



Russia's Forcible Transfers of Unaccompanied Ukrainian Children

Responses from Ukraine, the EU and Beyond

Andreas Umland
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Executive Summary

This survey was first published by the European Parliament in February 2024 and complements an April 2023 European Parliamentary Research Service report as well as other investigations into Russia's forcible displacement and deportation of Ukrainian children since 24 February 2022. The nature of this disturbing issue and the challenges posed together with possible solutions are discussed here, on the basis of numerous quotes from Ukrainian officials. Ukrainian reactions to the deportations are listed as well as the first foreign governmental and non-governmental responses. Against this background, various recommendations are presented for action to the European Union and further international stakeholders. These policy suggestions are based on interviews with experts in Kyiv and designed to jump-start the process of not only repatriating illegally transferred children but also restoring justice. An extensive bibliography concludes the report.

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List of Abbreviations

BRCS	Belarusian Red Cross Society
CoE	Council of Europe
DPR	Donetsk People's Republic
EP	European Parliament
EU	European Union
ICC	International Criminal Court
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
LPR	Lugansk People's Republic
MEP	Member of the European Parliament
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
ODIHR	Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
RCHR	Regional Centre for Human Rights
UCRN	Ukrainian Child Rights Network
UN	United Nations
UNCRC	United Nation's Committee on the Rights of the Child
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
USA	United States of America
YSPH	Yale School of Public Health

1. Outline of Events and Context¹

This report uses both the term ‘child’ and ‘children’ in the sense quoted in Article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child: ‘a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years’². In this context, the term ‘displacement’ applies to transfers of Ukrainian children who have been forcibly and illegally moved by Russian state organs, yet have remained within the Russian-occupied territory of Ukraine. The term ‘deportation’ denotes a state’s unilateral act of forcefully removing a person from her or his homeland; it refers here to those children who have been illegally transported from Ukraine to the internationally recognised territory of Russia³.

1.1 Russia’s Deportation Strategy and Its Genocidal Character

Starting in 2014 and especially since 2022, Moscow has implemented an outrageous policy of large-scale Russian state-enforced displacement and deportation of Ukrainian civilians including tens if not hundreds of thousands of children, among which apparently are also thousands of unaccompanied minors and teenagers. Belarus has participated in this campaign, albeit to a relatively smaller degree. These incredible actions are emanations of broader pathological traits in Soviet/neo-Soviet political thinking and behaviour⁴.

Both Russian and Belarusian governments have inherited a generally instrumental approach towards children’s human rights from the USSR’s domestic and foreign policies. For example, with its 2012 so-called ‘Dima Yakovlev Law’, Moscow forbade the adoption of Russian children by American citizens in retaliation to the US Magnitsky Act against Russian officials involved in human rights violations. The Russian government and parliament thereby deprived thousands of heavily impaired Russian children living in Russia’s nursing homes of a chance to grow up in American foster families⁵.

This report addresses the history of displacement, deportation and russification of unaccompanied Ukrainian children between 24 February 2022 and 10 October 2023 together with first reactions. It does not consider important documents such as reports

1 The report was commissioned in summer 2023 and first published in February 2024, as a briefing for the European Parliament’s Subcommittee on Human Rights. See: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EXPO_STU\(2024\)754442](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EXPO_STU(2024)754442). It follows, with a couple of exceptions, only developments until 10 October 2023. Translations from Ukrainian and Russian have been made by the author. The author is grateful for substantive and editorial advice to Sonia Chabane, Natalia Salchuk, Kateryna Rashevskya, Tetiana Fedosiuk, Omar Ashour, two anonymous reviewers from the EP and two representatives of [The Reckoning Project](#). None of these persons and their institutions can, however, be held responsible for any misjudgements that this report may contain.

2 Y. Ioffe, ‘Forcibly Transferring Ukrainian Children to the Russian Federation: A Genocide?’, *Journal of Genocide Research*, 2023.

3 As there have been various forms of Ukrainian displacement during the war since 2014, the report could be further specified as being about Russian state-enforced displacement, i.e. transfers within Ukraine not organised by the adult relatives of children but by the Russian government. Russian state-enforced deportation explicitly denotes the removal of Ukrainian children that did not happen in the context of voluntary migration of their immediate adult relatives and/or other legal guardians to Russia.

4 A. Umland, ‘Do Russians Love Their Children Too?’ *Transitions Online*, 16 July 2012.

5 C. Hawkins DeBose and E. DeAngelo, ‘The New Cold War: Russia’s Ban on Adoptions by U.S. Citizens’, *Journal of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers*, Vol 28, 2015, pp. 51-77; T. Fedosiuk, ‘The Stolen Children: How Russia Attempts to Kidnap Ukraine’s Future’, *International Centre for Defence and Security*, 2023.

from the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine, established by the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council in February 2022⁶, and the March 2023 arrest warrants for Vladimir Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova by the International Criminal Court⁷. These and similar relevant legal topics are covered in a January 2024 European Parliament briefing by Yulia Ioffe, which also includes discussion on the new International Centre for the Prosecution of the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine established in July 2023 and hosted by the European Union (EU) Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation, Eurojust⁸.

Within such a report, it would be justified to also include the story of accompanied Ukrainian children who have been forcibly transferred by the Russian government together with their adult legal guardians – either within Ukraine’s Russia-occupied territories or from Ukraine to Russia. Accompanied children constitute the majority of displaced and deported minors and teenagers. In part, they suffer similar fates and are currently also lost for Ukraine. Therefore, in their public pronouncements, Kyiv officials often do not explicitly distinguish between accompanied and unaccompanied Ukrainian children forcibly transferred to Russia. Moreover, Moscow’s removals of accompanied minors and teenagers have, as in the case of unaccompanied children, often been effected by application of some form or threat of coercion to the children themselves and/or their legal guardians.

The forcible transfer and future repatriation of accompanied Ukrainian children is, though, a different problem than the current sad fate and future possible return of unaccompanied Ukrainian minors and juveniles displaced or deported by the Russian state. Most of the unaccompanied Ukrainian children who have forcibly come under Russian tutelage are certain to have close relatives or other legal guardians in Ukraine. However, both their forcible transfer and future repatriation pose challenges that are different and often more complex than those regarding the return of accompanied children to Ukraine.

A particular aspect of the forcible transfer and subsequent russification of unaccompanied Ukrainian children is the time factor. The longer the Russian state-orchestrated displacement, assimilation and brainwashing of the unaccompanied children continues, the more problematic repatriation becomes for them as well as their families. Many children become integrated into Russian society, attached to their foster communities or families, and impregnated with Kremlin narratives⁹. The likelihood of disagreement with their repatriation once it becomes possible grows the longer subjection to Russian tutelage continues, an aspect of which Moscow is doubtless fully aware and cynically counts on.

An autumn 2023 official Russian governmental bulletin reported unashamedly about a group of 31 unaccompanied Ukrainian children picked up in Mariupol in 2022 and sent via Donetsk

6 OHCHR, [Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine](#), Human Rights Council, Fifty-second session 27 February–31 March 2023, A/HRC/52/62, 15 March 2023.

7 ICC, [‘Situation in Ukraine: ICC judges issue arrest warrants for Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin and Maria Alekseevna Lvova-Belova’](#), ICC Press Release, 2023.

8 European Commission, [‘Ukraine: International Centre for the prosecution of Russia’s crime of aggression against Ukraine starts operations today’](#), Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, News Article, 3 July 2023.

9 Interfax, [‘Yermak discussed with UNICEF Executive Director cooperation to stop the deportation of Ukrainian children by the occupiers \[Єрмак обговорив із виконавчим директором ЮНІСЕФ співпрацю щодо припинення депортації окупантами українських дітей\]’](#), *Interfax-Ukraine*, 25 April 2023; Y. Usenko, [‘Children of war: abduction of young Ukrainians by Russia as a crime of genocide \[Діти війни: викрадення росією маленьких українців як злочин геноциду\]’](#), *Ukrinform*, 7 February 2023.

to Russia. Seven of these juveniles who had by 2023 reached the age of 18, the Russian government bulletin rejoices, decided to stay in Russia¹⁰. Such an irreversible result of deportation illustrates that Russia's assimilation policy towards Ukrainian children is already having lasting effects¹¹.

This report cannot detail, discuss and interpret the varieties, connotations and changes of positions that displaced or deported Ukrainian children and their legal guardians have taken in the past, take now and will take in the future. These can range from complete disagreement to full accord. However, it should be remembered that all such statements by Ukrainian citizens since 2014 have been made under conditions of potential, latent, or actual duress. Russia's intense national and international propaganda campaigns, its multivariate war (hybrid, delegated, conventional, genocidal, etc.) against Ukraine, its terroristic occupation as well as bombardment of Ukrainian territories, and its child as well as adult education programmes are designed to generate expressions of consent. Made under conditions of restraint and public pressure, most opinions expressed by Ukrainians under occupation or within Russia should not be taken at face value. They can be genuine, but may also be false, situational, conformist, partial, or otherwise distorted. Moreover, such opinions may change over time and depend on the current locations not only of children, but also their accompanying or separated legal guardians.

Moscow's aggressive child removal policy is an aspect of Russia's nine-and-half-year military aggression against Ukraine that illustrates its character as a demographic and not only geographic conquest, as well as a national-cultural and not only military-political project¹². One of the 'special military operation's' aims since 2022 has been to capture and then russify large numbers of Ukrainian citizens in order to prop up Russia's declining population¹³. This aim may – at least initially – have been as important to Moscow as the annexation of Ukrainian territory. Child displacement and deportation has been taking place in Ukraine's occupied

10 Russian Government, 'Activities of Maria Lvova-Belova, Presidential Ombudsperson for Children's Rights, to protect children during the special military operation' [Деятельность Уполномоченного при Президенте Российской Федерации по правам ребенка Марии Львово-Беловой по защите детей во время специальной военной операции], Bulletin, No 2, 13 October 2023, p. 8.

11 Communication with Kateryna Rashevskya, Regional Centre for Human Rights (RCHR), 16 October 2023. Another Ukrainian youngster from this deported Mariupol group, 17-year-old Bohdan Yermokhin, in contrast, tried to flee Russia and return to Ukraine on his own in early 2023. Yet, Yermokhin was, during his escape, detained on the Belarusian-Russian border and brought back to Russia. See D. Bulavin, 'Teenager deported from Mariupol tried to return to Ukraine from Russia yet was detained on the border with Belarus – media' [Депортований із Маріуполя підліток намагався повернутися в Україну з Росії, його затримали на кордоні з Білоруссю — ЗМІ], Hromadske, 4 April 2023. By autumn 2023, Yermokhin's case had become widely known not only in Ukraine but also abroad. In apparent reaction to international mediation and negative international media reports concerning Yermokhin, Moscow eventually released the teenager, and he returned, shortly before his 18th birthday, to Ukraine in mid-November 2023. T. Peter, and Yu. Kovalenko, 'Ukrainian teen returns to Ukraine after being taken to Russia from occupied Mariupol', Reuters, 20 November 2023. The author is grateful to Tetiana Fedosiuk for alerting to this case.

12 M. Kragh, and A. Umland, 'Ukrainophobic Imaginations of the Russian Siloviki: The Case of Nikolai Patrushev, 2014-2023', Centre for Democratic Integrity, 2023.

13 O. Kunytskyi, 'Ukraine's abducted children: 'List of suspects will grow'', Deutsche Welle, 25 March 2023; D. Herasymchuk, 'There is no international structure that could offer an effective mechanism for the return of our deported children from Russia', [Немає жодної міжнародної структури, яка б могла запропонувати дієвий механізм повернення з Росії наших депортованих дітей], Interfax-Ukraine, 19 June 2023; S. Talaver, 'Russia's War Is a Failed Answer to Its Demographic Crisis', Jacobin, 23 April 2023.

Crimea and Donbas since 2014¹⁴. Yet, it did not become widely known until 2022 when the numbers of such illegal transfers rose sharply.

In view of the concerted character of Moscow's efforts to deport and russify young Ukrainian citizens, various scholars as well as international institutions have started to apply the concept of 'genocide' to Russia's actions¹⁵. Among other such statements (see below), a 2023 report from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (CoE) pointed out that 'the documented evidence of this practice matches with the international definition of genocide'¹⁶. This is also the approach and terminology preferred by most Ukrainian officials¹⁷.

1.2 Numbers, Procedures and Paths of Deportations

Between 24 February 2022 and 10 October 2023, Russia had displaced or deported at least 19 546 unaccompanied Ukrainian children. This is an official figure provided by the Ukrainian government's 'Children of War' portal at childrenofwar.gov.ua which also lists statistics on killed, maimed, missed, found, returned and abused children¹⁸. However, this daily updated statistic includes only those children on whom information has been provided to the government by relatives, witnesses or local authorities regarding a child's deportation to Russia or forcible transfer within the Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine and where such evidence is already undergoing verification¹⁹. Presumably, the real figure is considerably higher.

A broad variety of estimates on the number of overall deportations has been circulating since 2022. In a June 2023 interview, Daria Herasymchuk, Ukraine's Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights and Child Rehabilitation, rejected a staggering number published by Russian authorities of 744 000 allegedly illegally 'evacuated' Ukrainian children. Ukraine's Children Rights Commissioner estimated instead that there could be up to 200-300 000 deported and forcibly removed children²⁰. This number and estimates of similar magnitude by Ukrainian officials also include accompanied minors who were transferred by force to Russia with their legal guardians.

14 Embassy of Ukraine to Ireland, 'On illegal adoption of the orphaned children of Ukrainian nationality in Crimea', News, 17 October 2014; Crimean Human Rights Group, 'Illegal deportation of Ukrainian citizens from Crimea by Russian Federation', Working session 11: Humanitarian issues and other commitments, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 19 September 2017: 'For more than three years, Ukraine has not been able to obtain information from the Russian Federation on the fate of more than 4,000 orphans who were in orphanages in Crimea at the time of the occupation. It is known that in October 2014 several children were taken from Crimea and moved to the families of Russian citizens in the framework of the Train of Hope project. However, the Russian authorities refuse to give Ukraine any information about the fate of moved children and those who remained in Crimea'.

15 See for instance Y. Ioffe, 'Forcibly Transferring Ukrainian Children to the Russian Federation: A Genocide?', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 2023.

16 Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, 'The forcible transfer and 'russification' of Ukrainian children shows evidence of genocide, says PACE', News, 28 April 2023.

17 See for instance Ukrinform, 'Bring Back Kids UA movement launched in Ukraine to return deported children' [В Україні започаткували рух Bring Back Kids UA за повернення депортованих дітей - Зарівна], Ukrinform, 15 May 2023.

18 Ukrainian Government, 'Children of War', Ukrainian Government Children Affected by the War Tracker, 2023.

19 L. Solomko, 'Thousands of deported and abducted Ukrainian children are hostages in the hands of Russia. What are the mechanisms for their release?' *Voice of America*, 17 March 2023.

20 D. Herasymchuk, op. cit.

Apparently, Moscow has deliberately circulated an exaggerated estimate of 'evacuated' children, which is designed to blur the difference between potentially genocidal deportation and russification of Ukrainian children, along with other forms of transfer of Ukrainian minors and teenagers to Russia. If not simply taken out of the blue, the figure of 744 000 could, for instance, include children of Ukrainian labour migrants in Russia. Such dilution of crimes committed by Russia via statistical hyperbole is meant to obfuscate the nature, scale and intentions of Russian human rights violations.

The displaced or deported unaccompanied Ukrainian children can be separated into the following categories:

- ❖ 'Children of war' in a more literal sense are minors or juveniles who for different reasons have been left alone during the fighting. Unaccompanied children have been collected by Russian officials and activists from the frontline or occupied Ukrainian territories.
- ❖ Some children's parents or relatives have been persuaded by Russian agents (officials, activists, collaborators, etc.) to send their offspring to Russian summer camps or other recreational centres. After an agreed recreation period, many have been kept for longer and/or transported elsewhere.
- ❖ Since 2014, underage orphans and other minors living in Ukrainian children's homes have been systematically displaced or deported by the Russian authorities. As many as 3 855 children from Ukrainian institutions had, according to the Regional Centre for Human Rights (RCHR), been deported or displaced by September 2023²¹. It should be noted that, according to the Ukrainian Child Rights Network (UCRN), less than 10 % of minors and teenagers in Ukrainian children's homes are genuine orphans, i. e. have no living parent²².
- ❖ Some Ukrainian children have been separated from their parents in so-called 'filtration camps' along the frontline²³.

From all four categories, most of these illegally transferred Ukrainian non-accompanied children have close relatives or other legal guardians. Some of the latter live in the government-controlled areas of Ukraine whereas others are themselves externally displaced and live abroad. In the vast majority of cases, neither the relatives nor any relevant Ukrainian governmental authorities have given explicit permission for Russia's permanent transfers of these unaccompanied children.

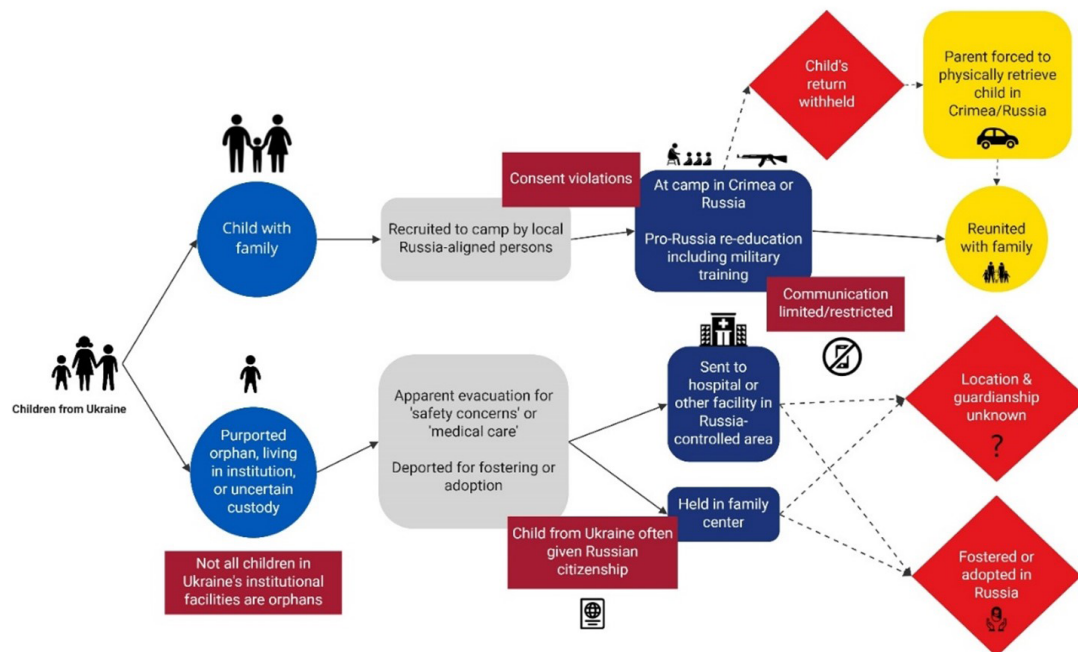
21 UN, 'Deportation, Treatment of Ukraine's Children by Russian Federation Take Centre Stage by Many Delegates at Security Council Briefing: Delegate Questions Moscow's Position in International Community Once Conflict Ends', United Nations Meetings Cover and Press Releases, SC/15395, 24 August 2023.

22 Interview with Daria Kasyanova, Ukrainian Child Rights Network (UCRN), Kyiv, 5 September 2023.

23 Ukrinform, 5 May 2023, op. cit.

In February 2023, the Yale School of Public Health's Humanitarian (YSPH) Research Laboratory published the following graph (Figure 1) illustrating two pathways for the forcible Russian transfer of Ukrainian children and their rare return to legal guardians.

Figure 1: A child's journey through Russia's system of re-education camps and adoption



Source: YSPH Humanitarian Research Lab, 2023.

Certain children's camps in Russia are advertised as 'integration programmes' for Ukrainian children. By the end of 2022, at least 32 of 43 such camps had been identified by the YSPH as engaged in systematic political re-education. The YSPH report published in February 2023 stated that '[t]wo facilities were associated with the deportation of orphans'²⁴: a psychiatric hospital and a family centre. 41 summer camps were either in Russian-occupied Crimea or Russia itself: '12 were clustered around the Black Sea, 7 are on Crimea, and 10 are located around Moscow, Kazan and Yekaterinburg'. 11 camps are located more than 500 miles from Ukraine's border with Russia, including 2 in Siberia and 1 in the Magadan region of Russia's Far East near the Pacific Ocean²⁵.

According to the RCHR, during the first nine months of 2023, 'Russia not only did not stop but escalated its efforts to "re-educate" Ukrainian children. [There were] 85 cases involving the transportation of 8 254 Ukrainian children to summer camps or sanatoriums between May and September 2023. This network of facilities has notably expanded in comparison to 2022. Some of them are operating under the tutelage of President Putin himself, for instance, the "Okean" (Ocean) camp in Vladivostok, located 9 000 kilometres away from the

24 YSPH Humanitarian Research Lab, 'Russia's systematic programme for the re-education and adoption of children from Ukraine', Conflict Observatory, 2023.

25 YSPH Humanitarian Research Lab, op. cit.

children's homes. There are now 46 such camps in Russia, 7 more camps on the territory of occupied Crimea [also identified by the YSPH] and at least 4 such institutions in Belarus'²⁶.

In November 2023, the YSPH Humanitarian Research Lab published a follow-up report specifically on Belarus' participation in the Russian deportation programme detailing that more than 2 400 children from Ukraine aged between six and 17 years old have been taken to 13 facilities across Belarus since 24 February 2022²⁷. The YSPH report further specified that '[m]ore than 2,000 children [...] were transported to the Dubrava children's centre in Belarus' Minsk region between September 2022 and May 2023, [...] while 392 children were taken to 12 other facilities. [...] Transports to Belarus through Russia were "ultimately coordinated" between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Belarus leader Alexander Lukashenko [...]. Lukashenko approved the use of state organizations to transport children from Ukraine to Belarus and finance their transportation. Once in Belarus, children have been subjected to military training and re-education [...]. It is unclear how many of the children identified by Yale's research remain in Belarus'²⁸.

1.3 Russian Legislation and Actors Involved in Deportations

While there had already been forcible transfers of children in the period 2014-2021, a systematic and mass campaign started in early 2022 as part of large civilian deportations from the Donbas to Russia. It accelerated further after 24 February 2022 within Moscow's so-called 'special military operation' (i.e. full-scale war) in Ukraine. For instance, on 26 April 2022, according to Russia's so-called Commissioner for Children's Rights, Maria Lvova-Belova, 27 alleged orphans from Donbas were officially transferred to Russian families²⁹. This was done without permission by Ukrainian authorities, but instead by 'political consent' from the so-called Lugansk People's Republic (LPR) and Donetsk People's Republic (DPR). At that point in time, these pseudo-republics had just been recognised as 'states' by Moscow and were still waiting to be annexed to Russia which happened five months later.

Various new legal acts were adopted by Russia to facilitate the russification and assimilation of Ukrainian children. Among the first such regulations were: the Russian Government Resolution No. 348 in March 2022 on the integration of Ukrainian children from the so-called LPR and DPR into Russian society³⁰; the Russian Ministry of Education Decree No. AB-631/05 of March 2022 which aimed at identifying and re-educating deported children with poor Russian language skills³¹; and amendments to the 2019 Russian President's

26 Communication with Kateryna Rashevskaya, RCHR, 16 October 2023.

27 YSPH Humanitarian Research Lab, '[Belarus's Involvement in Russia's Systematic Relocation of Ukraine's Children](#)', Conflict Observatory, 2023.

28 A. Deutsch, '[Thousands of Ukrainian children taken to Belarus - Yale research](#)', Reuters, 17 November 2023.

29 K. Rashevskaya, '[Operation Repatriation: How to return Ukrainian children forcibly deported by Russia? \[Операція "репатріація": як повернути примусово депортованих росією українських дітей?\]](#)', Higher School of Advocacy, 16 June 2022.

30 'On the procedure for coordinating activities in the field of general education, secondary vocational education and relevant additional vocational education, vocational training, additional education of children and adults, education, guardianship and care of minors, social support and social protection in relation to persons originating from the territories of the DPR and LPR.'

31 'On sending methodological recommendations on secondary vocational education and preparation for the final state certification of citizens accepted by transfer to educational organisations of the Russian Federation from educational organisations of the DPR, LPR and Ukraine.'

Decreets Numbers 183 and 187³² in May 2022 which simplified the procedure to obtain Russian citizenship for Ukrainian children without parental care³³. After these and a number of further executive acts, on 18 March 2023 the State Duma passed a law allowing easier withdrawal of Ukrainian citizenship from children under 14 years³⁴. These revisions have led to a situation in which, according to a report from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe/Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR), children 'have virtually no say in the whole process [of citizenship change] and the same is true for their parents or other (original) legal guardians in cases, where children are separated from them'³⁵.

A range of Russian governmental bodies participate in the deportation and adoption process, with Children Commissioner Lvova-Belova playing a coordinating role. Granting of Russian citizenship entitles adopted children to 'social guarantees', in other words access to governmental subsidies. This creates financial incentives for potential adopters³⁶. Under the Russian Family Code, adopted children are equal in status to their parents' own children. Russian adoptions 'may entail the change of the name, surname and the date and place of birth of the child. It is guided by the principle of secrecy, due to which there is not, and there cannot be, any database of adopted children'³⁷. This makes it difficult to establish Russia-adopted Ukrainian children's status and their relatives in Ukraine³⁸.

At one point, the Russian government responded to international criticism in 2022 concerning some of the deported children claiming that they have been merely placed in foster care rather than offered for adoption with Russian families³⁹. Yet, the plausibility or, at least, continued validity of such rebuttals is questionable⁴⁰. It is known that, since 2014, numerous orphans from occupied Crimea and Donbas forcibly transferred to Russia had not only been put under foster care, but also adopted by Russian citizens⁴¹.

In February 2023, YPSH identified dozens of federal, regional and local officials involved in the operational as well as political implementation of Russia's child deportation and russification

32 'On determining, for humanitarian purposes, the categories of persons entitled to apply for Russian citizenship under a simplified procedure', and 'On certain categories of foreign citizens and stateless persons entitled to apply for Russian citizenship under a simplified procedure.'

33 V. Bilkova, C. Hellestveit and E. Šteinerte, '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', OSCE, 4 May 2023, p. 19.

34 Federal Law 'On peculiarities of the legal status of citizens of the Russian Federation who have citizenship of Ukraine.'

35 V. Bilkova, C. Hellestveit and E. Šteinerte, op. cit., p. 20.

36 Interview with Kateryna Rashevskaya, RCHR, Kyiv, 5 September 2023.

37 V. Bilkova, C. Hellestveit and E. Šteinerte, op. cit., p. 18.

38 K. Rashevskaya, op. cit.

39 Russian Foreign Affairs Ministry, 'Unreliable information from the US Department of State', Press Service, 12 September 2023; I. Balachuk, 'Russian Children's Commissioner says orphan from Mariupol who wanted to go home was not allowed to leave Russia', Ukrainska Pravda, 4 April 2023.

40 Communication with Kateryna Rashevskaya, RCHR, 16 October 2023.

41 Embassy of Ukraine to Ireland, op. cit.; V. Bilkova, C. Hellestveit and E. Šteinerte, op. cit., p. 19.

programme⁴². Activities of these officials include: logistic coordination; fundraising; providing supplies; managing children's camps; as well as promotion of the russification campaign within Russia and the occupied areas of Ukraine. By early 2023, 'at least 12 of these individuals had not yet been put on US and/or international sanctions lists'⁴³. Crucial decision-makers and their official functions in implementing the resettlement, re-education and adoption of Ukrainian children are listed in Figure 2.

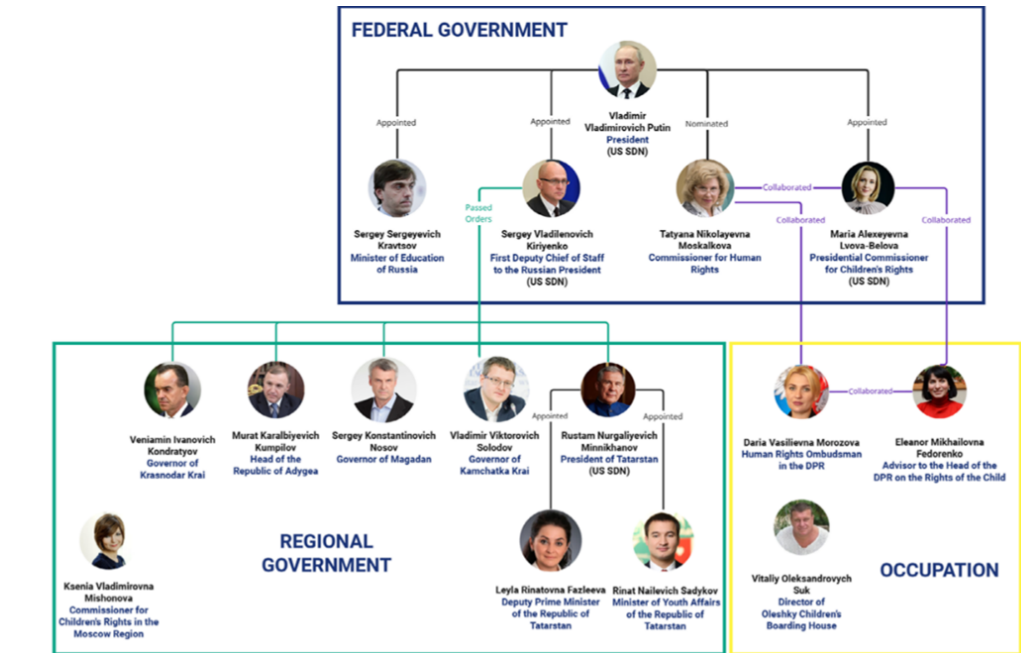


Figure 2: Senior leadership involved in systematic relocation, re-education and adoption of Ukrainian children

Source: YSPH Humanitarian Research Lab, 2023⁴⁴.

2. Reaction to Deportations in Ukraine and Abroad

2.1 Official Statements and Actions of Ukraine on Deportations

Ukraine has addressed the forcible transfers through various public statements and diplomatic channels. On 8 April 2022, the country's then Commissioner for Human Rights Liudmyla Denisova alerted the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions. At that time over 121 000 children had been transferred from Ukraine – mainly with their families from the Donbas⁴⁵. As this practice continued and accelerated, Ukrainian officials have made more and more statements on the issue and addressed particular persons. On the one hand, the latter included Ukrainian

42 YSPH Humanitarian Research Lab, op. cit.

43 YSPH Humanitarian Research Lab, op. cit.

44 This picture distinguishes between state-enforced deportation into Russia, on the one side, and state-organised organised displacement within Ukraine's occupied territories, on the other. It lists only select officials involved in the forcible transfers implemented by hundreds of Russian civil servants and activists.

45 T. Fedosiuk, op. cit.

relatives of illegally transferred children⁴⁶, and on the other hand Russian foster or adopting families possibly unaware of their involvement in an international crime⁴⁷. In March 2023, Ukraine's Vice Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk appealed unsuccessfully to Moscow:

'I am publicly addressing the Russian Ombudswoman Tatyana Moskalkova and the Russian Ombudswoman for Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova. I propose to immediately hand over to the Ukrainian side the lists of all orphans and children deprived of parental care who: (1) as of 24 February 2022 were citizens of Ukraine, up to and including the age of 18, (2) are currently in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine, (3) were transferred from the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine to the Russian territory'⁴⁸.

Since the second half of 2022, Ukrainian criticism has become increasingly targeted at multilateral institutions and foreign partners. Especially those international organisations tasked with preventing and reversing forcible transfers of children are branded by Kyiv as insufficiently active and effective. In November 2022, the Head of Ukraine's Presidential Office, Andriy Yermak, criticised the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC): 'unfortunately, due to the very passive position of international organisations, in particular the ICRC, we are not able to fix the exact number of our children and where they are'⁴⁹.

On 19 May 2023, Virginia Gamba, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, met with Lvov-Belova – then already wanted by the ICC – in Moscow and talked with her about the deportation of Ukrainian children. Gamba was heavily criticised for this meeting not only by Ukrainian commentators but also – as noted in Ukraine – by the US State Department⁵⁰. Despite Gamba's meeting with Lvov-Belova and the absence of any concrete results, in 2023, the UN's so-called 'list of shame' – the Secretary-General's yearly 'Children and Armed Conflict' report to the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), published shortly after Gamba's trip to Moscow – did not mention the mass Russian deportation and displacement of unaccompanied and accompanied Ukrainian children⁵¹.

In May 2023, Ukraine's parliament called 'on the institutions of the CoE and the EU, the OSCE in Europe, the UNCRC, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the UN Children's Fund [UNICEF], the International Organization for Migration and the ICRC to intensify their work on developing international

46 Ukrinform, '[Deportation of children: the Ombudsman told where to turn to relatives and friends](#) [Депортація дітей: омбудсман розповів, куди звертатися рідним і близьким]'; Ukrinform, 1 February 2023.

47 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, '[Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine on the deportation of Ukrainian citizens from Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions by Russia](#) [Заява МЗС України щодо депортації Росією українських громадян з Херсонської та Запорізької областей]'; Press Release, 2022.

48 I. Vereshchuk, '[Deputy PM Vereshchuk appeals to Russian commissioners to provide lists of Ukrainian orphans](#)'; The New Voice of Ukraine, 19 March 2023.

49 I. Sitnikova, 'Yermak criticises ICRC for passive stance on abduction of Ukrainian children by occupants [Єрмак розкритикував МКЧХ за пасивну позицію щодо викрадення окупантами українських дітей]'; Hromadske, 9 November 2022.

50 European Pravda, '[US State Department concerned over UN official's meeting with Russian Children's Rights Commission](#)'; Ukrainska Pravda, 25 May 2023.

51 Communication with Kateryna Rashevskaya, RCHR, 16 October 2023; UNGA, '[Children and armed conflict: Report of the Secretary-General](#)', General Assembly Security Council Seventy-seventh session, A/77/895-S/2023/363, 5 June 2023.

mechanisms for the identification, return and reunification of abducted and forcibly deported children, protection of interests, return of abducted and forcibly deported children home and reunification with their families⁵². In the same month, President Zelenskyy publicly asked 'the Vatican to join Ukraine's efforts to return Ukrainian children illegally and forcibly taken to Russia, *de facto* abducted'⁵³.

As the child deportations continued and only very few of them were reversed, the Ukrainian government has launched various initiatives. These include the Centre of National Resistance collecting, *inter alia*, information on illegal displacement; the Child Rights Protection Centre; Bring Kids Back UA programme; as well as Coordination Council on Child Protection and Safety under the President of Ukraine chaired by Presidential Office Head Yermak. The Bring Kids Back UA Action Plan unites efforts by Ukrainian government agencies, international and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as well as concerned citizens. According to Commissioner Herasymchuk, this programme aims to: return and reintegrate Ukrainian children deported by Russia; develop family forms of upbringing for orphaned children; record crimes; promote inter-parliamentary cooperation; and communicate with the public⁵⁴. However, by autumn 2023, less than 400 children of the so far almost 20 000 officially registered displaced or deported children had been returned to government-controlled territory within Ukraine⁵⁵.

2.2 Ukrainian Non-governmental Assessments and Initiatives

A range of NGOs have become engaged in the documentation, prevention and reversal of Russian state-organised displacements and state-enforced deportations of Ukrainian children. The Save Ukraine Foundation founded by Mykola Kuleba, Ukraine's former Commissioner for Children's Rights, the Ukrainian section of the international network SOS Children's Villages and RCHR are among organisations advocating, preparing or managing the return of deported children. On 25 February 2022, a large coalition of NGOs under the name 'Ukraine: At Five in the Morning' was launched. It brings together 31 NGOs as well as some individual experts documenting Russia's war crimes and crimes against humanity. It seeks protection or justice for victims through various national and international legal mechanisms. In January 2023, the coalition published its report 'Deportation of Ukrainian citizens from the territory of active hostilities or from the temporarily occupied territory of Ukraine to the territory of the Russia and the Republic of Belarus' in Kyiv⁵⁶.

52 Press Service of the Verkhovna Rada, 2023, 'The Vice-Speaker Olena Kondratiuk addressed the National Council and invited the President of Slovakia to become an ambassador for the return of abducted Ukrainian children', *Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine*, 29 March 2023.

53 B. Skavron, 'Zelensky drew the Pope's attention to the abduction of children in Ukraine by the aggressor state [ЗЕЛЕНСЬКИЙ ЗВЕРНУВ УВАГУ ПАПИ РИМСЬКОГО НА ВИКРАДЕННЯ В УКРАЇНІ ДІТЕЙ ДЕРЖАВОЮ-АГРЕСОРКОЮ]', *TSN*, 13 May 2023.

54 President, 'The President got acquainted with the plan to return children illegally deported by Russia Bring Kids Back UA and took part in the opening of the Centre for the Protection of Children's Rights [Президент ознайомився з планом повернення незаконно депортованих Росією дітей Bring Kids Back UA та взяв участь у відкритті Центру захисту прав дитини]', President of Ukraine, 31 May 2023.

55 'Help us trace and bring back home the forcefully deported children of Ukraine', *Bring Kids Back UA*, 2023.

56 Media Center Ukraine, 'How Russia steals children and illegally moves Ukrainian citizens: Presentation of the analytical report of the Coalition 'Ukraine. Five in the Morning' [Як росія краде дітей та незаконно переміщує громадян України: презентація аналітичного звіту Коаліції «Україна. П'ята ранку»]', *Ukrinform*, 16 January 2023.

An example illustrating another type of civic response to the illegal displacements and deportations is [KibOrg](#). This is a project involving journalists and information technology specialists who investigate Russian crimes in Ukraine, expose collaborators and debunk Russian fakes. As an example, KibOrg managed to gain access to the occupational database 'Children of Donbas' with information about: abductions; transfer of children's personal files to Russian citizens; forced 'passportisation'; and local collaboration⁵⁷.

2.3 Foreign Actions in Response to Deportations

International public awareness of Russia's mass deportation of children has risen only slowly. Following the large-scale invasion, it initially became a topic of attention in East-Central Europe. On 25 May 2022, for instance, the ministers responsible for social policies of Ukraine, Estonia, the Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Slovakia issued a joint open statement condemning Russia's illegal deportations and related violations of international law⁵⁸. On 1 July 2022, global human rights organisations called for a moratorium on inter-country adoptions of Ukrainian children in line both with the Ukrainian government's approach and international law. By early March 2023, it had been signed by 43 international NGOs⁵⁹.

In September 2022, the European Parliament (EP) adopted a resolution calling upon Russia, *inter alia*, to:

'immediately cease [...] all forced transfers of children to the Russian-occupied territories and the Russian Federation, as well as any inter-country adoptions of children transferred from Ukraine's entire internationally recognised territory; [...] repeal all legislation facilitating the adoption of Ukrainian children; [...] immediately provide information about the names, whereabouts and well-being of all Ukrainians detained or deported, and allow and enable the safe return of all Ukrainian civilians, including children; [...] immediately grant international organisations such as the OHCHR [Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights] and UNICEF access to all Ukrainian children who have been forcefully deported to the Russian-occupied territories and Russia; [and] ensure the safety and well-being of Ukrainian children while in Russia and in the Russian-occupied territories, and to protect them from the dangers arising from the war and its consequences'⁶⁰.

Being one of the first such significant foreign declarations, the EP resolution was appreciated

57 KibOrg, '[Minihysterical ministers: who is involved in the abduction of children in Luhansk region](#)' [Міністерки-міністерви: хто причетний до викрадення дітей на Луганщині], *KIBORG*, 20 July 2023; KibOrg, '[Donbas Children Database: Who is involved in the abduction of children in Mariupol](#)' [База даних «Діти Донбасу»: хто причетний до викрадень дітей у Маріуполі], *KIBORG*, 22 August 2023.

58 Ukraine Ministry of Social Policy, '[Maryna Lazebna together with ministers from 6 EU countries issued a joint statement condemning the illegal actions of the Russian Federation against children in Ukraine](#)' [Марина Лазєбна разом з міністрами 6 країн ЄС звернулись з спільною заявою про засудження незаконних дій російської

59 Human Rights Watch, '[Joint statement on the forcible transfer, deportation, and adoption of children from Ukraine by Russia](#)', *Reliefweb*, 2023.

60 EP, '[Joint Motion For A Resolution on human rights violations in the context of the forced deportation of Ukrainian civilians to and the forced adoption of Ukrainian children in Russia](#)', 2022/2825(RSP), 14 September 2022.

in Ukraine as reflecting the government's position and demands at the time⁶¹. In a February 2023 resolution, the EP went further and stated that transferring children from one group to another constitutes the crime of genocide⁶². As mentioned above, this classification was also supported by the Parliamentary Assembly of the CoE in April 2023 and duly noted in Ukraine⁶³. The term 'genocide' was not, though, used in a parallel OSCE/ODIHR report which instead spoke of 'crimes against humanity' – a nuance noted in the Ukrainian government's comment to the report⁶⁴.

Shortly after, in April 2023 Russia used an informal UN procedure to spread disinformation concerning its child transfers. In explicit reaction to Moscow's action, a 'Joint Statement' was signed by the EU together with 22 other states⁶⁵. The multilateral declaration stated, *inter alia*, that: 'We unequivocally condemn the actions of Russia in Ukraine, in particular the forced deportation of Ukrainian children, as well as other serious violations against children committed by Russian forces in Ukraine'⁶⁶.

On 1 June 2023, International Children's Day, 23 foreign diplomatic missions in Ukraine issued a joint statement on Russia's forced deportation of Ukrainian children which concluded: 'We will hold Russia accountable for its illegal and barbaric actions in Ukraine!'⁶⁷. On 18 August 2023, the Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights Daria Herasymchuk, UN Resident Coordinator in Ukraine Denise Brown and UNICEF Representative Murat Shahin signed a joint preventive plan to stop gross violations of children's rights in the context of Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine⁶⁸.

In July 2023, the Advisor to the Head of the Office of the President of Ukraine Mykhailo Podolyak indicated that Riyadh and Ankara were negotiating with Moscow the return of Ukrainian children⁶⁹. In October 2023, the *Financial Times* confirmed that Türkiye and Saudi Arabia

61 See for instance I. Lysohor, '[European Parliament condemns deportation and forced adoption of Ukrainian children in Russia](#) [Європарламент засудив депортацію та насильницьке всиновлення українських дітей у Росії]', *Livyy bereh*, 15 September 2022.

62 European Parliament, '[Resolution of 16 February 2023 on one year of Russia's invasion and war of aggression against Ukraine](#)', P9_TA(2023)0056, 2023. An exchange of views on the 'Violation of international law and human rights of children from Ukraine forcibly deported to or retained in Russia' followed on 1 March 2023 in the EP Subcommittee on Human Rights. The EP Committee on Employment and Social Affairs along with the Committee on Legal Affairs held a joint hearing on 20-21 April 2022 discussing the risk of Ukrainian children in institutional care being illegally adopted.

63 Ukrinform, '[PACE recognises deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia as genocide](#) [ПАРЄ визнала геноцидом депортацію українських дітей до росії]', *Ukrinform*, 27 April 2023.

64 V. Bilkova, C. Hellestveit and E. Šteinerte, op. cit., p. 81; Radio Liberty, '[May be considered a crime against humanity: OSCE report on Russia's deportation of Ukrainian children](#)', Radio Liberty, 4 May 2023.

65 Andorra, Albania, Australia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Canada, Georgia, Guatemala, Iceland, Japan, Moldova, Monaco, Montenegro, New Zealand, North Macedonia, Norway, San Marino, Switzerland, Ukraine, the Republic of Korea, the United Kingdom and the USA.

66 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, '[Joint Statement in response to the Russian Federation's Arria Formula meeting on the illegal forced deportation of children by the Russian Federation in Ukraine](#) [Спільна заява у відповідь на засідання РФ за формулою Аррія щодо незаконної примусової депортації дітей Російською Федерацією в Україні]', Joint Statement, 2023.

67 Ukrainian Government, op. cit.

68 Gordon, '[Ukraine and the UN sign plan to prevent violations of children's rights in the context of Russian aggression](#)' [Україна й ООН підписали план щодо запобігання порушенням прав дітей в умовах агресії РФ], Gordon, 19 August 2023.

69 L. Kozova, '[Ukraine, with the help of third countries, is trying to return children abducted by the Russian](#)

had already been engaged for some months in negotiations with Russia on the repatriation of Ukrainian children⁷⁰. The Emirate of Qatar also engaged in informal diplomacy and achieved in autumn 2023 a repatriation of four children from Russia to Ukraine⁷¹.

3 Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

3.1 Assessment of Current Initiatives: Almost no Repatriations

In addition to the documents quoted in this report, further announcements, declarations, resolutions, protests and the like now constitute an impressive body of texts with clear messages, unequivocal aims and resolute formulations. These statements stem not only from Ukrainian stakeholders, but also other governmental bodies and NGOs as well as international and EU institutions, including the EP. However, despite such comprehensive condemnation, by 10 October 2023 only 386 Ukrainian deported children had been returned from Russia⁷². Thousands of unaccompanied Ukrainian minors remain in Russia or Russia-occupied territory without their legal guardians. As mentioned above, the longer they stay away from their homes and families, the more painful, complicated and questionable their future repatriation becomes.

Occasionally, there has been select Russian governmental cooperation in the return of certain Ukrainian children. For propagandistic purposes, a video of a Ukrainian family reunion in Russia was, for instance, circulated; the tape prominently featured Lvova-Belova who took credit for the successful action⁷³. However, despite many appeals to the Russian government, no transparent procedure, mechanism, or algorithm for enacting family reunions and child repatriations has been established⁷⁴.

Not only has bilateral communication on the issue been unsuccessful. Attempts at finding solutions within multilateral formats and by international organisations have to date also been ineffective. Ukraine's Children's Rights Commissioner Herasymchuk complained: 'the ICRC should be the organisation that would be the first to be on the spot and save people, but unfortunately, in practice in Ukraine, this did not work'⁷⁵.

Oddly, instead of preventing and reversing forcible transfers, the Belarusian Red Cross Society (BRCS), a member of the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, has participated in the deportation of Ukrainian children to Belarus⁷⁶.

Federation – Podolyak [Україна за допомогою третіх країн намагається повернути дітей, викрадених РФ – Подоляк], UNIAN News Agency, 19 July 2023.

70 Reuters, 'Talks on repatriating Ukrainian children from Russia under way since at least April, source says', Reuters, 19 July 2023.

71 A. Mills, 'Qatar helping four Ukrainian children go home from Russia to Ukraine', Reuters, 16 October 2023.

72 Ukrainian Government, op. cit.

73 Lvova-Belova, M., 'DNA expertise helped to return the child to the grandmother from Ukraine [експертиза ДНК допомогла вернуть ребенка бабушке с Украины]', Telegram, 3 September 2023.; Russian Government, op. cit.

74 D. Herasymchuk, op. cit.

75 Ibid.

76 AP, 'Belarus Red Cross says it is involved in transfer of children out of Ukraine', The Guardian, 20 July 2023.

Dzmitry Shautsou, the BRCS's Secretary General, publicly boasted about these activities after which the BRCS was sharply criticised from many sides including the ICRC⁷⁷. In a television report of the governmental Belarus 1 TV channel, Shautsou rejected this criticism and defended his organisation's involvement in the removals from the occupied territories of Ukraine to Belarus as a humanitarian action in the interests of the deported children⁷⁸.

3.2 Recommended Actions for the EU and International Organisations

Until more responsible governments come to power in Russia and Belarus, massive multilateral and multidirectional action is needed to affect swift and tangible change. National and transnational actors must move from verbal interventions to result-oriented action. A combined plan of public pressure as well as informal and backchannel diplomacy should pave the way for returning a maximum number of Ukrainian children home as soon as possible. The following recommendations start with some general suggestions after which possible measures by the EP, the EU and its Member States are outlined – in line with 'The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the European Child Guarantee' (EU, 2022) and other EU documents⁷⁹.

As a comprehensive and public solution to the issue of collaboration with Moscow is currently impossible, a worldwide blaming and shaming campaign by national governments and parliaments, international organisations and human rights watchdogs in cooperation with media outlets as well as social networks is overdue. Increasing public statements by all concerned actors for worldwide circulation should be undertaken in parallel with diplomatic attempts to reunite Ukrainian children with their families. Initial results in this regard, albeit minor, have been achieved and show that attaining Russian cooperation in informally organised repatriation is possible⁸⁰. Following these examples, further mediation by non-North Atlantic Alliance governments, for instance, of Asia and/or non-Western NGOs, such as international relief, religious and labour organisations should be supported⁸¹.

In June 2023, Ukraine's Presidential Office Head Andrii Yermak announced that the Vatican's assistance as an intermediary is being sought: 'we will welcome the efforts and will be happy if the representative of the Holy See can help us releasing prisoners from Russian captivity and returning home illegally deported Ukrainian children'⁸². These forays have so far been unsuccessful yet should be continued. Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) with ties to the Catholic Church and other religious organisations, including national Orthodox

77 Y. Karmanau, '[Belarus Red Cross sparks outcry after its chief says it brought Ukrainian children to Belarus](#)', AP News, 19 July 2023.

78 ATN, '[Stories of Donbas Children: Impressions from Belarus. Main broadcast](#)', ATN: news of Belarus and the world, 23 July 2023 [video deleted by now].

79 Council of the European Union, '[Council conclusions on the fight against impunity regarding crimes committed in connection with Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine](#)', 15237/22, 29 November 2022.

80 A. Mills, op. cit.; Reuters, op. cit.

81 Some observers, though, believe that blaming and shaming should come later. Currently, the focus should be on the return of children who are not only victims of Russia's genocidal policies but also its witnesses. The latter circumstance may be an additional reason why Moscow and Russian families are reluctant to return deported and, perhaps, already adopted Ukrainian children to Ukraine. Interview with Roman Romanov, International Renaissance Foundation at Kyiv, Skype, 5 October 2023.

82 Ukrinform, '[The Vatican can help Ukraine with the release of prisoners and the return of children – Yermak](#) [Ватикан може допомогти Україні визволенням полонених і поверненням дітей - Єрмак]', Ukrinform, 27 June 2023.

Christian churches, should explore possibilities to start dialogues with the Russian Orthodox Church, Spiritual Assembly of Muslims of Russia and other officially recognised Russian religious organisations to facilitate the return of Ukrainian children from Russia.

Diplomatic efforts from other states such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia or Türkiye (see Section 2.3) can also serve as models for similar attempts in the future. EU Delegations and Member States' embassies across the world should consult with successful mediators about their experiences. Further such activities should be supported and the willingness and capability of additional non-Western governments and organisations to function as informal intermediaries between Russian authorities and Ukrainian families for enabling repatriations explored. Among observers in Kyiv, there are also hopes that, for Russia, relevant countries such as Kazakhstan, India or South Africa can – within structures such as the Eurasian Economic Union or BRICS group – help to mediate a return of deported children to Ukraine. The example of multilateral negotiations leading to the Black Sea Grain Initiative is mentioned as perhaps a relevant model⁸³. Some experts suggest that a country or group of countries should be officially designated as third-party facilitator, possibly with a mandate from the UNGA⁸⁴. EU Member States' diplomats should explore the appointment of such a mediating state or coalition via the UN, OSCE or another governmental organisation to which Russia is still a party.

Within the naming and shaming blaming approach referred to earlier, the RCHR has suggested that, instead of merely mentioning Russia's mass deportation of children in generic humanitarian or political declarations, official *ad hoc* documents specifically demanding the repatriation of Ukrainian children should be adopted and publicised⁸⁵. The UNGA, international parliamentary assemblies and as many national parliaments as possible should do so. This would follow the examples of respective statements by the EP as well as the Parliamentary Assembly of the CoE⁸⁶, and, on a national level, by the US Senate in June 2023 and Slovakia's parliament in March 2023⁸⁷. The Slovak National Council's adoption of a separate declaration condemning Russian crimes against Ukrainian children and women has been acknowledged by the Ukrainian parliament⁸⁸.

EU officials and diplomats should support a joint initiative of the UN's EU members for an adoption, by the UNGA, of an *ad hoc* resolution solely devoted to Ukrainian children captured by Russia. Such a resolution text should demand from the Russian government in the most direct terms the repatriation of all forcibly displaced or deported Ukrainian children to Ukraine. It should also require an immediate end to all involuntary transfers of Ukrainian

83 Interview with Kateryna Rashevskaya, RCHR, Kyiv, 5 September 2023.

84 Interview with Roman Romanov, International Renaissance Foundation at Kyiv, Skype, 5 October 2023.

85 RCHR, 'Repatriation and return to Ukraine would be in the best interests of the child - human rights activist [Репатріація та повернення в Україну відповідатиме принципу найкращих інтересів дитини – правозахисниця]', Regional Center for Human Rights, 2023.

86 EP, op. cit.; Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, op. cit.

87 US Senate, 'A resolution condemning the deportation of children from Ukraine to the Russian Federation and the forcible transfer of children within territories of Ukraine that are temporarily occupied by Russian forces', S.Res.158, 8 June 2023; National Council of the Slovak Republic, 'NRSR: Parliament condemned the crimes committed against Ukrainian women and children [Parlament odsúdil zločiny páchané na ukrajinských ženách a deťoch]', 28 March 2023.

88 Interview with Kateryna Rashevskaya, RCHR, Kyiv, 5 September 2023; Press Service of the Verkhovna Rada, op. cit.

civilians, including unaccompanied Ukrainian minors and teenagers, within the Russia-occupied territories and to Russia. In addition, MEPs should suggest to their colleagues at home the formulation and adoption of respective national parliamentary declarations, as well as raise the question of respective multilateral resolutions initiated by their home country's delegations to inter-parliamentary assemblies.

EP committees and political groups can initiate further actions to bring more public attention to the fate of deported children and their families following the example of an EP workshop on 13 November 2023⁸⁹. These could include open hearings within EP and national parliaments premises with relatives of deported Ukrainian children who are willing to express their views and feelings publicly. Individual MEPs may consider announcing sponsorships for certain deported children and their families if desired and welcomed by them. Special conferences in Brussels, Strasbourg or at other significant locations could bring together Ukrainian civil society groups, activists from EU Member States and international governmental as well as non-governmental organizations specialising in child protection. They should also include media representatives.

Furthermore, the RCHR has suggested that agreements between Ukraine and willing partners should be concluded on cooperation in repatriation; the list of currently sanctioned Russian persons involved in deportations should be expanded and means of influencing already sanctioned figures be extended; new arrest warrants modelled on those against Putin and Lvova-Belova should be issued by the ICC; new crimes should be added to those listed in the existing warrants; and frozen Russian assets should be confiscated and reprofiled for the needs of children who have become victims of illegal deportation and forced displacement⁹⁰. An additional EP resolution detailing such and similar proposals specifying their implementation and suggesting concrete measures to the EU's various organs and Member States should be adopted. Limitations on Russian officials involved in the deportation and assimilation of Ukrainian children should become a prominent feature in EU sanctions packages⁹¹. EU sanctions related to the deportation and assimilation of Ukrainian children should be extended to Russian NGOs, companies, schools, universities, professional organisations and so on participating – often openly and even demonstratively – in the deportation and russification efforts⁹².

MEPs and EU officials should use their influence and voices to demand a more active, clear and visible stance of international organisations designed to reduce the suffering of civilians and children during violent conflict. The ICRC, UNICEF, UNCRC and similar structures are co-funded by EU Member States. These organisations – in Kyiv's opinion – show insufficient resistance, continued meekness and public softness regarding Russia's mass displacement and deportation of Ukrainian children, which needs to be brought to an end as a matter of urgency.

Further RCHR suggestions for steps to be taken by interested actors throughout the

89 'How to bring deported children back home from Russia', European Parliament, 13 November 2023. See also: 'Cofundador Salvar Ucrania califica de "genocidio" deportaciones niños ucranianos a Rusia Este contenido fue publicado el 13 noviembre 2023', Swissinfo.ch, 13 November 2023.

90 RCHR, op. cit.

91 Council of the European Union, 'EU response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine', webpage, n.d.

92 Communication with Tetiana Fedosiuk, International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS) in Tallinn, 30 October 2023.

world, in cooperation with Ukrainian specialised organisations, include: expanding lists of confirmed and presumably deported children; transferring these lists for verification to Russia via relevant international organisations or third states; identifying locations within and outside Ukraine for the temporary placement of returned children to Ukraine with their relatives or other authorised carers; requesting Russia to return deported Ukrainian children and coordinating this process with the participation of relevant international organisations or third states⁹³. For instance, international experience, according to the UCRN, suggests that ‘children hubs’ can be created in third countries, namely outside Ukraine and Russia. There, deported children can meet with their Ukrainian guardians (legally authorised relatives and other carers) as well as child psychologists. There they would have the opportunity and time to contemplate and decide for themselves about their future⁹⁴. MEPs and EU officials could initiate the creation of such hubs for family reunions and transitory periods in East-Central European EU Member States.

The formal legal consequences of deportations to Russia will often be graver than those of displacements within the occupied territories of Ukraine when, for instance, they lead to adoption. Notwithstanding, as long as Ukraine’s occupied territories are not liberated, forcible removals of Ukrainian children into Russia proper may sometimes be easier to reverse than illegal transfers within the parts of Ukraine captured by Russia. Russian rudimentary rule of law and civil society function better within Russia than in the Ukrainian territories annexed by Russia in 2014 and 2022. Against this background, MEPs and EU officials should attempt to use remaining public or private connections – usually initiated before 2014 – to Russian governmental and non-governmental organisations to facilitate the location, identification, and repatriation of Ukrainian children deported to Russia.

3.3 Recommended Actions for Research and Investigative Authorities

Ukraine’s Children Rights Commissioner Herasymchuk stated in June 2023:

‘One of the biggest problems with the return of children is not knowing who we are looking for. [...] A second problem is that we don’t know where they are. It is very difficult to find them. Russia is doing everything to hide them. They immediately give children Russian citizenship, constantly move them around or give them to Russian families for upbringing, changing their names. They also have a strong influence on children’s minds. So even after spending only a few months in Russia, children return with great psychological trauma⁹⁵.

A lack of solid information on the identity and fate of displaced and deported children constitutes a major challenge. Much of the relevant data on Russian displacements and deportations is currently not easily collectible. The possible engagement of Russian researchers inside Russia and the occupied territories in Ukraine to find transferred children and identify destinations of displacements and deportations entails personal risks for such investigators. This would especially be the case if such research were funded by Western governmental and NGOs.

However, archival and field research in the government-controlled parts of Ukraine is possible and welcome. To date, it has been insufficiently undertaken by Ukraine’s own authorities and

93 RCHR, op. cit.

94 Interview with Daria Kasyanova, Ukrainian Child Rights Network (UCRN), Kyiv, 5 September 2023.

95 D. Herasymchuk, op. cit.

specialised institutes because Ukrainian financial and human resources remain sparse during the war. Moreover, investigation of open sources within Russia, such as relevant accounts in leading Russian social media networks such as *Vkontakte* (In Contact) or *Odnoklassniki* (Classmates), is still possible. It can be conducted with little risk from outside Russia and the Moscow-controlled territories in Ukraine. Governmental, not-for-profit, or even commercial intelligence services and agencies may be utilised to acquire evidence that is not easily accessible via Open Source Intelligence. The 2023 YPSH reports⁹⁶ or the KibOrg hacking operations mentioned above illustrate that substantive data collection within Russia, Belarus and in the occupied territories is still possible.

At least three larger studies should be commissioned by the EP or other EU institutions to provide a better picture of the current situation:

- ❖ Firstly, in collaboration with Ukrainian governmental and non-governmental organisations, a comprehensive register of all presumably displaced and deported children with personal data on them (including DNA information) should be created. An initiative in this direction has already been proposed in February 2023 by the European Commission, Poland, and the UN⁹⁷.
- ❖ Secondly, a further report should be modelled (a) on perpetrator studies of crimes during the Second World War and in later wars as well as (b) on the above-quoted reports by the YPSH⁹⁸. This means that an as detailed and as wide-ranging a study as possible should outline the methods, actors and paths of illegal displacements, deportations and adoptions of Ukrainian children by Russia.
- ❖ Thirdly, a cross-cultural and historical study – paralleling a recent comparative-legal analysis by Yulia Ioffe⁹⁹ – should compare the course, results and effects of current Russian policies to other cases of state-enforced mass deportation of children and their subsequent reversals.

In sum, these three investigations would provide a more solid basis for policy recommendations, formulation and implementation than the currently sketchy body of analytical literature.

Both journalistic and scholarly investigations should focus particularly on the genocidal intent, character and result of Russia's child deportations. Many observers still refrain from applying the concept of genocide for Russia's actions in Ukraine since 24 February 2022¹⁰⁰. Yet, there is a growing community of jurists, political scientists and historians who classify Moscow's behaviour in Ukraine as such¹⁰¹. This also includes the Russian displacement and deportation of children¹⁰². Following the example of a recent seminal legal exploration of how applicable

96 YSPH Humanitarian Research Lab, op. cit.

97 A. Krzysztozek, '[Poland, Commission launch initiative to trace abducted Ukrainian children](#)', Euractiv, 1 March 2023.

98 YSPH Humanitarian Research Lab, op. cit.

99 Y. Ioffe, op. cit.

100 See for instance V. Bilkova, C. Hellestveit and E. Šteinerte, op. cit.

101 See for instance D. Azarov, et al., '[Understanding Russia's Actions in Ukraine as the Crime of Genocide](#)', *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, Vol 21, No 2, 2023, pp. 233-264; Y. Diamond, '[An Independent Legal Analysis of the Russian Federation's Breaches of the Genocide Convention in Ukraine and the Duty to Prevent](#)', New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy, May 2023; O. Luchterhandt, '[Völkermord in Mariupol](#)': *Russlands Kriegsführung in der Ukraine*', *Osteuropa*, 14 April 2022; M. Shaw, '[Russia's Genocidal War in Ukraine: Radicalization and Social Destruction](#)', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 2023, pp. 1-30.

102 See for instance J. M. Chodakiewicz and M. Perdue, '[Another Genocide: Russia kidnaps Ukraine's children](#)', *Institute of World Politics*, 2022; V. Havrylov, '[Russia's mass abduction of Ukrainian children may](#)

the Genocide Convention might be to Russia's deportation and displacement of Ukrainian children¹⁰³, additional expert analyses in this direction and subsequent dissemination of their results should be encouraged, promoted and funded.

3.4 Recommended Actions in Mass Media and by Public Relations Companies

Broadcasters, news agencies, publishers, as well as public relations, artistic and further organisations have an important role to play, not only in documenting and explaining the above issues, but also indirectly helping with the containment, deterrence and reversal of Russia's displacement and deportation policies. In Ukraine itself, preventing further removals and protecting those living in areas of active hostilities and occupied territories remains a complex issue.

In December 2021-January 2022, the UCRN had already warned first the Ukrainian government and then the Ukrainian public that the forthcoming Russian large-scale invasion would create specific challenges for the evacuation of families and children¹⁰⁴. Yet, these warnings were not circulated widely and did not lead to sufficient precautionary measures. Today, national and international media should conduct awareness-raising campaigns for families: (a) encouraging them to evacuate in time so as to take children out of insecure areas; and (b) warning them not to let their children be taken on any Russia-organised 'holiday trips' – whether without or with consent of their parents.

A far more complicated challenge is how to alert still largely ignorant parts of the international community to the scale, gravity and tragedy of Russia's child removal policies. So far, there remains a deep rift between, on the one side, expert knowledge, and, on the other side, public awareness about Russian deportations and displacements of Ukrainian children. While many interested academics, politicians and diplomats in the West are already well-informed, acquaintance with this scandalous situation among 'ordinary' citizens of European and other countries remains limited¹⁰⁵. This gap needs to be closed with particular focus on nations in the Global South where Kremlin narratives about the Russo-Ukrainian War are relatively popular, yet public condemnation of Russian child deportations may be achieved, nevertheless¹⁰⁶. Special fellowships, prizes, competitions, tours, meetings, workshops and so on for journalists, editors, bloggers, publishers, pundits, artists and so on should lead to the production of suitable analytical, journalistic and artistic texts, podcasts as well as video material which is more easily accessible and disseminated to the general public¹⁰⁷.

qualify as genocide,' Atlantic Council, 2023; Regional Center for Human Rights and the Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention, 'Responsibility of Russian Federation Officials for Genocide in Ukraine, in particular, for Forcibly Transferring Children of the Group to Another Group', Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention, 2022.

103 Y. Ioffe, op. cit.

104 Interview with Daria Kasyanova, Ukrainian Child Rights Network (UCRN), Kyiv, 5 September 2023.

105 To illustrate the point: in 2020, the UN published a detailed report on the infamous torture prison Izolyatsiya (Isolation) in Russia-occupied Donetsk and the horrendous mistreatment of men as well as women there. However, the report was largely ignored by non-Ukrainian mass media. See OHCHR, 'Report on the human rights situation in Ukraine 16 November 2019 to 15 February 2020', Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Report, 2020. Only about a year later, the torture prison and situation there started to become widely known outside Ukraine when one of Izolyatsiya's former prisoners, Stanislav Aseyev, started publishing, in Western languages, articles, interviews and books about his two-year experience there. See, for instance, S. Aseyev and A. Umland, 'Prisoners as Political Commodities in the Occupied Areas of the Donbas', SCEEUS Reports on Human Rights and Security in Eastern Europe, No 2, 2021; S. Aseyev, *The Torture Camp on Paradise Street*, Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, Cambridge, 2022.

106 G. Khadiagala, 'An African Peace Initiative in the Russia-Ukraine War?', PRIF blog, 21 July 2023.

107 See for instance W. Klitschko and T. Kiel, *Gestohlene Leben: Die verschleppten Kinder der Ukraine*, Heyne, München, 2023; Online.ua, 'Abducted Childhood: Documentary', Youtube, June 2023; Vice News, 2023, 'Stealing Ukraine's Children: Inside Russia's Camps', Youtube, June 2023.

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Andreas Umland

Analyst at the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies (SCEEUS) at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs.

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