War crime of Causing excessive incidental harm to civilians or damage to civilian objects (3) Crime against humanity of inhumane acts	(1) Article 8(2)(b)(ii) of the Rome Statute (2) Article 8(2)(b)(iv) of the Rome Statute (3) Article (7)(1)(k) of the Rome Statute (4) Article 25(3)(a) of the Rome Statute (5) Article 25(3)(b) of the Rome Statute (6) Article 28 of the Rome Statute	Karim A.A. Khan KC
Valery Vasilyevich Gerasimov	Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces	24/06/2024	(1) War crime of fireting attacks against Civilian Objects (2) War crime of Causing excessive incidental harm to civilians or damage to civilian objects (3) Crime against humanity of inhumane acts	(1) Article 8(2)(b)(ii) of the Rome Statute (2) Article 8(2)(b)(iv) of the Rome Statute (3) Article (7)(1)(k) of the Rome Statute (4) Article 25(3)(a) of the Rome Statute (5) Article 25(3)(b) of the Rome Statute (6) Article 28 of the Rome Statute	Karim A.A. Khan KC

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