

# Russian Abductions and Deportations of Ukrainian Children

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## 1. Introduction

As part of her duties in the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE, Carina Ödebrink has been appointed Special Rapporteur of the OSCE Parliamentary Support Team for Ukraine, with a mission to ensure that Ukraine's needs are fully considered and supported by the Assembly. This report stems from that mandate – to report on the unjust war that is being waged against Ukraine, and the enormous costs that Russia's war of aggression is exerting on Ukraine.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, which began in 2014 and intensified in 2022, is more than an attempt to conquer land. The Russian regime, led by Vladimir Putin, seeks to erase what they see as a “constructed” Ukrainian identity and replace it with a unified Russian one. It is a war for people as much as it is one for land.

Since launching its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Russian Federation has systematically committed a series of actions that can be considered war crimes, including large scale attacks on medical facilities, indiscriminate attacks on civilians, targeted destruction of cultural heritage, torture and executions of prisoners of war, sexual violence and abuse, and looting. All of these atrocities will traumatize and damage Ukraine for years to come, but none may be so damaging for the future of the Ukrainian nation and Ukrainians as the abduction, deportation and Russification of Ukrainian children.

Albeit less overtly violent, these crimes consist of the erasure of Ukrainian identity and militarization of children who are forced not only to endure a brutal war of aggression during those formative childhood years, but to have Russian imperialism, aided by Belarus and North Korea, kill their parents, siblings, relatives, friends, language, culture and home. Because of Putin's war, these children are being robbed of their identity. The obvious intent and scale of the crimes prove that the Russian Federation does not only seek to annex Ukrainian territory, but to erase a generation of Ukrainians in order to argue and demonstrate to the world that the territories it has occupied from Ukraine are now irreversibly Russian. Children are the focal point of this disgraceful effort to deprive Ukrainian children of their identity and future, which undoubtedly constitute war crimes and a violation of human

rights. It is a continuation of the crimes that the OSCE PA has declared “clear, gross and uncorrected violations of Helsinki principles” since Russia started the war in 2014, and a clear violation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, a convention that we must work together internationally to uphold.

This report builds upon reports and information made available by internationally recognized actors inside and outside of Ukraine, with the aim to expose the magnitude of Russia’s violation of basic international humanitarian law (IHL) and OSCE commitments. The forceful abductions and deportation of Ukrainian children has been condemned by numerous international entities, such as the UN Human Rights Office and the European Union, and highlighted in the OSCE reports that have been presented under the Moscow Mechanism. Together with international partners, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly needs to take resolute action to ensure accountability for the abductions of Ukrainian children and keep their situation an absolute priority. Ukraine will not be free before its children are located and returned.

## 2. The Russian Federation’s abductions and deportations of Ukrainian Children

Sources on the number of Ukrainian children that have been forcibly deported to Russia vary: 19,546 have been confirmed by Ukraine, while the Yale Humanitarian Research Lab places the number closer to 35,000. Maria Lvova-Belova, the Russian Commissioner for Children’s Rights (wanted for arrest by the International Criminal Court) has claimed that over 700,000 Ukrainian children have been “relocated” to Russia, while her Ukrainian counterpart, Daria Herasymchuk, estimates the true number to be between 200,000—300,000. Russia has consistently refused to provide Ukraine or other international parties with any records of transferred children, in violation of international law, which makes verifying the true number of deported children near impossible.

Ukrainian children deported from Russia include both children with and without (known) parents or legal guardians, as well as children cared for by Ukrainian state institutions. Their ages vary from anywhere between only a few months to 17 years old. Several reasons are presented by Russian authorities for these deportations, such as cultural exchange programs, evacuation from war, medical care, recreational summer camps and military-patriotic camps. Under any or multiple of these pretenses, children

are moved to facilities in Russia, Russian-occupied territory in Ukraine, or in Russian-allied Belarus.

The experiences of these deported children vary, but many are forced to undergo intense efforts to erase their Ukrainian identity. Children are subjected to Russification and militarization, including being forced to speak Russian, sing the Russian national anthem, participate in military marches and handle firearms. Moreover, the few children that have returned from these camps demonstrate signs of having been psychologically and physically abused and of the resulting trauma, including unquestioning obedience of adults and fear of using the Ukrainian language.

Moreover, Russia maintains a system of coerced adoptions for a significant number of deported Ukrainian children. These children are placed in Russian adoption databases, where they are falsely presented as being of Russian birth and origin. Through a series of legal reforms, the Russian Federation has streamlined a system of first placing Ukrainian children under temporary guardianship, then naturalizing them as Russian citizens, which in turn allows for their “temporary guardians” to adopt them. Legislation has also been introduced which eases the alteration of children’s names, places and dates of birth, further concealing their origin.

This systematic coercive adoption and subsequent erasure of Ukrainian identity for children abducted from Ukraine has been directed and supported from the very top of Kremlin leadership. Russian president Vladimir Putin signed legislation to ease adoption and naturalization of Ukrainian children, directed funds to the project and ordered the military to assist in transportation of the children. Putin is wanted for arrest by the ICC for his command of these crimes.

Previously, OSCE Participating States have invoked the Moscow Mechanism, which assembles independent experts to establish facts related to a specific human dimension problem. Since the beginning of the Russian Federation’s full-scale war of aggression, the Mechanism has been invoked in relation to the war in Ukraine four times. In April 2023, a report was presented to the Permanent Council on the forcible transfers of Ukrainian children, which concluded that the Russian Federation “manifestly violated the best interests of these children repeatedly”, and identified violations of articles 3, 8, 9, 10, 12, 14, 17, 20, 21, 24, 28, 29, 31 and 37(b) of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The succeeding report, presented in April 2024, established that under both International Humanitarian Law and International Human Rights Law, Ukrainian civilians (including children) have been subjected to arbitrary transfers and are “entitled to immediate and unconditional release.” Both texts reported that no attempt has been made

by the Russian Federation to cease their unlawful deportations or return the children. The reports are acknowledged in the OSCE PA Bucharest Declaration, which notes that the “forcible transfer and deportation of a population constitutes a crime against humanity, and possibly genocide.”

Other reports on the forcible transfers and violations of the rights of children has been produced by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE). The United Nations General Assembly, The European Parliament, PACE, and the European Network of Ombudspersons for Children (ENOC) among many other have adopted resolutions and statements on the situation of the children of Ukraine. With the formation of a Consultation Group and the appointment of a Special Envoy, the Council of Europe has taken additional steps to support the Ukrainian children.

### 3. Challenges of return and reintegration

By far the greatest challenge for returning the children that have been unlawfully deported to Russia is identification. As previously mentioned, no records of coerced deportations have been shared by Russia, and even if a list of children were to be provided, their current whereabouts would also need to be identified along with possible foster/adoptive families. Adding to the difficulty is the fact that many children have had their birth records and names changed to appear Russian, and the fact that some children were deported at such a young age that they might not remember their origin and home in Ukraine. Most importantly, the Russian Federation needs to agree to return the children – if not, it will be practically impossible, even if the children are identified and located.

Many of the children that have been subjected to Russia’s deportation scheme will be traumatized, and their re-integration into Ukrainian society will need to be careful and properly handled with the best interests of the child as its principle. Relevant institutions, including courts and law enforcement agencies, need to be trained to handle traumatized children so that their recovery is not hindered. It is critical that necessary expertise on child-specialized psychology is available for the children upon their return – not only for psychologists, but social workers and other related personnel.

#### 4. Recommendations

The OSCE PA, as an organization dedicated to the human rights and security of all children, has a responsibility to act to ensure that these children are returned to their home country. We must do what we can in order to facilitate this administration of justice. While we are currently assisting Ukraine in war, we must not forget to also assist them in peace. Once Russia ends the war of aggression, the recommendations described below are still highly relevant - we need a long-term approach that ensures that every child is brought back and rehabilitated responsibly.

In every declaration since the beginning of the Russian Federation's full-scale war of aggression, the Assembly has made its position clear. As expressed in the 2024 Bucharest declaration, the OSCE PA, *inter alia*, condemns in the strongest possible terms the forceful abductions and deportation of children from Ukraine to the Russian Federation, and notes that the forcible transfers may constitute a crime against humanity. In the 2023 Vancouver Declaration, the Assembly, *inter alia*, calls on OSCE participating States to provide all necessary assistance to support Ukraine's efforts to collect and verify data on all children, and to support Ukraine in creating specific mechanisms and solutions to advance the children's reunification with their families. The Assembly also condemned the forced deportations of Ukrainian children in the 2022 Birmingham Declaration and demanded their quick return, a demand that has been ignored by the Russian Federation.

The OSCE PA should take more resolute action to enforce the decisions of the annual declarations concerning the Ukrainian children. In addition to the statements that has been adopted, the Assembly should consider the following steps to be taken:

**Demand that Russia provides a list of abducted children.** While investigations have been successful in identifying a number of abducted children, no records are as substantive as Russia's own. We must demand that they provide Ukraine and the international community with complete and verifiable information on all forcibly transferred and deported Ukrainian children, including those whose personal data, names, or legal status have been changed.

**Pressure Russia to immediately cease the forced deportation, transfer, and illegal detention of Ukrainian children.** Belarus, a Russian ally, stopped hosting deportation camps for Ukrainian children as a result of heavy sanctions against it. This economic pressure needs to be continuously and increasingly applied to Russia and individuals affiliated with the

deportation schemes in an effort not only to return the children, but to end the war. The seizure of frozen Russian assets could present a financial resource with which the effort to return, rehabilitate and reintegrate the children could be funded, including the above-mentioned funding for organizations vital to the mission.

**Urge our governments to intensify cooperation with Ukrainian counterparts.** Many OSCE participating states are already committed to cooperation with the Ukrainian government and government agencies, and this cooperation needs to be continued and intensified. National law enforcement agencies, social agencies, and offices such as Ombudspersons for children are valuable sources of experience and competence. Ukraine needs support not only now, during the horrible war of aggression and abduction of its children, but also after the war, where we have a tremendous responsibility and ability to assist them in the enormous project of locating, returning, and caring for the kidnapped children.

**Maintain and deepen international coalitions and collaboration,** primarily within of the International Coalition for the Return of Ukrainian Children, as well as the initiative of the President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky «Brings Kids Back UA». In the 2024 Bucharest Declaration, OSCE PA declared its full support of the International Coalition and urged OSCE member states to join. This recommendation stands – it is vital that we join forces in international platforms, coalitions and assemblies so that we can work together to put an end to Russia’s unlawful abductions.

**Maintain funding for organizations like Yale HRL.** It is vitally important that organizations working with documenting these illegal deportations, such as Yale HRL, do not shut down as they lose funding. We must all commit to sponsoring initiatives in our respective legislative assemblies to supply these organizations with financial support. Databases of the missing children, as well as the unique competencies of those working at these organizations, cannot be lost – it is crucial, and it is *urgent*.

**Negotiations for peace and ceasefire must include arrangements for unconditional safe returns of the Ukrainian children.** The negotiation of a ceasefire or permanent peace is a deal to be approved by Ukraine and Russia, not any other state or actor. Still, in solidarity with Ukraine and as a significant pillar of democracy and human rights, the OSCE PA should act to ensure that any peace, ceasefire agreement or similar arrangements include a plan for the unconditional return and reintegration of the illegally abducted children of Ukraine. We cannot let these children be forgotten. It is worth repeating – they are the future of Ukraine.

**Urge the OSCE Executive Structures to invoke the Moscow Mechanism for further investigations into the Russian Federation's abductions.**

Previous reports that have been presented within the framework of the Moscow Mechanism has provided important observations of the forcible transfers and deportations perpetrated by the Russian Federation. It is however worth noting that the reports into the issue of Ukrainian children and civilians were presented in April 2023 and April 2024, respectively. OSCE PA should support the invocation of the Moscow Mechanism to provide additional investigations into the events and circumstances that has been discovered since then. Substantial and fact-based reports presented by independent experts are instrumental for the continued efforts to ensure accountability and that the Ukrainian children are returned to their home country.