

Tens of thousands of children have been ripped from their homes in Ukraine since 2022



**They are not lost.
They are not forgotten.
They were stolen.**

RETURN EVERY CHILD



**We will not stop until
they are back where
they belong.**



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CHAPTER ONE

Executive Summary

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, tens of thousands of Ukrainian children have been taken from their homes and transferred deep into Russia. The Ukrainian Government in March 2023 confirmed 19,546 cases, but this figure is a significant understatement. Data from Yale University published in June 2025 pushes this figure up to 35,000. Other estimates put the figure even higher. In July 2023, the US Government estimated that around 260,000 children were transferred, though likely most of these were with their families. It is important to emphasise these children were not lost; they were stolen..

For the **over one million children that remain in temporarily occupied territory of Ukraine (TOT), the situation has also been dire.** What started with a ban of speaking their own language and rewritten school curricula has turned into **a state-sponsored campaign of indoctrination and militarisation, that has seen children given military training and issued draft papers for the Russian military.**

This report provides striking evidence of how Russian authorities are employing a multi-layered system of control - **to create a generation of children stripped of their identity** and moulded to serve an authoritarian state.

This report is built around **testimonies from 200 children** who were returned from Russian-occupied territories (TOT) and from inside Russia. Between March 2023 and July 2025, Save Ukraine specialists - including psychologists, social workers, and legal experts - conducted interviews with these children. **Their voices provide one of the clearest windows yet into the systematic violations and suffering inflicted on Ukrainian children.**

Of the 200 repatriated Ukrainian children surveyed a significant number reported single or multiple serious violations of their rights:

- **55% reported being subjected to pro-Russian indoctrination.**
- **41% highlighted experiences of militarisation through school-based training, or membership in organisations.**

- **39% percent described unlawful transfers or deportations, to Russia, Crimea or Belarus.**
- **30% cited being placed in camps where further indoctrination or military training was provided.**
- **Other grave abuses included separation from families (18%), denial of medical care (18%), torture or cruel treatment (10%), conflict-related sexual violence (6%), exploitation including forced labour (2%) and religious persecution (2%).**

Testimonies describe **children being told they would be permanently separated from their parents** if families refused Russian citizenship. Children give **first-hand accounts of torture, intimidation, and cultural erasure.** Evidence describes constant pressure to conform to Russian identity and loyalty, representing a **sustained assault on their psychological wellbeing** and their sense of belonging (Chapter 13).

Alongside recording the profound violations that these 200 children have endured, their words crucially reveal the horrifying reality still faced by **hundreds of thousands of children left behind in Russia and living in occupied Ukraine.**

This report aims to **ensure that these children's voices are heard**, so that the public and politicians alike stand up for their rights and effect change. It is a joint effort of three organisations: **War Child UK** who provides protection, education, psychosocial support, and advocacy to children impacted by conflict; **Save Ukraine** who alongside supporting children affected by the ongoing war rescues and repatriates children unlawfully taken or trapped under occupation; and the **Human Security Centre** an independent think tank that researches conflict, human rights, and international law.

The evidence presented in this report - and confirmed by many governments, international organisations, and human rights groups - shows that Russia's treatment of Ukrainian children is a state-driven policy of abduction, indoctrination, and militarisation. It can fairly be identified as the

largest, most organised campaign of grave child rights violations in Europe since the end of the Yugoslav wars. In some respects - because of the scale of indoctrination and militarisation - it represents a new dimension of child exploitation in armed conflict.

Scale and Patterns of Abuse – a summary of the evidence

The report provides compelling evidence of how Russian authorities employ a multi-layered system of control. Schools in the TOT have been reoriented into pathways of indoctrination, with Russian curricula replacing Ukrainian and compulsory participation in patriotic events. Children are offered better grades or manipulated into believing that they are less likely to receive military draft papers by joining paramilitary groups. The reality is that they function as recruitment pipelines, **normalising military service from early adolescence.**

Camps across Russia, Belarus and temporarily occupied Ukraine (TOT) **subject children to ideological programming and military drills**, often under the guise of “recreation” or “rehabilitation.” By 2025, researchers had identified at least two hundred camps and facilities holding Ukrainian children (Chapter 7).

Beyond militarisation, Russia enforces cultural and legal assimilation. **Ukrainian children are issued Russian passports and identity documents**, sometimes without parental consent. **Newborns in the TOT are registered with Russian birth certificates**, cutting legal ties to Ukraine from the moment of birth. **Adoption systems place children with Russian families**, giving them new names and documents, and erasing their Ukrainian identity entirely (Chapter 9).

The militarisation of children is embedded in Russia’s national security and foreign policy doctrine. Since 2022, official strategy documents have drastically increased their emphasis on the importance of patriotic education for pre-draft training. **Budgets for patriotic education rose from \$50 million in 2022 to \$459 million in 2024**, with further increases projected in 2025. President Vladimir Putin and senior officials have explicitly described youth policy as a strategic issue, linking it to Russia’s sovereignty, military preparedness, and geopolitical ambitions (Chapter 6).

This report provides evidence that Ukrainian children are not merely collateral victims of these policies but are being deliberately

**IT IS IMPORTANT
TO EMPHASISE
THESE CHILDREN
WERE NOT LOST;
THEY WERE
STOLEN.**

targeted. The report arrives at the judgement that Russia’s aim is both demographic and strategic: to erase Ukrainian identity, assimilate TOT, and prepare a new generation of military recruits.

The practices documented in this report are likely to evidence **violations of multiple instruments of international law.** Forced transfer and deportation of children are prohibited under the Geneva Conventions and are prosecutable as war crimes under Articles 8(2)(a)(vii) and 8(2)(b)(viii) of the Rome Statute. When committed with the intent to destroy a national group, such practices could fall under Article 6(e) of the Rome Statute as acts of genocide. The European Court of Human Rights, in July 2025, also found Russia responsible for the unlawful transfer of Ukrainian children (Chapter 12).

Russia’s goals are painfully clear, to create a suppliant generation of Ukrainian children devoid of their past identities and cast anew in their own mold. **Left unchecked countless thousands of these children will be turned upon their own people to fight in Russia’s armies.** The international community must do everything it can to end this travesty before it is too late.

Urgent action is needed

The international community must prioritise the safe return and reintegration of deported children, ensure accountability through international justice mechanisms, and provide expanded psychosocial and legal support for survivors. Allowing the militarisation and assimilation of children to continue unchecked risks not only condemning potentially hundreds-of-thousands of young lives but also **undermining the global commitment to protect children in war** - a principle at the heart of international humanitarian law and our shared humanity.

But governments and institutions alone cannot shoulder this responsibility. Real change will only come if the world refuses to look away. **Public pressure is essential to keep Ukrainian children's rights on the agenda**, to hold decision-makers accountable, and to ensure that justice is not delayed or denied.

The British public and people from across the globe are called on to **speak up for these children**, ensure that their stories are heard. Raise this situation with their elected representatives and share media coverage of their stories.

When I first arrived [at the school], they said, 'You're Ukrainian? Ew, Ukrainians...' All my friends that support Ukraine were insulted and humiliated. The deputy principal kept telling us that Ukraine is useless, and Russia is better. She told me: 'If you don't do this' [referring to participation in pro-Russian militarised events] 'then you'll get failing grades.' One time I came in and shouted, 'Glory to Ukraine!' - the police came, and the principal hit me, and said that in Russia you're only allowed to say 'Glory to Russia'

Boy, 10, Kharkiv region

We got the impression that schoolchildren were being prepared for war. They said this was a ticket to military school. Most joined because it gave extra exam points, increasing the chances of not being drafted into the military. This especially applied to boys.

Girl, 14, city of Luhansk

Back in occupied Luhansk, I enrolled in college. They introduced "Conversations About Important Things" - a weekly 45-minute propaganda session. Every Monday, we raised the Russian flag. Teachers repeated the same line: "Ukraine started the war, Russia is protecting us." Soldiers came to the college and made us prepare "voluntary-compulsory" aid packages for the Russian army. We were told FSB agents might come to inspect our phones.

Boy, 18, city of Luhansk

When you turn 17, they issue you a draft notice for military registration. The first and second notices don't bring penalties, but the third can lead to court and fines. In my case, they posted an announcement at the town shop with my full name, summoning me to appear by a certain date with my Russian passport. I was given a paper summons stating I had to register for military service by January 25. I did not go. I didn't want to fight - especially not against my own people.

Boy, 17, Kherson region

CHAPTER TWO

Joint Message from CEO's of Save Ukraine & War Child UK

No child should ever be torn from their family, have their language and identity silenced, or made to bear the brunt of war. Yet this is what hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian children are enduring today.

The testimonies in this report speak for themselves. Teenagers describe being placed in so-called "recreation camps", forced to conduct weapons drills, dig trenches and trained to search for mines. Others recall classrooms where history was rewritten, their own language banned, and loyalty to Russia demanded on threat of violence.

Children are enduring the most brutal abuses, including torture, sexual violence, and other forms of cruelty that no child should ever face. The separation of children from their families is one of the most terrifying and traumatic realities of war - and in temporarily occupied Ukraine it is happening as a deliberate policy.

These crimes must never be normalised. The forced transfer, indoctrination, and militarisation of children are some of the most serious violations of international law. They represent a direct assault on the rights of children everywhere, not just in Ukraine. When the world tolerates the systematic abduction and manipulation of children in one conflict, it erodes the protections of every child caught up in war.

War Child UK and Save Ukraine recognise our joint purpose: to protect children from the worst consequences of conflict, and where we have been unable to prevent this, to provide expert support and assistance to enable children to heal from the inevitable harm. Yet the evidence in this report reveals crimes that are devastating children's lives on a massive scale

We cannot allow this to continue. The international community must act with urgency to ensure that every child taken is found and returned to safety and care. Governments must increase pressure to hold perpetrators accountable - through the International Criminal Court, through targeted sanctions, and through the mechanisms of the UN.

At the same time, there must be sustained investment in the long-term support required for children to recover: psychosocial care, education, and protection that allows them to reclaim their future.

The courage of the 200 children at the heart of this report must compel us to act. Their voices - sometimes faltering, sometimes trembling with fear, but always unmistakable - speak not only of what they have endured, but paint a picture of the shadow now hanging over hundreds of thousands left behind. It is a shadow the international community has a duty to lift, before it deepens further in Ukraine and spreads to other war zones.

Every child has the right to be returned home, reunited with family and able to grow, not as an instrument of war but as a child once more.

Helen Pattinson – CEO War Child UK

Mykola Kuleba – CEO Save Ukraine

**BEHIND EACH
STATISTIC IS A CHILD
WHOSE FUTURE HAS
BEEN DERAILED**

CHAPTER THREE

Introduction to Save Ukraine, War Child UK and the Human Security Centre

Save Ukraine

Save Ukraine is a non-partisan, international NGO headquartered in both Ukraine and the United States. Since its founding in 2014 the organisation has become the leading force behind the rescue, rehabilitation, and reintegration of Ukrainian children who were either illegally deported by Russia or trapped in the TOT. Save Ukraine's rapid response field teams have also evacuated over 100,000 children and family members from frontline areas.

In response to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Save Ukraine launched covert cross-border rescue missions into TOT and Russia itself. These operations have resulted in the successful return of nearly 800 Ukrainian children who were forcibly transferred by Russian authorities in violation of international law.

Save Ukraine provides a full continuum of care - from emergency shelter and trauma counselling to long-term family reunification and reintegration into Ukrainian society. To support this, the organisation has built over 20 rehabilitation and support centres.

Each child's recovery is supported by a multidisciplinary team of psychologists, legal advocates, educators, social workers, and case managers - ensuring that every child is safely reintegrated, emotionally supported, and empowered to reclaim their identity and future.

Save Ukraine's work is grounded in international humanitarian and human rights law and guided by trauma-informed, child-centred principles. With over 300 dedicated staff and volunteers, the organisation works on the front lines of one of the most urgent child protection crises of our time.

Save Ukraine is a key partner in the international "Bring Kids Back UA" Coalition and serves as a trusted hub for rehabilitation, evidence collection, and reunification of rescued children.

War Child UK

For over three decades, War Child UK has been driven by a single goal – ensuring a safe future for every child affected by war.

We work in some of the hardest-to-reach places to support those who are most in need and aim to reach children as quickly as possible when conflict breaks out and stay long after the cameras have gone to support them through their recovery.

War Child UK is a member of the War Child Alliance Foundation, a global foundation made up of five fundraising offices all raising money to support our work in 14 countries across Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and Latin America. Programme staff are based in and around conflict-affected areas around the world.

War Child Ukraine, part of the global War Child Alliance, has been active since March 2022, supporting children and families affected by the war. Operating across various regions, including frontline and hard-to-reach areas, War Child Ukraine has supported over 13,500 children through child protection, over 20,000 through mental health and psychosocial support, and over 275,000 through catch-up learning via the Can't Wait to Learn platform.

Working with local partners, government agencies, international organisations, and donors, War Child Ukraine ensures a coordinated, inclusive, and child rights-based response that prioritises gender equality and access for all children.

Globally our challenge is bigger than ever. Nearly 1 in 5 children are affected by conflict worldwide. There are more children at risk today than at the end of the second world war.

War Child boldly campaigns on the root causes of conflict and helps to amplify children's voices, so that it can advocate for change on the issues that

matter to them. We understand children's needs, respect and stand up for their rights, and put them at the centre of everything we do.

Every day, our local teams are in communities and refugee camps creating safe spaces for children to play, learn, and access psychological support. War Child will never give up on children affected by conflict.

The Human Security Centre

From Kyiv to Kabul, the safety of ordinary people is being undermined by war, repression, and lawlessness. The Human Security Centre (HSC) exists to confront these threats head-on and to ensure that protecting lives is treated as a core duty of foreign policy.

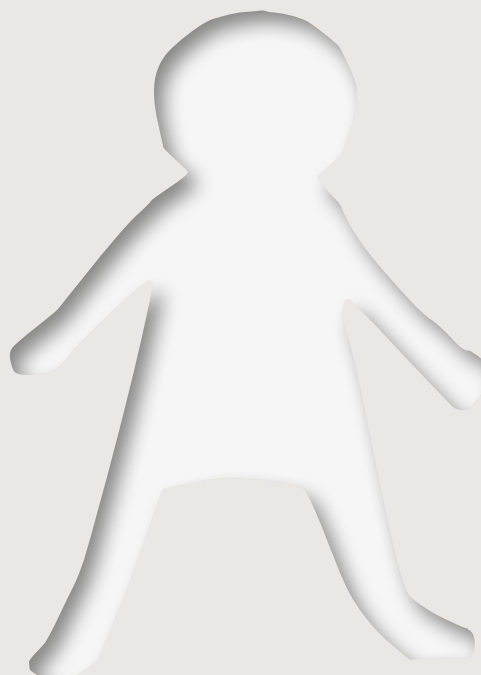
The HSC is an independent, non-profit foreign policy think tank based in London. It was founded to put people at the heart of security policy. The purpose of the HSC is to address, and to formulate solutions to, current and emerging threats to human security. The HSC aims to promote and help create an international society in which individuals and communities everywhere are able to live free from fear, free from want and free from indignity.

To achieve this, the HSC promotes the concept of human security as a tool to facilitate better understanding of the complexity and interrelatedness of threats and as a central pillar of foreign policy in the twenty-first century.

The HSC aims:

- **To educate** the public about the concept of human security and the various threats to human security around the world.
- **To contribute** to the collective knowledge and advance the understanding of the concept of human security.
- **To encourage** governments to adopt the human security approach as the basis for foreign, defence, security and international development policies.
- **To engage** with key stakeholders and the general public in strengthening the political will to act upon human security issues.

Since its establishment, the HSC has worked with a wide range of partners, including national governments, international and regional organisations, non-governmental organisations, academic institutions, media outlets, private sector actors, and security and humanitarian specialists.



CHAPTER FOUR

Research Findings from Save Ukraine's Child Protection Case Files

This chapter presents the findings of new research carried out by Save Ukraine, in collaboration with the Human Security Centre, based on the experiences of 200 children who were repatriated from Russian-controlled territory between March 2023 and July 2025. The research, drawn from Save Ukraine's case management system, provides one of the most detailed accounts to date of the violations suffered by Ukrainian children under Russian occupation.

Analysis

The analysis in this chapter is grounded in transcripts and notes from semi-structured interviews conducted by Save Ukraine's multidisciplinary teams - including psychologists, social workers, lawyers, educators, and child protection coordinators - and validated against internationally recognised investigative standards¹. All interviews followed strict ethical safeguards, with a trauma-informed approach designed to protect children's psychological wellbeing and ensure confidentiality. All the interviews were translated from the original Ukrainian or Russian and a small number were paraphrased for clarity and to protect identities where necessary.

By combining the testimonies of children and their families with documentary evidence (Chapters 5-10), psychological assessments (Chapter 13), and legal analysis (Chapter 14), this research offers both

qualitative insights into the lived experiences of affected children (Chapter 10) and quantitative data on the prevalence of specific violations (below). It documents patterns of indoctrination, militarisation, forced displacement, deportation, detention, torture, denial of medical care, conflict-related sexual violence, and exploitation.

It is important to note, that these findings reflect only the experiences of children who managed to escape Russian control and return to Ukrainian-held territory. Their ability to flee makes them a small and relatively fortunate group compared to many others who likely endured harsher conditions.

Children still in occupied territories, or transferred deeper into Russia or Belarus, may have faced even more severe indoctrination and coercion, in some cases to the point of losing awareness of the violations committed against them. As a result, this study likely understates the full scale of abuses. It should also be noted that the cases examined involve children repatriated between March 2023 and July 2025, meaning that many of their testimonies do not capture the most recent and intensified campaigns of militarisation and indoctrination. In certain instances, children were manipulated into believing that Ukraine had already been conquered and no longer existed as a sovereign state.

While the children included in this study represent those who managed to escape and return to Ukrainian-controlled territory, their accounts nevertheless reveal the scale and severity of international crimes being committed. The evidence presented demands urgent attention from national and international justice mechanisms.

This case study is therefore not only a record of grave violations against children, but also a vital resource for accountability efforts - ensuring that the voices of Ukraine's most vulnerable are heard, protected, and acted upon.

¹ Documenting International Crimes and Human Rights Violations for Accountability Purposes: Guidelines for Civil Society Organisations. Istanbul Protocol: Manual on the Effective Investigation and Documentation of Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, 2nd edition, 2022. Global Code of Conduct for Gathering and Using Information about Systematic and Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (the Murad Code), April 13, 2022. Basic Investigative Standards for International Crimes (Global Rights Compliance LLP), 2019. Berkeley Protocol on Digital Open Source Investigations (extended version), Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Centre for Human Rights at the University of California, Berkeley School of Law, 2020.

HEADLINE RESULTS

Total number of cases:

200 children

Gender:

Girls — 88 (44%)

Boys — 112 (56%)

Age category:

14–17 years old — 181 children (91%)

18–20 years old — 18 persons (9%)

Case type:

Initial interview — 200 children (100%)

Follow-up interview — 10 children (5%)



It should be noted in relation to the figures above and shared elsewhere in this report, that the purpose of interviews conducted by Save Ukraine specialists, was first and foremost to ensure the wellbeing of the repatriated children and tailor support that covered their psychological, social and other needs. As such, interviews may have largely focused on the most serious harms and pressing needs. Effects such as these can be seen in figures around indoctrination, where a child may not reference changes to their education curriculum despite Russian authorities having made significant changes as part of state policy, as identified in Chapter 9 of the report.

55%

Indoctrination

More than a half of the child case studies surveyed (55%) included descriptions of the child being subjected to pro-Russian narratives, participation in ideological activities, or a ban on studying the Ukrainian language and history.

These took place in mandatory school programs, participation in patriotic events, repetition of pro-Russian narratives, screenings of films and lectures promoting a “correct” version of history, as well as punishment for expressions of Ukrainian identity.

The percentage of children who did not experience militarisation and ideological indoctrination includes those who did not attend Russian schools but continued their studies remotely with Ukrainian schools, had already completed their education after the 9th or 11th grade, or managed to escape shortly after occupation. This group also includes children who were granted health leave from school.

41%

Militarisation

Testimonies reveal that 41% of the children surveyed were subjected to militarisation under Russian control.

Many were compelled to attend so-called “military-patriotic camps,” where they were dressed in uniforms, trained in combat tactics, weapons handling, and sapper work. Some underwent direct instruction in shooting, grenade throwing, and the use of mines, alongside preparation for eventual service in the Russian army. Several children reported being issued summonses at the age of 17 and pressured to enrol in military academies or sign contracts for future service. In several cases, children were openly encouraged or coerced to prepare for armed conflict against their own state.

39%

Forced displacement and deportation

Of the case studies surveyed, 39% of the children were subjected to forced displacement or deportation, sometimes alongside their family and at other times separated from their caregivers. Under international humanitarian law, forced displacement and deportation have distinct meanings.

- **Forced displacement** refers to the transfer of civilians within occupied territory, such as the movement of children from Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, or Zaporizhia to Crimea.
- **Deportation** refers to the forcible transfer of civilians beyond national borders - in this case, the removal of Ukrainian children to the Russian Federation or Belarus.

30%

Attending 'camps'

30% of the children we surveyed reported staying at 'camp' facilities. These sites, which were located in the TOT, Russia or Belarus, were often used as location in which children were subjected to indoctrination and militarisation. Accounts indicate that children and parents were frequently tricked into believing they would be attending recreational facilities and were instead subjected to military training. There were multiple reports of mistreatment while at the camps, telephone contacts with parents being both monitored and limited, as well as threats of children being placed under the care of someone other than their parents or guardians - with this threat acted upon in some instances.

18%

Separation from family

According to the data, 18% of children reported losing contact with their families as a direct result of actions taken by Russian authorities while under occupation. In numerous cases, parents died as a result of hostilities, mistreatment, or lack of access to essential medical care. Others were detained in inhumane conditions, including in makeshift underground pits. Children from large families were sometimes taken away under the false pretext of developmental delays or illness, or when parents had a disability or were elderly, allegedly deemed unfit to care for them. In some instances, a brother or male guardian was forcibly taken to a military training camp, leaving the child without guardianship. There were also cases in which parents managed to flee occupied territory but were later prevented from returning by the occupying authorities, resulting in prolonged separation and uncertainty for their children.

18%

Denial of access to medical care

18% of children reported experiencing deliberate obstruction, neglect, or failure to receive necessary medical services. This included the absence of qualified paediatric care, refusal to administer treatment without Russian identification documents, and systemic neglect in camps and institutional settings.

17%

Forced detention

17% of children reported being detained – sometimes alongside their parents – in police stations, filtration camps, or informal facilities. Some were held for weeks or months, interrogated, and subjected to threats, torture, and even electric shocks. Children of Ukrainian servicemen and women were specifically targeted and pressured to disclose their parents' military affiliation. In several cases, the solitary confinement of children was used as punishment at camps.

10%

Torture or cruel treatment

10% of children reported experiencing torture or other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment. This included physical abuse such as beatings, electric shocks, and forced stress positions, as well as psychological pressure through threats, intimidation, and prolonged interrogations. Some children were forced to undress during interrogations or in detention settings, exposing them to humiliation and fear. Others were made to witness or hear acts of violence against fellow detainees. These practices were often used to instil terror, extract information, or punish perceived disobedience.

6%

Conflict-related sexual violence

6% of children reported experiencing or witnessing conflict-related sexual violence. These incidents included sexual harassment, threats of rape, forced undressing, and, in some cases, sexual assault while in detention, filtration camps, or during abduction. Particularly alarming were testimonies from boys who reported that minor girls were raped by supervisors in the camps. Unaccompanied children, especially girls, faced heightened risks in settings where there was no oversight or protective presence.

2%

Exploitation

2% of documented cases included references to child exploitation in the form of forced labour or service to military structures. Children reported being compelled to carry out tasks such as cleaning, cooking, washing military vehicles, laying tiles, and performing refurbishment or repair work - often under coercion or threat. In some instances, these tasks were carried out directly for occupying forces or camp personnel.

2%

Religious persecution

2% of children reported experiencing religious persecution at schools or in camps during their time under occupation. This included being prohibited from practicing their faith, as well as being mocked or punished for expressing their religious identity. In some cases, access to churches was denied and personal religious symbols were confiscated.

CHAPTER FIVE

Ukraine's Stolen Children

This chapter provides an overview of the deportation of children from internationally recognised Ukrainian territory under Moscow's control to Russia and Belarus, which together form the 'Union State'.² The campaign began with the 2014 annexation of Crimea. It intensified immediately before and after the 2022 full-scale invasion, aiming to remove large numbers of Ukrainian children and youths from TOT. It is estimated that between those removed from TOT to Russia and those who remain, 1.6 million Ukrainian children are living under Russian control.³ Of those in the TOT, around 600,000 are school aged children.⁴

Numbers transferred

Determining the number of children deported out of Ukraine or displaced within temporarily TOT is difficult due to inconsistent definitions and data gaps. A May 2023 Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) report notes that while exact numbers remain uncertain, the large-scale displacement of children on what is internationally recognised as TOT does not seem to be disputed by either Ukraine or Russia, but notes confusion from combining different categories

of children.⁵ Similarly, the UN Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine highlights greatly varying figures which it cannot verify.⁶ Both missions informed the July 2025 ruling of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in the case of *Ukraine and the Netherlands v. Russia*, which found Russia responsible for the involuntary transfer of Ukrainian children.⁷

In January 2023, the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada suggested that over 150,000 Ukrainian children may be on Russian territory, although she clarified that it included children with parents or guardians and that only 14,000 had been positively identified.⁸ In April 2023, a Russian diplomat cited 730,000 children moved to Russian territory, allegedly mostly with relatives.⁹ In June 2023, a Ukrainian

2 The 'Union State' is a supranational union between Russia and Belarus which was established in 1999. For further details, see Barros, George, "Russia's Quiet Conquest: Belarus", Institute for the Study of War. 15 January 2025. Available at: <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russias-quiet-conquest-belarus>,

3 Андрій Єрмак, Telegram, August 20, 2023. Available at: <https://t.me/ermaka2022/5983>; Радіо Свобода (2025). Єрмак: під контролем Росії перебувають близько 1,6 мільйона українських дітей. [online] Радіо Свобода. Available at: <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news-yermak-rosiya-dity/33350669.html>

4 Ombudsman of Ukraine, "Special Report of the Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights on Access to Education for Children and Youth from the Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine," 2025, p.11. Available at: <https://ombudsman.gov.ua/storage/app/media/uploaded-files/Special%20report%20on%20Access%20to%20education%20for%20children%20and%20youth%20from%20the%20temporarily%20occupied%20territories%20of%20Ukraine.pdf>

5 Bilkova, V., Hellestveit, C. and Steinerte, E. *Report on the Violation 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 by the Russian Federation*, OSCE 4 May 2023, p.12 and 76. Available at: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/7/7/542751.pdf>

6 Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine*, UN Human Rights Council, 15 March 2023, p.17. Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/coiukraine/A_HRC_52_62_AUV_EN.pdf

7 ECHR, "Grand Chamber judgment *Ukraine and the Netherlands v. Russia* - The Court holds Russia accountable for widespread and flagrant abuses of human rights arising from the conflict in Ukraine since 2014, in breach of the European Convention on Human Rights," 9 July 2025, p.12. Available at: <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/frepress#%7B%22fulltext%22:%5B%22rus-sia%20ukraine%22%5D%2C%22sort%22:%5B%22kupdate%22%2C%22itemid%22:%5B%22003-8279845-11657965%22%5D%7D>

8 Interfax Ukraine, "More than 14,000 Ukrainian children verified in Russia's territory, but there may be more than 150,000 of them there — Ombudsman," 27 January 2023. Available at: <https://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/887392.html> ; Bilkova et al, 12.

9 TASS, "Majority of children who fled Ukraine for Russia came with relatives — diplomat", 28 April 2023. Available at: <https://tass.com/society/1611397>

presidential advisor estimated 200,000–300,000, although noted only 19,499 positive identifications.¹⁰ In July 2023, a statement from the U.S. government claimed that the Russians “have interrogated, detained, and forcibly deported” between 900,000 and 1.6 million Ukrainian citizens, including 260,000 children, from their homes to Russia.”¹¹ The fundamental root of the lack of precise figures is that only Russia is in a position to provide them and refuses to do so. They have also refused to cooperate with the ICRC missing persons process’ and its Central Tracing Agency.¹²

The use of the number for which specific information exists provides a more conservative estimate, albeit one that will inevitably vastly underestimate the total. The Ukrainian government’s ‘Bring Kids Back’ initiative recorded 19,546 reports of unlawful deportations and forced transfers.¹³ An OHCHR report of October 2023 also references this government figure and contains clarification from the Ukrainian government officials that the number included those children who had not been separated from their parents.¹⁴ However, OSCE research identified that the two primary categories the children in this figure fell under were “orphan” and “unaccompanied children.”¹⁵

An OHCHR study released in March 2025 stated

that it was unable to fully assess the scale of the transfers owing to its lack of access to TOT or Russia.¹⁶ Yale School of Public Health’s Humanitarian Research Lab’s (HRL) latest research, published in June 2025, indicates that over 35,000 children have been taken from Ukraine.¹⁷

Of our sample of 200 case studies, 39% of children stated that they experienced unlawful transfer (moved from one area of TOT to another) or deportation to Russia without parental consent, sometimes using falsified guardianship documents.¹⁸

The Nature of the Transfers

The OSCE mission identified three main Russian justifications for child “evacuation.” The first, security-related evacuations, began in the TOT in eastern Ukraine shortly before the 2022 invasion. Extrapolated data suggest about 21,000 children were removed from Donetsk and Luhansk regions by 20 February 2022¹⁹. However, the OHCHR judges that in none of the 164 case studies they examined met the safety or medical criteria required under international humanitarian law.²⁰

The second rationale is adoption or foster care. This practice originated after the 2014 annexation of Crimea and expanded to TOT areas of Donetsk and Luhansk after 2022, later extending to Russian-annexed Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia.²¹ Limited numerical data is available for adoption or foster care transfer however, December 2024 research from the Yale HRL states that the organisation “has determined with high confidence that the Russian Federation has engaged in the

10 Екатерина Людви́к, “Russians could kidnap 200-300 thousand Ukrainian children, - Herasimchuk, 19 June 2023. Available at: https://censor.net/en/news/3425520/russians_could_kidnap_200300_thousand_ukrainian_children_herasimchuk

11 U.S. Embassy in Ukraine, “Russia’s ‘Filtration’ Operations, Forced Disappearances, and Mass Deportations of Ukrainian Citizens,” 13 July 2022. Available at: <https://ua.usembassy.gov/russias-filtration-operations-forced-disappearances-and-mass-deportations-of-ukrainian-citizens/>

12 Article 7 ((1)(i)) of the Rome Statute bans “enforced disappearance” including concealment of a person’s whereabouts ((1)(i)). The IV Geneva Convention’s Article 136 mandates sharing information on protected persons. The International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance’s Article 25(1)(a) requires efforts to locate and return missing children.

13 Bring Back Kids UA. Available at: <https://www.bringkidsback.org.ua/>

14 Independent International Commission of Inquiry On Ukraine, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine*. UN Human Rights Council October 2023, p.17. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/coiukraine/A-78-540-En.pdf>

15 Bilkova et al, p.13.

16 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *The Impact of the Armed Conflict and Occupation on Children’s Rights in Ukraine*, March 2025, pp. 14. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/2025-03-21-ohchr-report-children-s-rights-in-ukraine.pdf>

17 Humanitarian Research Lab, “Help the Humanitarian Research Lab Keep Finding Ukraine’s Abducted Children”, Yale School of Public Health. Available at: <https://medicine.yale.edu/lab/khoshnood/give-now/>

18 Save Ukraine data: Numerical data was taken from a group of 200 children who escaped the TOT for Ukraine between March 2023 and July 2025.

19 Bilkova et al, 14-15.

20 Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine*, UN Human Rights Council, 15 March 2023, p.15.

21 Bilkova et al, p.16.

systematic, intentional, and widespread coerced adoption and fostering of children from Ukraine,” and gave a figure of 314 identified individuals. It also stated that “The operation... was initiated by Putin and his subordinates with the intent to ‘Russify’ children from Ukraine.”²²

Additional disturbing detail came to light in August 2025, when Save Ukraine exposed the existence of a Luhansk People’s Republic website offering Ukrainian children for adoption, with options to select them by characteristics including hair colour, eye colour, and gender.²³ Yale HRL confirmed that similar regional websites had been operating since 2016, and that these sites lists of children followed the format of the Russian Ministry of Education database that the HRL had identified was used to feed data to Russia-affiliated adoption sites.²⁴

The third category involves transfers to what are colloquially referred to as “camps,” which serve as indoctrination and militarisation centres across the TOT, Belarus, and Russia. 30% of 200 cases we surveyed included children being sent to camps, sometimes with parental consent, often in the hope that they would be safer or have an opportunity for rest or recuperation from the war. However, this was not always true or informed consent, with many accounts of parents being coerced into sending their children or consenting after being misled as to the purposes of the camps.²⁵ These camps will be

22 Raymond, Nathaniel A., Oona A. Hathaway, Caitlin N. Howarth, and Kaveh Khoshnood et al., *Intentional, Systematic, & Widespread: Russia’s Program of Coerced Adoption and Fostering of Ukraine’s Children*, 3 December 2024. Humanitarian Research Lab at Yale School of Public Health: New Haven, p.1. Available at: <https://files-profile.medicine.yale.edu/documents/aa3bcb47-c4db-4d86-994c-22489c70581b>

23 RFE/RL, “Ukrainian NGO Accuses Russia-Controlled Luhansk Of Operating ‘Child Trafficking’ Database,” 8 August 2025. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukrainian-ngo-accuses-russia-luhansk-child-trafficking-database/33498167.html>

24 Nathaniel Raymond and Caitlin Howarth, “HRL Statement re Adoption Website,” 8 August 2025. Available at: <https://ysph.yale.edu/news-article/statement-re-adoption-website/>

25 Khoshnood, Kaveh, Nathaniel A. Raymond and Caitlin N. Howarth et al., “Russia’s Systematic Program for the Re-education and Adoption of Ukraine’s Children.” 14 February 2023b, p.5 and 13-14. Humanitarian Research Lab at Yale School of Public Health: New Haven. Available at: <https://files-profile.medicine.yale.edu/documents/8c54abb4-3c6d-4b5c-be05-727f612afccc>

Khoshnood, Kaveh.; Nathaniel A. Raymond and Caitlin N. Howarth et al., “Belarus’ Collaboration with Russia in the Systematic Deportation of Ukraine’s Children,” 16 November 2023a. Humanitarian Research Lab at Yale School of Public Health: New Haven, p.1 and 11. Available at: <https://files-profile.medicine.yale.edu/documents/a5414357-e145-47de-90e3-f5625305e089>

examined later in this report (Chapter 7).

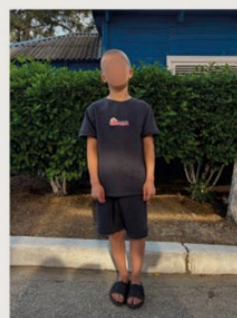
The OHCHR identifies three groups of unaccompanied transferred children: those who lost or lost contact with parents during hostilities, those separated after parental detention, and those previously institutionalised; the OSCE uses a similar categorisation of “orphans” and “unaccompanied children.”²⁶ 18% of the children we surveyed reported being separated from their families their families (defined as one or both parents or guardians) as a result of the war.²⁷



Алексей
(anketa265.html)
10 лет, мальчик

Дружелюбный, коммуникабельный, активно взаимодействует со сверстниками. Ко взрослым относится уважительно. Любит спорт и активные игры.

Познакомиться
(anketa265.html)



Александр
(anketa264.html)
10 лет, мальчик

Общительный, добрый, всегда приветлив. Со сверстниками контактирует дружелюбно. Имеет много друзей. Со взрослыми всегда вежлив. Предпочитаемые предметы -

Познакомиться
(anketa264.html)

Ukrainian children available for adoption with faces blurred out from a website of the Russian-controlled administration in the TOT of Luhansk. The websites search criteria includes options for gender, age, eye colour, and form of child placement.

26 Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine, UN Human Rights Council, 15 March 2023, p.15. Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/coiukraine/A_HRC_52_62_AUV_EN.pdf ; Bilkova et al, p.13-14.

27 Save Ukraine Interview

RUSSIA DOES NOT ACT ALONE: YALE HRL HAS DOCUMENTED BELARUS'S INVOLVEMENT,

identifying 2,442 children transferred to at least 13 Belarusian facilities between 24 February 2022 and 30 October 2023. Consent from parents or guardians was not always obtained.²⁸

Returned Children

Details of the return process are limited. OSCE and Yale HRL note that most recoveries result from efforts by Ukrainian government agencies and children's relatives, with the OSCE also noting the role of civil society.²⁹

Russia obstructs repatriation through renaming, relocations, and bureaucratic hurdles; the OHCHR reports almost no proactive Russian initiatives.³⁰ Testimonies from those surveyed provide examples of Russia's attempts to hold on to children:

The Russians warned me that if my parents didn't take me back within six months, I would be sent to an orphanage and my guardian would lose custody. They kept saying over and over that no one would come for us, that we shouldn't expect anyone.³¹

Girl, 16, Kherson region

The Ukrainian government and partners have created mechanisms to identify and document missing children, led by the Ombudsman's Office and the Prosecutor General. NGOs such as Save Ukraine gather evidence, conduct rescues, and assist with reintegration. Families report cases via hotlines or directly to NGOs, which help assemble proof of guardianship required for repatriation. Relatives often travel to Russia or TOT to retrieve children.

International intermediaries have aided returns. Qatar launched a mechanism in October 2023, enabling 68 returns by May 2025.³² The ICRC facilitated "several dozen," though this success was undermined after the Belarus Red Cross admitted involvement in transfers to Belarus.³³ The Vatican has also quietly assisted.³⁴ The International Coalition for the Return of Ukrainian Children was established in February 2024. Co-chaired by Ukraine and Canada, the group currently has 41 member states as well as the Council of Europe as participants.³⁵

28 Khoshnood et al, 2023a, p.1 and 11.

29 Khoshnood et al, 2023b, p.16; Bilkova et al, p.21

30 Bilkova et al, p.21; Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine. UN Human Rights Council October 2023, p.15 <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/coiukraine/A-78-540-AEV.pdf>.

31 Save Ukraine Interview

32 Ukrainiform, "Qatar helps return 68 Ukrainian children home – Lubinets," 26 May 2025. Available at: <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-society/3997295-qatar-helps-return-68-ukrainian-children-home-lubinets.html>

33 ICRC, "Russia-Ukraine International Armed Conflict: The value of neutrality for humanitarian work," 21 February 2025. Available at: <https://www.icrc.org/en/article/russia-ukraine-international-armed-conflict-value-neutrality-humanitarian-work>; Associated Press, "Belarus Red Cross says it is involved in transfer of children out of Ukraine," *The Guardian*, 20 July 2023. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jul/20/belarus-red-cross-says-it-is-involved-in-transfer-of-children-out-of-ukraine>

34 Borgia, Gregorio. "Ukraine's Zelenskyy meets with Pope Leo XIV. Both propose the Vatican as the site for peace talks," Associated Press, 9 July 2025. Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/vatican-pope-leo-zelenskyy-children-taken-ukraine-cb1437b87d9970d0642648152979fcd0>

35 Government of Canada, "International Coalition for the Return of Ukrainian Children." Available at: https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_development-enjeux_develop

As of August 2025, the Ukrainian government lists 1,560 children “returned from deportation, forced transfers, and temporarily occupied territories.”³⁶

As noted, Russia has sought to frustrate the return process. Our survey identified multiple instances of interrogation by Russian authorities of those attempting to flee from TOT to the territory controlled by the Kyiv government.³⁷

However, those who succeeded in escape expressed relief and hope for the future:

When I crossed the border into Ukraine, I was so happy I almost cried. At first, I couldn't believe I had returned to my homeland. My plan now is to go to my brother, find a job, and I'd also love to volunteer, driving people out of Donetsk and Luhansk. My biggest dream is to be a volunteer and help people.³⁸

Boy, 16, Kherson region

**SAVE UKRAINE
EXPOSED THE
EXISTENCE OF
A LUHANSK
PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC
WEBSITE OFFERING
UKRAINIAN
CHILDREN FOR
ADOPTION, WITH
OPTIONS TO
SELECT THEM BY
CHARACTERISTICS
INCLUDING HAIR
COLOUR, EYE
COLOUR, AND
GENDER**

pement/response_conflict-reponse_conflicts/crisis-crises/
ukraine-children-enfants.aspx?lang=eng

³⁶ Bring Back Kids UA. Available at:
<https://www.bringkidsback.org.ua/>

³⁷ Save Ukraine Interview

³⁸ Save Ukraine Interview

CHAPTER SIX

Goals of Militarisation

This chapter provides an overview of the Russian rationale behind the “patriotic education” and militarisation of youth, the tools employed in its implementation, and its role within the framework of Russia’s national security doctrine. It examines how patriotic education serves as a key instrument for preserving Russian values, promoting patriotism as a means of safeguarding Russia’s version of historical truth, elevating its geopolitical stance and justifying the use of force.

Militarisation of Youth as a Policy Agenda

While far from an entirely new phenomenon – modern patriotic education efforts began in 2001 – youth militarisation efforts drastically accelerated in 2012, when, on returning to office, Putin advanced the concept of patriotic education based on a “objective” writing of history.³⁹ The 2014 Russian Military Doctrine identified “the improvement of youth pre-draft training and the military-patriotic education of citizens” as a key pillar in the organisation and development of the Russian Armed Forces.⁴⁰ In 2020, Putin submitted legislation to add patriotism to the school curriculum.⁴¹ Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Russian government has intensified its

efforts around patriotic education. Accounts from children surveyed describe constant propaganda – portraits of war heroes and Putin’s speeches in classrooms, care package drives for soldiers, and messaging about inevitable Russian victory.⁴²

Budgets reflect this escalation: funding for patriotic education rose from \$50 million in 2022 to \$439 million in 2023 and \$459 million in 2024, with Yunarmiya – a Defence Ministry funded youth organisation founded in 2016 – projected to receive 800 million rubles (\$9.7 million) in 2025 under the Youth and Children national project and an additional 200 million rubles (\$2.4 million) from the Defence Ministry itself.⁴³ In 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin described youth policy as a strategically important issue for the Russian government, stating that young Russians (including residents of TOT, as implied by Putin) would “determine Russia’s future development.”⁴⁴ Two years later, addressing the participants of the Znanie Society award ceremony, he elaborated: “The key to the country’s future and the continuity of its development lies in ensuring that young people have reliable life guidelines and consider our [Russian] traditional values truly their own.”⁴⁵

According to Russian researchers, the authorities turned their focus to young people during the period when democratic processes (“colour revolutions”) were taking place in Serbia (2000), Georgia (2003) Ukraine (2004), and Kyrgyzstan (2005), where youth

39 CSIS, “Next-Generation Fighters: Youth Military-Patriotic Upbringing Bolsters the Russian Military’s Manning and Mobilization Potential,” 22 September, 2020. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/next-generation-fighters-youth-military-patriotic-upbringing-bolsters-lashchenko-luliia>. “Nationalistic Propaganda as a Strategy for Patriotic Upbringing in Russian Education,” *Nuovi Autoritarismi e Democrazie: Diritto, Istituzioni, Società*, No.1/2023, p.111-112. Available at: <https://riviste.unimi.it/index.php/NAD/article/download/19960/17777/59457>

40 *The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation*. Approved by President of the Russian Federation V. Putin on 25 December 2014, No. Pr-2976, p.14. English translation available via the Russian Military and Security blog. Available at http://rusmilsec.blog/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/mildoc_rf_2014_eng.pdf

41 *Moscow Times*, “Putin Adds Patriotism, War History to School Curriculum,” 22 May, 2020. Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20200524012405/https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/05/22/putin-adds-patriotism-war-history-to-school-curriculum-a70347>

42 Save Ukraine Interviews

43 Vasily Kuzmichenok / Moskva News Agency. “Russia Doubles Budget for State-Sponsored ‘Youth Army’.” *The Moscow Times*, 23 April 2025. Available at: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2025/04/23/russia-doubles-budget-for-state-sponsored-youth-army-a88832>; *The Kyiv Independent*. How Russia is turning kids into soldiers. YouTube video, https://youtu.be/l_Mh6S1AcWQ.

44 TACC. (2022a). Путин на Госсовете назвал молодежную политику стратегически важной темой. [online] Available at: <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/16665365>

45 TACC. (2024). В Путин: надежные жизненные ориентиры у молодежи – залог будущего России. [online] Available at: <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/20087409>

were the primary driving force behind them.⁴⁶ The central idea of these revolutions was the strong zeal for democracy and demand for removal of entrenched authoritarian leaders. As a result of these protests, Slobodan Milošević, Askar Akayev, Viktor Yanukovych, Eduard Shevardnadze were overthrown after disputed elections. As noted by scholar Seva Gunitskiy, “colour revolutions” represented contagion-driven waves emanating from the intense external forces, capable of temporarily overwhelming the domestic constraints of these states.⁴⁷

During this period, the Russian regime recognised the potential threat posed by the younger generation, who might demand democratic change at a time when authoritarianism in Russia was already deepening.⁴⁸ Therefore, to prevent “colour revolutions”, the Russian authorities decided, first and foremost, to eradicate “extremist ideas” among young people.

The methods used on Ukrainian children strongly indicate that Russian youth policy in TOT, designed to create a mobilisation reserve and foster allegiances to the Russian state, is aimed at eradicating Ukrainian identity and imposing Russian militarised patriotism.⁴⁹ It can be inferred that it is done to establish and strengthen Russian control over Ukrainian territory and undermine Ukrainian sovereignty.

Russian Rationale

In 2020, Russian President Vladimir Putin defined patriotism as service to the development of the country, describing it as the core of the Russian national idea.⁵⁰ Again, this is not a new development: since 2001, Russian officials’ stated aims for ‘patriotic education’ have included helping to preserve stability, restore the national economy, and maintain/strengthen the country’s defence capability.⁵¹

This rationale responds to what Moscow views as an “ideological vacuum” after the USSR’s collapse.⁵² The 2015 *National Security Strategy* stresses preserving traditional spiritual moral values and resisting foreign cultural influence; the 2021 update explicitly names the U.S. and allies as threats to Russian sovereignty and cultural “Westernisation.”⁵³ In this regard, the popularisation of patriotic education is presented as the first step toward restoring Russia’s status as a great power and canonising the Russian version of historical truth.

Putin’s 2021 article “On the Historical Unity of One People” portrays Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians as one nation and casts Ukraine as a foreign-backed anti-Russian project.⁵⁴ Since 2022, Putin has repeatedly invoked “de-Nazification” to justify the war.⁵⁵ These beliefs are manifest in those

46 Медведев Иван Александрович Молодежь и “цветные революции”: тенденции взаимодействия в современном обществе // Гуманитарный вестник. 2019. №6 (80), p. 7. Available at: <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/molodezh-i-tsvetnye-revolutsii-tendentsii-vzaimodeystviya-v-sovremennom-obshchestve>

47 Gunitskiy, S. (2018) ‘Democratic Waves in Historical Perspective’, *Perspectives on Politics*, 16(3), p. 635, doi:10.1017/S1537592718001044.

48 Hawn, Jeff, New Lines Institute, “The Youth Are Russia’s Future,” 3 April 2023. Available at: <https://newlinesinstitute.org/strategic-competition/the-youth-are-russias-future/>

49 Ibid, 4,5,6 and 9.

50 Президент России Владимир Путин. «Путин: Национальная идея России заключается в патриотизме.» Ren.tv, 10 мая 2020 г. Доступно по ссылке: <https://ren.tv/news/v-rossii/696347-putin-natsionalnaia-idea-rossii-zakliuchaetsia-v-patriotizme>

51 Kontur.ru. (2025). Постановление Правительства РФ от 16.02.2001 N 122 — Редакция от 16.02.2001 — Kontur. Норматив. [online] Available at: <https://normativ.kontur.ru/document?documentId=43139&moduleId=1&utm=>

52 Сазонов А. М. «Патриотизм как основа воспитания молодежи в современной России». Вестник адъюнкта, Военная академия Генерального штаба ВС РФ; Военный университет Минобороны РФ, 2021. Доступно: <https://rodnayaladoga.ru/rubriki/svyaz-vremen/2126-patriotizm-kak-osnova-vospitaniya-molodezhi-v-sovremennoj-rosii>

53 Cooper, Julian. “Russia’s updated National Security Strategy.” *NDC Research Division*, NATO Defense College, 19 июля 2021 г. Документ-анализ доступен по ссылке: <https://www.ndc.nato.int/research/research.php?icode=704>

54 Vladimir Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” 12 July 2021. Available at: Article by Vladimir Putin “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians” Available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>

55 BBC News, “Tucker Carlson: Putin takes charge as TV host gives free rein to Kremlin”, 9 February 2025. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-68248740>

who have been tasked with implementing Russian policy regarding the indoctrination of children in Ukraine. One child recalled:

In every civics class ODNKR, all we ever talked about was Russia. Even at home, we had to do homework about Russia's coat of arms and national anthem. Every Monday, we had to stand for the anthem - if you bent down to grab a pen, the teacher could kick you out. Every class was about how Russia is great, and I remember the teacher calling Ukrainians Nazis, fascists, and "Zelensky's army."⁵⁶

Boy, 12, Kherson region

Practical Implementation and Its Logic

While we will examine the extent and methodology of the implementation of these policies in more detail in Chapter 7 and 9, it is important to note how goals, history, and policy intersect more broadly within Russia. Militarisation and support for Russia's war permeate education at every level.

Beginning in kindergartens, children are exposed to Kremlin propaganda throughout their education - a policy Putin has explicitly advanced.⁵⁷ Militarisation is supported by activities such as immersing children in a World War II atmosphere, where they are tasked with creating a soldier's meal menu, identifying military ranks by shoulder boards and marching, overcoming rope obstacles, decoding ciphers, and transmitting messages using Morse code - experiences that are targeted to ignite a sense of duty and inspire the idea of serving the Motherland.⁵⁸ Youth centres promote patriotism through military-themed role play, including obstacle courses, code breaking, and soldier meal preparation.⁵⁹

Youth programmes such as "Volunteers of Victory," with 650,000 members across 89 regions, glorify Russian history and traditional values, linking today's war to World War II narratives and presenting it as a moral duty to defend the motherland.⁶⁰ Given the Russian policy of assimilating Ukrainian children into the Russian world, it is to be expected that both abducted children and those residing in TOT have been exposed to such an environment. Combined with changes to the curriculum and new educational material, this is intended to fully immerse those within the Russia-led education system. 55% of those we surveyed reported exposure to Russian ideological indoctrination.⁶¹

**I REMEMBER THE
TEACHER CALLING
UKRAINIANS
NAZIS, FASCISTS,
AND "ZELENSKY'S
ARMY."**

56 Save Ukraine Interview

57 Hurska, A. "Russia is breeding for war through youth (para-) militarisation. Eurasia Daily Monitor, 21 (22). Jamestown Foundation, 13 February 2024. Available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-isbreeding-for-war-through-youth-para-militarization/>; Interfax, "Putin supported the proposal to introduce 'Conversations about the important' from kindergarten," 18 October 2024. Available at: <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2024/10/18/cradle-snatchers-en>

58 Лебедева Г.В., Леонова И.Ю., Чайникова Е.В. «Я живу в России! Практика патриотического воспитания детей и молодёжи в учреждении дополнительного образования». Журнал «Про_ДОД», Детско-юношеский центр «АРС», Кострома, 27 августа 2024 г. Доступно: <https://prodod.moscow/archives/31638>

59 Лебедева Г.В., Леонова И.Ю., Чайникова Е.В. «Я живу в

России! Практика патриотического воспитания детей и молодёжи в учреждении дополнительного образования». Журнал «Про_ДОД», Детско-юношеский центр «АРС», Кострома, 27 августа 2024 г. Доступно: <https://prodod.moscow/archives/31638>

60 Hurska, A; Милан Черный. «Экзамен с автоматом. Как «военно-патриотическое» обучение захватывает школы, дetsады и творческие кружки.» *The Insider*, 25 марта 2023 г. Доступно по ссылке: <https://theins.ru/politika/260134>

61 Save Ukraine Data

Broader Geopolitical and Strategic Purposes

For Russia, the USSR's collapse was a major geopolitical defeat, compounded by Western expansion and perceived attempts to undermine Russia's wartime legacy and sphere of influence.⁶² The failure of Russian efforts to fit into the geopolitical game by Western rules, economic slowdown, public unpopularity of democratisation and the USSR nostalgia emphasised Russian 'otherness'.⁶³ Putin capitalised on these grievances, shaping Russian underdevelopment into the increasingly aggressive 'enlightened imperialism' ideology and positioning himself as a stronghold bearer of this mission, portraying Russia as a unique civilisation resisting Western encirclement.⁶⁴

Patriotic education is integral to this strategy. Putin's *Executive Order on Russia's development goals through 2030 and for the future until 2036* called for 75% youth participation in patriotic initiatives, echoed in the updated *State National Policy Strategy*, which incorporates Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson into national policy frameworks.⁶⁵ It underpins the paramount role of youth in advancing Russian national interests and promoting its ideology, represented by the indoctrination of young people, including those in TOT, to aid the assimilation of these regions and to raise a new generation that harbours official state rhetoric, nurturing young generation's eagerness to sacrifice lives for the state's interests in the potential conflicts.

Russia's short-term inability to achieve its objectives in Ukraine through military means has added another impetus to its militarisation efforts. Russia's militarisation of deported Ukrainian children and those who remain in TOT serves as both psychological warfare and demographic engineering purpose - erasing Ukrainian identity and instilling anti-Ukrainian sentiment to hinder reintegration of liberated territories.⁶⁶

Ultimately, patriotic education aims to instil loyalty to the state which in practice mean Putin's regime, where Putin, portrayed as the beacon of Russian patriotism, assumes a paternalistic role in leading the Russian people toward the restoration of former greatness. The "transformation of patriotic initiatives into a war-supporting apparatus", is combined with the fear of persecution for anti-war views, fostering "ritualistic support" and "passive adaptation" to the realities of war.⁶⁷

ULTIMATELY, PATRIOTIC EDUCATION INSTILS LOYALTY TO PUTIN'S REGIME

62 Allen, J. R., Hodges, F. B., & Lindley-French, J. (2021). *Future War and the Defence of Europe*. Oxford University Press. p. 94

63 Strakhov, A. (2023) 'Russian invasion of Ukraine: civil or colonial war?', *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, 29(3), p. 260. doi: 10.1080/11926422.2023.2225202.

64 Curanović, A., 2021. *Conclusion*. In: *The Sense of Mission in Russian Foreign Policy*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp.240–248. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003131588-7> pp. 209-10

65 Президент Российской Федерации. «Указ О национальных целях развития Российской Федерации на период до 2030 года и на перспективу до 2036 года.» Подписан 7 мая 2024 г. Available at: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/73986> ; Российская Федерация, Президент. "Перечень поручений по итогам заседания Совета по межнациональным отношениям, состоявшегося 19 мая 2023 г." Приказ № 71690, утверждён 16 июля 2023 г. Доступно на сайте Кремля: <https://www.kremlin.ru/acts/assignments/orders/71690>

66 "Діти війни: як російська агресія руйнує дитинство цілого покоління українців," Центр Громадянських Свобод, <https://www.helsinki.org.ua/articles/dity-viyny-uk-rosiyska-ahresii-ruy-nuie-dytynstvo-tsiloho-pokolinnia-ukraintsiv/>.

67 Alava, Jonna (2025) From Patriotic Education to Militarist Indoctrination—Disciplinary Power and Silent Resistance in Russia after the Onset of the War against Ukraine, *Problems of Post-Communism*, pp.5,9 DOI: 10.1080/10758216.2024.2444600;

CHAPTER SEVEN

Extent of the Militarisation

This chapter examines the network of camps used to indoctrinate and militarise Ukrainian children. Labelled as “recreation” or “rehabilitation” centres by Russia, these facilities provide ideological training, paramilitary drills, and religious instruction to erase Ukrainian identity and instill loyalty to Russia. Many attendees are victims of forced deportation, while others remain in TOT but are subject to transfer within it. Those Ukrainian children forced to attend Russian-run schools both in Russia proper and TOT and therefore exposed to the indoctrination and militarisation they advance following their transfer to Russian control, are also considered here:

Transfers of Ukrainian children to camps

Russian authorities and proxies run an extensive network of camps across the TOT, Belarus, and Russia to detain, indoctrinate, and militarise Ukrainian children. Facilities outside Ukraine span from Krasnodar and Moscow to Chechnya and as far east as Magadan, nearly 4,000 miles from Ukraine.⁶⁸

The creation of the current Russia-run network dates from shortly after the 2014 outbreak of war; in addition to new facilities, it uses pre-existing camps - including Artek, which Russia took over and funded after annexing Crimea that year.⁶⁹ Today, Artek is one of the most prominent in a broader network of camps established after the 2022 invasion.⁷⁰ These are managed by the Russian regional and local governments with support from civil society and private sector actors, and appear to be led at the national level by Russian Commissioner

for Children’s Rights Marua Lvova-Belova in cooperation with senior members of Kremlin leadership.⁷¹



Image of Deputy Chairman of the Security Council of Russia and former president Dmitry Medvedev visits Artek camp in 2015

Russia frames the transfer of Ukrainian children as a humanitarian mission.⁷² However, many children sent to camps have never returned or faced involuntary extended stays. As noted in Chapter 5, consent from parents for their children to attend is sometimes obtained through deception or coercion. An OSCE report cites a case of 200 children sent to a summer camp in KrasnodarskyiKrai, Russia, who were enrolled in local schools instead of returning to Ukraine.⁷³ A similar case was reported by the *Guardian* in December 2022, including a refusal by a camp in Crimea to return a child to his family after

68 Khoshnood et al, 2023b, p.12,15 and 19

69 The Moscow Times, “Moscow Boosts Funding of Artek Children’s Camp in Crimea,” 10 September 2014. Available at: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/09/10/moscow-boosts-funding-of-artek-childrens-camp-in-crimea-a39275>

70 RFE, “Crimea’s Famed Artek Camp Turns 100, Tainted By Links To Russia Invasion,” 7 June 2025. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-ukraine-artek-pioneers-crimea/33436003.html>

71 Khoshnood et al, 2023b, p.6.

72 Ibid.

73 Bilkova, V., Hellestveit, C. and Steinerte, E. *Report on the Violation 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 by the Russian Federation*, OSCE 4 May 2023, p.34. Available at: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/7/7/542751.pdf>

his hometown of Kherson had been liberated by Ukraine.⁷⁴ Our research has uncovered examples of mistreatment of children in such facilities including one boy being stripped down to his underwear, standing against the background of the Russian flag, and forced to record a video apologising for their pro-Ukraine tattoos.⁷⁵

Camps Statistics and Institutional Support

In February 2023, Yale HRL identified 43 camps and other facilities used for purposes including indoctrination that hold Ukrainian children, including 7 in the TOT of Crimea and 10 near Moscow, Kazan, and Yekaterinburg.⁷⁶ In 2024, the Ukrainian Regional Centre for Human Rights identified 13 re-education camps in TOT, 18 in Belarus, and 67 within the Russian Federation.⁷⁷ By March 2025, Yale figures had increased to “at least 57 facilities - including 13 facilities in Belarus and 43 in Russia and Russia-occupied territory.”⁷⁸ By September 2025, Yale HRL believed that facility numbers exceeded 200.⁷⁹

Russia has expanded the Yunarmiya initiative - a paramilitary youth movement created in 2016 by the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation - and established facilities in the Crimean Peninsula, subsequently establishing similar regional headquarters in the TOT areas of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. The movement now reportedly has 1.8 million members.⁸⁰



Yunarmiya youths on parade in TOT of Crimea, May 2022

Russian federal agencies are central to the process: the Ministry of Education drives curriculum and patriotic education; the Defence Ministry partially funds and oversees youth military programs like Yunarmiya; and the Ministry of Internal Affairs handles passports and civil registry changes.⁸¹

The Russian Orthodox Church contributes ideological programming, presenting militarisation as a moral and spiritual duty. In 2022, it began to work with the authorities to facilitate the placement of children in monasteries and other facilities controlled by the church.⁸² The church also has a role in bolstering the attractiveness of military

74 Koshiw, Isobel. “Weeks turn to months as children become stuck at camps in Crimea,” *Guardian*, 22 December 2022. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/dec/27/children-become-stuck-at-camps-in-crimea-ukraine-russia>

75 Save Ukraine interview

76 Khoshnood et al, 2023b, p.4-5.

77 Regional Centre for Human Rights, Where is Russia re-educating our children: A new study by RCHR, 2024. Available at: <https://rchr.org.ua/en/publications/where-is-russia-re-educating-our-children-a-new-study-by-the-rchr/>

78 Yale School of Medicine, “Fact Sheet: Russia’s Kidnapping and Re-education of Ukraine’s Children,” March 17, 2025. Available at: <https://medicine.yale.edu/news-article/fact-sheet-russias-kidnapping-and-re-education-of-ukraines-children/>

79 Nathaniel A. Raymond and Caitlin N. Howarth et al. “Tracking Ukraine’s Stolen Children: An Analysis of 210 Locations.” September 2025. Humanitarian Research Lab at Yale School of Public Health: New Haven.

80 “Save Ukraine: В российскую «Юнармию» привлекли 1,8 млн детей: среди них — сотни тысяч украинцев,” *Hromadske*, 8 мая 2025, Available at: <https://hromadske.ua/ru/obshchestvo>

vo/244412-save-ukraine-v-rossiyskuyu-yunarmiyu-privlekli-18-mln-detey-sredi-nih-sotni-tysyach-ukraintsev

81 *Moscow Times* “Russia Announces Compulsory Patriotic History Education for 7-Year-Olds,” 19 April 2025. Available at: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/04/19/russia-announces-compulsory-patriotic-history-education-for-7-year-olds-a77406>; *Moscow Times*, “Russia Doubles Budget for State-Sponsored ‘Youth Army’”, 23 April 2025. Available at: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2025/04/23/russia-doubles-budget-for-state-sponsored-youth-army-a88832> Interfax, “Более 2,2 млн российских паспортов выдано жителям четырех новых субъектов РФ за год - МВД”, 30 сентября 2023, Available at: <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/6888832> Более 2,2 млн российских паспортов выдано жителям четырех новых субъектов РФ за год - МВД - Агентство военных новостей || Интерфакс Россия

82 Havrylov, Vladyslav. “The Role of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Forcible Deportation of Ukrainian Children”, 26 October 2023. Available at: <https://globalchildren.georgetown.edu/responses/the-role-of-the-russian-orthodox-church-in-the-forcible-deportation-of-ukrainian-children>

service, with its leaders stating that “sacrifice in the course of carrying out your military duty washes away all sins.”⁸³ In 2023, it published a children’s booklet, *To Live is to Serve the Motherland*, with sayings including material telling readers that it is their duty to fight with the country’s armed forces.⁸⁴



The “To live is to serve the motherland” booklet of the Russian Orthodox Church

No corner of Russia has remained uninvolved. In Chechnya, the “Gorny Klyuch” camp near Grozny was used to host about 200 teenagers from the TOT area of Donbas and other regions in late 2022 for a “military-patriotic” program. There, teens were taught to handle weapons and were inundated with tales of Russian military “glory” in Ukraine. Another program, dubbed “Forces of the Caucasus,” was a joint project of Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov and Russian Children’s Rights Commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova.⁸⁵

A February 2023 Yale HRL study found that at least

83 RfE, “Russian Patriarch Kirill Says Dying In Ukraine ‘Washes Away All Sins’,” 26 September 2022. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-patriarch-kirill-dying-ukraine-sins/32052380.html>

84 Luxmoore, Jonathan. “New handbook instructs Russian children on duty,” Church Times, 8 December 2023. Available at: <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2023/8-december/news/world/new-handbook-instructs-russian-children-on-duty>

85 Martynyuk, Leonid. “US Sanctions on Chechen Leader’s Mother Target Involvement in Illegally Deporting Ukrainian Children,” VOA, 29 August 2023. Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/fact-check-us-justifiably-sanctions-chechen-leader-s-mother-for-involvement-in-illegally-deporting-ukrainian-children/7245731.html>

32 (78%) of identified camps systematically re-educate Ukrainian children through Russia-centric academic, cultural, patriotic, and military programs.⁸⁶

In our survey of children, 41% reported experiencing militarisation or being forced to participate in the activities of armed formations, and 30% attending camps.⁸⁷ This included weapons training, tactics and explosives. In several cases, minors were forced to prepare for armed conflicts:

They take all children starting from age 14. But there was even a boy who was 13 - he was sent to a camp for training. From Kherson, Luhansk, Donetsk - children from all occupied territories are taken ‘for training’ to prepare for war, for the army, to fight against Ukraine.⁸⁸

Girl, 17, Kherson region

Categorisation of Affected Children

Yale HRL categorises camp-assigned children into four groups: those with parents or guardians, children deemed to be orphans by Russia, children formerly in Ukrainian state care, and those with unclear pre-invasion status. Children with parents or guardians appear to be the main focus of the camp system, while orphans and children in state care were found to be particularly vulnerable to removal from Ukraine, often for adoption by Russian.⁸⁹ Yet even those in the camps with relatives at home are not immune:

There was even a visit from the Russian ombudswoman Maria Lvova-Belova. She was recruiting girls to move deeper into Russia and boys to join military youth movements like Yunarmiya. I managed to contact [name redacted]. I called her crying, telling her I wanted to come home. The Russians warned me that if my parents didn’t take me back within six months, I would be sent to an orphanage and my guardian would lose custody. They kept saying over and over that no one would come for us, that we shouldn’t expect anyone.⁹⁰

Girl, 16, Kherson region

86 Khoshnood et al, 2023b, p.4.

87 Save Ukraine Data

88 Save Ukraine Interview

89 Khoshnood et al, 2023b, p.4

90 Save Ukraine Interview

Quantitative Estimates and Program Descriptions

Russia's federal government coordinates a broad network of camps and facilities. In February 2023, Yale reported that over 6,000 Ukrainian children had been held in camps, although the true number was "likely significantly higher," in the TOT of Crimea and within Russia.⁹¹ According to September 2023 UK Ministry of Defence data, about 11,000 Ukrainian children were in "Russian custody" at 43 re-education camps.⁹²

As well as those detained, the camps also have a broader turnover of attendees. In December 2024, Ukraine's Regional Centre for Human Rights stated that around 40,000 Ukrainian children went through these camps annually.⁹³ In April 2025, the Russian First Deputy Education Minister stated that 53,000 Ukrainian children would spend their summer holidays at such camps.⁹⁴

In June 2025, analysis by Hala Systems and Save Ukraine used satellite and other data to analyse six Yumarmiya facilities.⁹⁵ The data and testimonies from attendees support the belief that children are being given military training at these camps. Mobile phone tracking showed drills in marching formation, while satellite images revealed slit trenches for training. Testimonies from children corroborate these findings.

They took me and settled me in some camp, the "Druzhba" camp, then I was transferred to another camp, "Luchisty", where I was for about 1.5 months. After that, the director came and took me to study without permission. It felt like 5 months... It was a formation, singing the Russian anthem, a run, then we went to training⁹⁶

Male, 20 (16 when taken to camp), Kherson region



Ukrainian children with weapons in Russian-controlled camps

Some Ukrainian children deported to Belarus have been sent to paramilitary-style youth camps run by the Belarusian Ministry of Emergency Situations, where they were given uniforms, took part in drills, and were exposed to military culture. Yale HRL has documented at least six such training events at Belarusian facilities housing Ukrainian children.⁹⁷

91 Khoshnood et al, 2023b, p.4 and 5

92 UK Ministry of Defence, X, 6 September 2023. Available at: <https://x.com/DefenceHQ/status/1726646695772004606>

93 Regional Centre for Human Rights, "Kateryna Rashevskaya Addresses UN Security Council on Forced Deportation and Political Indoctrination of Ukrainian Children by Russia," 4 December 2024. Available at: <https://rchr.org.ua/en/publications/kateryna-rashevskaya-addresses-un-security-council-on-forced-deportation-and-political-indoctrination-of-ukrainian-children-by-russia/>

94 Hird, Karolina and Trotter, Nate, "Russian Occupation Update, 1 May 2025. Available at: <https://understandingwar.org/background-russian-occupation-update-may-1-2025>

95 Mackinnon, Mack. "Satellite data shed light on Russia's modern-day gulags for Ukrainian children," *Globe & Mail*, 29 May 2025. Available at: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-satellite-data-sheds-light-on-russias-modern-day-gulags-for-ukrainian/>

96 Save Ukraine Interview

97 Yale HRL, *Belarus' Involvement in Deportations*, p.20

Camp discipline is severe. One attendee stated:

If someone misbehaved, they were beaten or thrown into a cold pool. As punishment, they were forced to pull waist-high weeds or dig fields. Girls were told they'd get the same if they misbehaved.⁹⁸

Girl, 17, Kherson region

Militarisation in Schools

After occupying Ukrainian territories in 2014 and again in 2022, Russia enrolled children into state-affiliated groups promoting patriotic values and military skills, prioritised under the *Russian Strategy of State Cultural Policy to 2030*.⁹⁹

The numbers highlighted above understate the broader campaign targeting all school-aged children in TOT. The latest information indicates that there are 900 secondary approximately schools in TOT, although accounts vary greatly as to the total number due to a lack of information.¹⁰⁰ Even before February 2022, children in Crimea and Russian-controlled Donetsk and Luhansk were subjected to anti-Ukrainian propaganda and basic military training in schools.¹⁰¹

In 2015, the so-called Luhansk People's Republic passed a law embedding "patriotic education," creating a "high level of patriotic awareness" among citizens.¹⁰² The so-called Donetsk People's Republic embarked on a similar effort, and in both instances,

the laws are in many areas direct transpositions from their Russian equivalents, in the Luhansk People's Republic law including the aim to "increase the prestige of state and military service."¹⁰³ In November 2022, Crimean authorities approved a program of "preliminary military training" for school children, matching a similar policy implemented in Russia.¹⁰⁴ The militarisation of children in the TOT is integrated into all levels of the educational process through compulsory curricula, state-run youth organisations, and ideologically charged "patriotic" activities, including:

- **Yunarmiya**¹⁰⁵ — all-Russian paramilitary youth movement created by the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, in which children aged 8 to 17 participate in military, combat, and fire training, marches, military-historical reenactments, and propaganda events. Ukrainian children who find themselves on the territory of the Russian Federation or under occupation are massively recruited into the Yunarmiya without the informed consent of their parents.
- **Zarnitsa (often referred as Zarnitsa 2.0)**¹⁰⁶ — originally a Soviet system of military sports games for schoolchildren, later restored in the Russian Federation. It contains the elements of combat training, tactical games, shooting, and simulation of military operations. Participation in "Zarnitsa" is aimed at developing children's survival skills in combat conditions and readiness for military service.

98 Save Ukraine Interview

99 Правительство Российской Федерации, 2024. Распоряжение от 11 сентября 2024 г. № 2501-р «Об утверждении Стратегии государственной культурной политики на период до 2030 года». [online] Available at: <http://static.government.ru/media/files/jlx0zkwFvU0sCnXIQTwPZO0RqTMMVL7v.pdf>

100 Профспілка працівників освіти і науки України. (2025). Війна та укрупнення змінюють освітню карту України» Профспілка працівників освіти і науки України. [online] Available at: <https://pon.org.ua/novyny/12060-viina-ta-ukrupnennia-zminuut-osvit-nu-kartu-ukrainy.html>

101 Matviyishyn, Iryna. "Children as a tool: how Russia militarises kids in the Donbas and Crimea," RFE, 3 May 2019. Available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/children-as-a-tool-how-russia-militarizes-kids-in-the-donbas-and-crimea/>

102 Barbieri, Jaroslava. "Raising Citizen-Soldiers in Donbas: Russia's Role in Promoting Patriotic Education Programmes in the Donetsk and Luhansk Peoples' Republics," *Ethnopolitics*, Volume 23, 2024 - Issue 5, p.517. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2023.2220097>

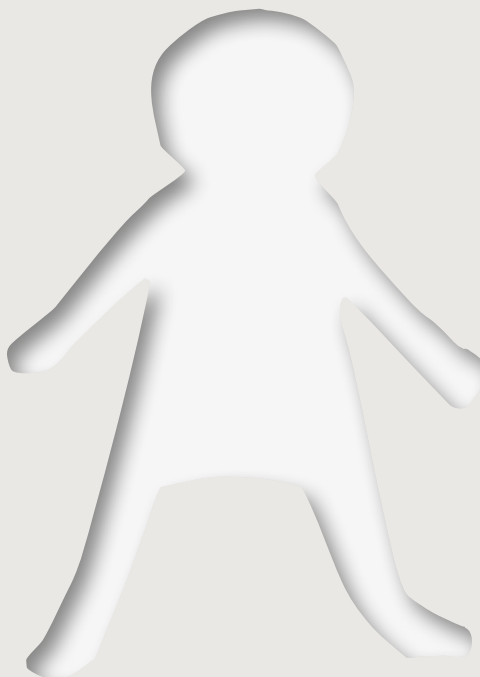
103 Ibid.

104 RfE, "'Loyal Soldiers Of Putin': Ukraine, Activists Call Militarization Of Schools In Russian-Occupied Crimea A War Crime," 1 December 2022. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-crimea-russia-militarization-schools/32157588.html>

105 Finch, Ray. "Young Army Movement Winning the Hearts and Minds of Russian Youth," *Military Review*, September-October 2019. Available at: <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/SO-19/Finch-Young-Army.pdf>

106 Centre for Countering Disinformation, "Zarnitsa 2.0 Project: How Russia Prepares Children for Future Participation in the War," 17 September 2024. Available at: <https://cpd.gov.ua/en/results/zarnitsa-2-0-project-how-russia-prepares-children-for-future-participation-in-the-war/>

- **Dvizhenie pervykh (The Movement of the First)**¹⁰⁷ — an officially established state-run “patriotic” movement of children and youth, designed to replace the Soviet-style pioneer organisation. The movement encompasses educational institutions. Subordinate to the Russian Presidential Administration, critics say it seeks to foster loyalty to the Russian government, inculcate submission to state ideology, glorify war, and promote the education of youth as “citizen-defenders.”
- **Razhovory o vazhnom (Conversations about important things)**¹⁰⁸ — are classes held every Monday in schools across the Russian Federation and in the temporarily occupied territories (TOT). The topics are intended to impose the ideology of the “Russian world” on students, honour the Russian army, ultimately forming a positive attitude towards the war and discrediting Ukraine. Attendance at such classes is mandatory, and the participation is graded.
- **OBZR - osnovy bezopasnosti zashchity rodiny (Fundamentals of Safety and Protection of the Motherland)**¹⁰⁹ — another mandatory subject in the school curriculum that is graded. Its study involves drill, training in tactics, handling weapons, and preparing children for military service in the ranks of the



Russian Armed Forces. This course serves as an ideological tool for preparing students for mobilisation.

- **Molodaya hvardiya Young guard**¹¹⁰ — the youth wing of the pro-government party “Yedinaya Rossiya” (United Russia), which is actively operating in the TOT. In addition to participating in propaganda activities, members of the organization are involved in organizing “patriotism lessons”, celebrations in honour of the “SVO” (i.e., *Special Military Operation* — Russia’s official name for the war in Ukraine) volunteer actions in support of the Russian army and de-facto campaigns to undermine Ukrainian state. (Young Guard) functions as a tool for political mobilisation and military education of adolescents and youth.
- **Eaglets of Russia**¹¹¹ — this is a Russian children’s project aimed at younger school students (6–10 years old), which serves as early militarisation and ideological preparation for joining the Movement of the First and

Yunarmiya. As part of the program, children are solemnly “consecrated” as “eaglets”, presented with symbols and involved in events that glorify the Russian army, promote “traditional values” and form loyalty to the Russian state. In the TOT, in particular in Melitopol, mass involvement of first-graders in the project without parental consent or under duress has been recorded. Participation in militarised structures such as Yunarmiya, Eaglets of Russia, (Young Guard), or the OBZR course, as well as systemic lessons like Conversations About Important Things and Zarnitsa, is not merely encouraged – it is

107 Arnald, Richard. “Youth Organization Signals Growing Russian Militarization,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol.21 Issue 45, Jamestown Foundation, 25 March 2024. Available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/youth-organization-signals-growing-russian-militarization/>

108 Kotlyar, Yevgenia and Coalson, Robert. “‘It’s Not Scary To Die For The Motherland’: As War On Ukraine Rages, Russian Children Targeted For ‘Patriotic’ Education”, RfE/RL, 2 September 2022. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-schoolchildren-patriotic-education-ukraine-war/32016144.html>

109 BBC Monitoring, “Explainer: Russian schools continue pushing war readiness, ideology,” 3 September 2024. Available at: <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/b00029ww>

110 Wikipedia, 2025. Молодая Гвардия Единой России. [online] Available at: https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Молодая_Гвардия_Единой_России.

111 Pasyuk, Maryna. “Be Prepared to Kill or Die for Russia 3. “Eaglets” and Children’s Military Clubs of DOSAAF,” 24 May 2024. Available at: <https://investigator.org.ua/en/investigations/266966/>

essentially mandatory and strictly monitored.

The implementation of *Russian Strategy of State Cultural Policy to 2030* is manifested by the preparation of youth for the Russian military service within Yunarmia facilities. The OHCHR reports boys and girls aged 8–18 being trained to handle automatic rifles, grenades, sniper and anti-tank weapons, and forced to wear military style uniforms to school.¹¹² By 2024, Yunarmiya membership totalled 4,100 members in Donetsk, 6,000 in Luhansk, and included 23 groups in Zaporizhzhia.¹¹³

Many of those we surveyed referred to their participation in the Yunarmiya movement. One child noted:

Russian soldiers came to our school and organised a trial participation in Yunarmiya. It was military training. There were about six of them - they told us about Donbas, something about Kyiv, something about the war, what happened in 2014. They gave us weapons to assemble and disassemble, and also cartridges - we handled and disassembled those too. They let us shoot; the rifle was heavy, but the bullets weren't real.¹¹⁴

Girl, aged 15, Mariupol, Donetsk region

A witness reported mandatory participation in Yunarmiya beginning in first grade (age-6-7), describing intense psychological pressure; one classmate, aged 15, dug trenches for Russian troops and later signed a military contract.¹¹⁵



Putin at a Movement of the First board meeting, December 2023

Military training was often compulsory for both genders. A girl Save Ukraine Interviewed described it thus:

We were taught to use weapons. Then they told us to choose a specialisation - tactics, medicine, emergency response, drone control, or demining. I chose demining. I thought it would be easy. But we trained in the evening: mining and demining, throwing grenades at our feet, learning about anti-tank and anti-personnel mines.¹¹⁶

Girl, 17, Kherson region

Schools also host military groups, which we will outline in detail in Chapter 9. The “Young Guard” group was an initiative mentioned by several of those we surveyed.

112 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *The Impact of the Armed Conflict and Occupation on Children's Rights in Ukraine*, March 2025, pp. 18; All-Russian Child-Youth Military-Patriotic Civic Movement “Yunarmiya”, “Statute of the Yunarmiya Movement,” adopted 28 May 2016; and “Development Strategy of the Yunarmiya Movement Until 2030.” Available at: <https://deti.gov.ru/Deyatel-nost/documents/245>

113 OHCHR, 2025, p.18

114 Save Ukraine Interview

115 Save Ukraine Interview

116 Save Ukraine Interview

One participant noted:

Young Guard is like a military school, but it took place at our regular school. Sometimes we got to shoot with an automatic rifle or watch some military event. We could leave school early to prepare for a parade, to march, to travel to Moscow, or to go on excursions. They issued a special uniform. I was part of it before, because it seemed interesting... We got the impression that schoolchildren were being prepared for war. They said this was a ticket to military school. Most joined because it gave extra exam points, increasing the chances of not being drafted into the military. This especially applied to boys.¹¹⁷

Girl, 14, city of Luhansk

The document “Extracurricular Course on Basic Military Training,” targeted at high-school students aged 16-17, provides an insight into Russia’s approach. Split between practical training (including marksmanship and battlefield medicine) and patriotic indoctrination, where “the Russian peoples” is used in plural form, underlying that the “Russianness” transcends the borders of the Russian Federation. The document does not specifically address the militarisation of Ukrainian youth but emphasises the univocal purpose of military education for youth - the rapid preparation of individuals for their eventual integration into the Russian armed forces.¹¹⁸

In 2015, in the TOT of Crimea, Russia introduced “cadet classes” (pre-professional education for entry into law enforcement and the military) into public schools for girls and boys.¹¹⁹ By the 2023-2024 academic year, 78 schools in Crimea had a total of 244 cadet classes. By December 2024, 11 cadet classes were operating in the TOT of Zaporizhzhia, with additional classes in at least three schools in Kherson, three in Luhansk, and two in Donetsk. In September 2024, Mariupol opened a specialised

117 Save Ukraine Interview

118 Институт стратегии развития образования, 2023. Рабочая программа курса внеурочной деятельности: Начальная военная подготовка (учебных сборов по основам военной службы) (среднее общее образование), p.4 Available at: https://edsoo.ru/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/БУД_РП_НВП_10-11-кл_Новая.pdf.

119 Republic of Crimea, “Law No. 131-ZRK/2015 ‘On Education in the Republic of Crimea’,” 6 July 2015.

Naval Military School for 560 students from the 5th grade (ages 11–12).¹²⁰

Another form of forced militarisation is the civic-state group “Movement of the First.” It claimed to have formed 2,108 groups for children aged 6 and older at schools in the TOT. This movement promoted militarisation and cultivation of Russian patriotism through paramilitary games – “Zarnitsa” and “Zarnichka” - events, many those of whom we surveyed and referenced.¹²¹ A 16-year-old boy recalled:

They told us there would be ‘Zarnitsa.’ We sat down with the history teacher, and he started assigning roles. I was told I’d be demining cans with a stick - I’d be a sapper. Another classmate had to run through obstacles. Tasks were handed out: someone had to learn Russian military ranks to record a video, answer history questions, and all about Russia. The boys were told to dress in military uniforms; there would be sports competitions, pull-ups, military drills, assembling weapons - assault rifles - for speed.¹²²

Boy, 16, Kherson region

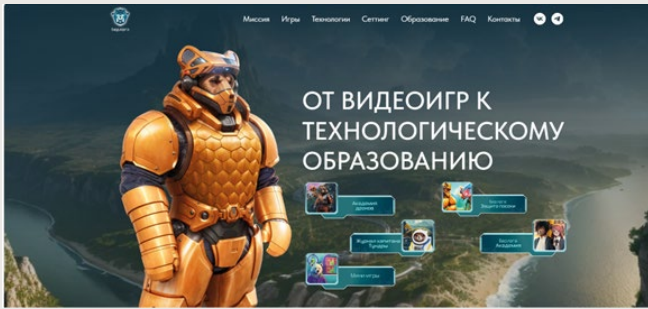
An additional programme of note is Moscow’s use of Russian children for the development, testing and production of combat drones, as well as the training of soldiers. Amongst these efforts is the Berloga (“Bear’s Den”) project, which sees schoolchildren play as bears in a computer game battling “cyber bees” to test and develop their abilities before moving on to clubs and competitions that serve as recruitment centres for the military and supporting industries. Putin himself has endorsed the program.¹²³

120 OHCHR 2025, p.18.

121 OHCHR, 2025, p.18; Save Ukraine Interviews

122 Save Ukraine Interview

123 Ashurkevich, Tatsiana; Grozev, Christo and Dobrokhotov. Roman, ““We must not say it’s for the war”: Hundreds of thousands of Russian schoolkids are building drones that kill Ukrainians,” The Insider, 22 July 2025. Available at: <https://theins.ru/en/inv/283351>



Screenshot from the Berloga website that develops children's ability to fly drones

The Berloga programme has also been incorporated into Zarnitsa, with children learning quadcopter drone piloting skills. In 2023, the Movement of the First incorporated this program into its activities, including through the “Pilots of the Future” competition.¹²⁴



A Russian child in a military uniform being trained to operate a drone – image via Zarnitsa 2.0's official Telegram channel

This approach reflects a deliberate policy of early military socialisation of children, structured to instill combat skills, loyalty to the Russian army, and support for the war.

WE GOT THE IMPRESSION THAT SCHOOLCHILDREN WERE BEING PREPARED FOR WAR. THEY SAID THIS WAS A TICKET TO MILITARY SCHOOL. MOST JOINED BECAUSE IT GAVE EXTRA EXAM POINTS, INCREASING THE CHANCES OF NOT BEING DRAFTED INTO THE MILITARY

¹²⁴ Ashurkevich, et al.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Risks to children of militarisation

As highlighted in previous chapters, the militarisation of Ukrainian children in the context of the temporary occupation and the state policy of the Russian Federation poses a threat to their physical, psychological and social security.

The multi-stage system of indoctrination and militarisation described in Chapter 7 seeks to normalise violence, militarism and war, while simultaneously displacing the Ukrainian language, culture and historical memory (Chapter 9). More than three years of Russian occupation of parts of Ukraine is already causing profound changes in the minds of some children (Chapter 13).

In many cases, parental consent to participate in such activities is formally given, but without a real choice - under pressure, coercion or deceptive promises.

I don't understand why they need this. They say: "To rest." In what sense — to rest? We ran with machine guns and shovels! Mum says: "There will be a sea, take a swimsuit." I take a swimsuit, and they take us to the camp. I stand and look: where is the sea? Where is the rest? One soldier laughs: "Who told you that you would come to the sea, to rest? No, you came to the military camp."¹²⁵

Girl, 17, Kherson region

Ongoing military socialisation is already conditioning Ukrainian children for potential service in the Russian armed forces (Chapter 7), and if these policies persist, the risk of their full assimilation, loyalty to the occupying state, and eventual use as a mobilisation resource will only grow.

Such conditioning exposes especially older children and youth to profound dangers: including the physical risks of front-line combat, injury, and death, alongside the psychological harms of coercion, indoctrination, and exposure to extreme violence, which can leave lasting trauma well into adulthood.

¹²⁵ Save Ukraine Interview

The vulnerability of separated children

In the context of the systemic militarisation carried out by the Russian Federation in the TOT, the situation of children who have been forcibly separated from their families or found themselves without proper parental care is of particular concern.

Such children - including those who have been deported to the Russian Federation or taken to the TOT of Crimea - are most vulnerable to the influence of ideological indoctrination, forced involvement in 'patriotic events' and programs of a militarised nature.

Conversely, we have identified children with parents or guardians who have been able to provide their children with some protection.

The last straw is Zarnitsa [system of military sports games for schoolchildren], they made it mandatory. Even lessons are cancelled for Zarnitsa, and children must participate. Conflicts began here. If grades 6 and 9 - the teachers there are pro-Russian, then we said that we would not participate in it, then the teachers: "Well, how about it, nada, nada [it's needed, it's needed]." And with my middle daughter, grade 8 - there is a Ukrainian teacher, he called me - my children will not participate in Zarnitsa, they are believers."¹²⁶

Mother of 16-year-old girl, Kherson region

Russian controlled institutions which forcibly separated or unaccompanied children are placed in, such as foster families, temporary centres or children's camps, often act as instruments of state policy for military education, rather than protection of the rights of the child. In cases of forcible separation, decisions to participate in militarisation activities are, by definition, made without the informed consent of the parents.

¹²⁶ Save Ukraine Interview

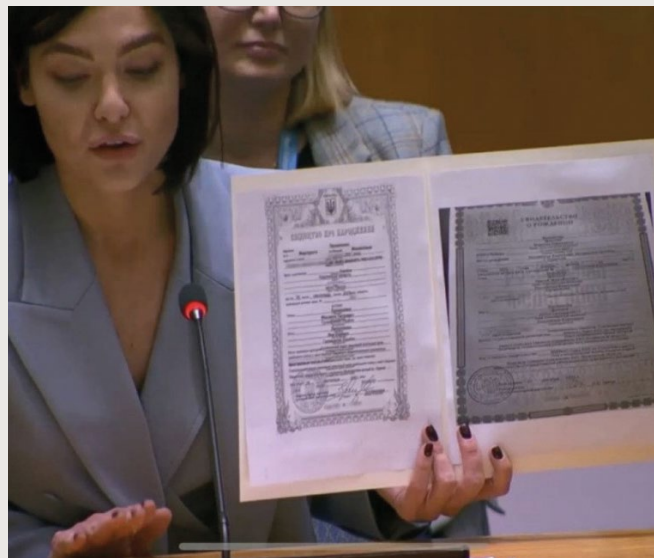
CHAPTER NINE

Methods of Influence

This chapter examines how the Russian state imposes ideological, cultural, and psychological control over abducted Ukrainian children. It focuses on forced assimilation through coerced citizenship, the issuing of Russian ID documents, bans on the Ukrainian language, and “patriotic education” - all designed to erase Ukrainian identity and reduce children’s ability and desire to return home.

Identity Erasure

Russia uses several methods to wipe out children’s Ukrainian identity. Mykola Kuleba, CEO of Save Ukraine - one of the two charities involved in this report - describes this process as an intended operation to destroy Ukrainian identity.¹²⁷ International and Ukrainian organisations report multiple ways in which Russia conducts a systematic policy to erase the identity of Ukrainian children.¹²⁸ The process of “de-Ukrainianisation” often begins at birth in TOT. Russian authorities have instructed medical staff to issue Russian birth certificates with Russified names and Russia listed as the place of birth: transmitting newborn data to Ukraine’s National Health Service is forbidden.¹²⁹ This obstructs Ukrainian efforts to trace the child and poses a significant barrier to future repatriation.



Dariia Zarivna, Advisor to the Head of the Office of the President and Chief Operating Officer of Bring Kids Back UA, presents a child’s original Ukrainian birth certificate, and a Russian one issued to the same child after they were abducted and taken to Russia, to the United Nations Security Council.

Additional risks exist for children without parents or those separated from them, as many transferred under Moscow’s control have been entered into Russia’s adoption database.¹³⁰ Some children, especially infants, are adopted early, issued Russian documents, and given new names, potentially completely erasing their Ukrainian identity.

This adoption system enables generational assimilation, functioning as an administrative tool to eliminate the cultural and national heritage of Ukrainian children. When placed in adoption or other placements in the TOT or Russia, the OSCE has noted that “Ukrainian children find themselves in an entirely Russian environment, including language, customs and religion and are exposed to a pro-Russian information campaign often amounting to targeted re-education as well as being involved in military education.”¹³¹

127 Ірина Матвійчук (2024). *Росія перетворює депортованих з України дітей на ворогів американського народу. Інтерв'ю з Миколою Кулебою*. [online] Голос Америки Українською. Available at: <https://www.holosameryky.com/a/rosy-depor-tovani-dity-kuleba-intervju/7466972.html>

128 For examples, see Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights on the Observance of Children's Rights in the Context of Armed Aggression against Ukraine, “Cross-Pollinated”, 2024. Available at: https://www.ombudsman.gov.ua/storage/app/media/uploaded-files/Special%20Report%20_CROSS-POLLINATED_.pdf; OHCHR, 2025, pp.16-19; Gittoes, Matt. “Stolen Generation; A Systematic Violation of Ukraine's Future”, GLOBSEC, June 2025. Available at: <https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/Stolen%20Generation%20a%20Systematic%20Violation%20of%20Ukraine%E2%80%99s%20Future.pdf>

129 OHCHR 2025, 14-16.

130 Raymond et al, 2024, p.1

131 Bilkova et al, p.1.

When leading the indoctrination of Ukrainian children, Russians participating in this effort say that they do not instill their culture, but “restore” it because, as they claimed, “residents of the temporarily occupied territories have always been bearers of Russian culture.”¹³² Collectively, this contributes to forming an opinion compliant with the Russian propaganda narratives, where NATO is framed as a culprit for the war, while fostering the feeling of abandonment by Ukraine and the inevitability of the Russian victory.

Among the children we surveyed, 55% reported efforts to impose pro-Russian ideology.¹³³ One pupil described being made to wear shirts with Russian flags, read poetry on camera, and take part in pro-Russian events. Lessons were filled with nationalist propaganda, pressuring students to claim Russian superiority.¹³⁴ Students were made to wear military-style uniforms and sing the Russian national anthem, often being filmed during these performances. Additionally, Russian patriotic songs were popularised, including ones that honoured violence and the Russian military.¹³⁵ It was also reported that soldiers would visit schools to promote joining youth movements and the Russian military.¹³⁶

The military - representatives of the Russian army - came. They wanted us to enter their educational institutions after school. We were taught to disassemble and assemble machine guns. They said that after school you could enter a military school in Melitopol... They said that you could do whatever you liked - driving in cars, driving in tanks. They promised that they would pay a salary - they said that they pay well there.¹³⁷

Boy, 17, Kherson region



A member of the Russia's Rosgvardiya (National Guard) demonstrates a weapon in a classroom in the TOT in the Kherson region

At some events, leaflets are passed out to pupils with warnings of how to behave around visiting veteran soldiers. These appear to serve a double purpose: deter pupils from behavior that may trigger soldier's post-traumatic stress disorder, and to intimidate pupils into obedience. These individuals had open and unrestricted access to Ukrainian children, posing serious risks to their psychological safety and well-being. One such warning explicitly stated that “any carelessness may cost a child their life.” Another advised children not to wear clothing that combines yellow and blue - the national colors of Ukraine - suggesting that even subtle signs of Ukrainian identity could provoke punishment.

132 Омбудсмен України, «Спеціальна доповідь: „Переопилені“. Системна російська політика знищення української ідентичності дітей», 2023, pp. 29-30. Available at: https://www.ombudsman.gov.ua/storage/app/media/uploaded-files/C%D0%B-F%D0%B5%D1%86%D1%96%D0%B0%D0%BB%D1%8C%D0%BD%D0%B0_%D0%B4%D0%BE%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%B2%D1%96%D0%B4%D1%8C_%D0%9F%D0%95%D0%A0%D0%95%D0%9E%D0%9F%D0%98%D0%9B%D0%95%D0%9D%D0%86_.pdf

133 Save Ukraine data

134 Save Ukraine Interview

135 Save Ukraine Interview

136 Save Ukraine Interview

137 Save Ukraine Interview



Leaflet handed out to children in advance of a visit by military veterans and its English translation.

Interwoven with this is a wider campaign of intimidation and oppression. Of the children we surveyed, 18% reported obstructed access to medical care. This was often interlinked with the issuing of “official” Russian documents such as passports.¹³⁸

At first, they didn't force Russian passports, but hospitals wouldn't admit anyone without them and wouldn't give out medicine.¹³⁹

Boy, 16, Kherson region

Torture and cruel treatment were reported by 10% of those surveyed.¹⁴⁰ We identified a number of instances of children being interrogated, beaten and tortured on suspicion of supporting Ukraine.¹⁴¹ The OHCHR has also identified cases of children being tortured.¹⁴² One child surveyed reported Russian soldiers brutally torturing and killing his adult friend after false accusations of collaborating with the Ukrainian military.

The hardest thing for me is remembering the death of my friend [Name redacted]. The Russians found a message thread with Ukrainian soldiers on his phone and took him to the commandant's office... They ripped out his teeth and eyelids, cut off his fingers... He couldn't survive the torture. Later, the news said he died of a 'blood clot.' But the truth is — they killed him.¹⁴³

Boy, 18, Kherson region

Also notable was bullying and intimidation from school peers, including physical violence, from pupils towards students who expressed pro-Ukraine views.¹⁴⁴ Conflict-related sexual violence was rarer but still reported by some 6% of those surveyed. Our survey revealed multiple instances of rape.¹⁴⁵ Again, this corresponds with similar findings from the OHCHR.¹⁴⁶ These findings also highlight how indoctrination often overlaps with other violations, creating severe risks to children's physical, psychological, and social well-being.

Coerced Citizenship

Much of the push for coerced citizenship has been legalistic. Since annexing Crimea in 2014, a series of laws and decrees has created automatic or coerced citizenship pathways. Key developments include:

- **Law No.6-FKZ (21 March 2014)**, which automatically granted Russian citizenship to individuals in the TOT of Crimea unless they opted out within one month.¹⁴⁷
- **Presidential Decree No. 183 (24 April 2019)**: Decree opened a fast-track path to Russian citizenship for people in certain districts of Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk. Decree 187 of the same day expanded eligibility to additional categories of Ukrainian nationals; expanded by **Decree 343 (17 July 2019)** to all

¹³⁸ Save Ukraine Interviews

¹³⁹ Save Ukraine Interview

¹⁴⁰ Save Ukraine Data

¹⁴¹ Save Ukraine Interviews

¹⁴² OHCHR, 2025, p. 14.

¹⁴³ Save Ukraine Interview

¹⁴⁴ Save Ukraine Interview

¹⁴⁵ Save Ukraine Interviews

¹⁴⁶ OHCHR, 2025, p. 13.

¹⁴⁷ CIS Legislation, *Federal Constitutional Law of the Russian Federation of 21 March 2014, No. 6-FKZ*. Available at: <https://cis-legislation.com/document.fwx?rgn=66256>

residents in both oblasts.¹⁴⁸

- **Presidential Decree No.330 (30 May 2022):** Granted guardians, caretakers and the leaders of children's institutions the ability to apply for Russian citizenship for children under their care.¹⁴⁹
- **Presidential Decree No. 440 (11 July 2022):** A decree extending simplified naturalisation to all citizens of Ukraine.¹⁵⁰
- **Russian Federation Federal Constitutional Laws No. 5 FZK, No.6 FKZ, No.7 FKZ and No.8 FKZ (7 Oct 2022):** Legalised (in Russian law) the annexation of Donetsk, Lugansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson and offered residents citizenship via an oath.¹⁵¹
- **Presidential Decree No. 951 (26 Dec, 2022):** Introduced a procedure to register children "unwilling" to retain Ukrainian citizenship, and a procedure for children under 14 to be registered as such without consent, via parent, guardians or officials.¹⁵²
- **Presidential Decree 307 (27 April 2023):** Ordered Ukrainians in TOT to obtain Russian passports by 1 July 2024 or lose rights (later extended to 31 December 2024 by Decree No. 281).¹⁵³
- **Russian Federation Law 138-FZ (28 April 2023):** Endowed the Russian President with the right to decide if individuals could be granted Russian citizenship without satisfying all

required criteria.¹⁵⁴

- **Russian Federation Law 271-FZ (24 June 2023):** Integrated the physical education and sports entities of TOT into the Russian legal system.¹⁵⁵
- **Presidential Decree No. 11 (4 Jan, 2024):** Enabled expedited citizenship for orphans via presidential or institutional request.¹⁵⁶
- **Decree No.62, Ministry of Education (1 Feb 2024):** Made "Fundamentals of Security and Defence of the Homeland," which includes weapons training, a compulsory school subject from September 2024.¹⁵⁷
- **Order No.2501 Government of the Russian Federation (11 Sept 2024):** Established *Russian Strategy of State Cultural Policy to 2030*, and placed the cultural, moral and spiritual integration of "new" Russian citizens and the participation of children in activities including those with a "military historical theme" as leading priorities.¹⁵⁸

148 President of Russia, "List of persons entitled to apply for Russian citizenship under simplified procedure expanded," 11 July 2022. Available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/acts/news/68853>

149 OHCHR 2025,p.15

150 OpinioJuris, "The Russian Citizenship Law in Ukraine and International Law," 6 October 2022. Available at: <https://opiniojuris.org/2022/10/06/the-russian-citizenship-law-in-ukraine-and-international-law/>

151 OHCHR, 2025, p.15

152 CIS Legislation, *Presidential Decree of the Russian Federation of December 26, 2022, No. 951*. Available at: <https://cis-legislation.com/document.fwx?rgn=146336>

153 Hinnant, Lori; Stepanenko, Vasilisa; Kullab, Samta; and Arhirova, Hanna, "Russia forces Ukrainians in occupied territories to take its passports – and fight in its army," AP, 15 March 2024. Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-war-occupation-passports-citizenship-c43bbd1107a27f70ed6a37097d5b9c59>

154 Российская Федерация, 2023. Федеральный закон от 28 апреля 2023 г. № 138-ФЗ. Статья 16. Прием в гражданство Российской Федерации отдельных категорий иностранных граждан и лиц без гражданства, пункт 9. [online] Available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/49216>

155 Российская Федерация, 2023. Федеральный закон от 24 июня 2023 г. № 271-ФЗ: Об особенностях правового регулирования отношений в области физической культуры и спорта в связи с принятием в Российскую Федерацию Донецкой Народной Республики, Луганской Народной Республики, Запорожской области и Херсонской области и образованием в составе Российской Федерации новых субъектов — Донецкой Народной Республики, Луганской Народной Республики, Запорожской области и Херсонской области. [online] Available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/49432>

156 Havrylov, Vladyslav. "Putin accused of fast-tracking Russian citizenship for abducted Ukrainian kids," 25 January 2024. Available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/putin-accused-of-fast-tracking-russian-citizenship-for-abducted-ukrainian-kids>

157 Министерство просвещения Российской Федерации, 2024. Приказ Министерства просвещения Российской Федерации от 01.02.2024 № 62 "О внесении изменений в некоторые приказы Министерства просвещения Российской Федерации, касающиеся федеральных образовательных программ основного общего образования и среднего общего образования" (Зарегистрирован 29.02.2024 № 77380). [online] Available at: <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/document/0001202402290059>

158 Правительство Российской Федерации, 2024. Распоряжение от 11 сентября 2024 г. № 2501-р «Об утверждении

- **Russian Federation Law No.550-FZ (28 Dec 2024):** amended law to priorities patriotic education and provide support for military-patriotic clubs.¹⁵⁹
- **Russian Federation Law No.543-FZ (28 Dec 2024):** Instructed that activities at facilities including children's camps be directed towards the "formation in children of a sense of [Russian] patriotism."¹⁶⁰
- **Presidential Decree (20 March 2025):** Required Ukrainians in TOT to regularise their legal status by 10 September 2025 or be classified as foreign nationals, facing expulsion or loss of rights.¹⁶¹

These laws and decrees collectively accelerate the Russification of Ukrainian children under Russian control. Refusal to accept Russian passports brings retaliation: we identified the case of a boy in a TOT village who refused such documents at 16 and subsequently suffered from a campaign of threats and intimidation by the Russian military.¹⁶² Others reported similar pressure to obtain such documents.¹⁶³

Russia also uses children as leverage to coerce parents into accepting Russian citizenship. Families are threatened with the removal of their children if they refuse. Multiple sources confirm additional threats, including job loss, termination of social benefits, denial of pensions, restricted bank access, and refusal of medical care.¹⁶⁴

Стратегии государственной культурной политики на период до 2030 года». [online] Available at: <http://static.government.ru/media/files/jlx0zkwFvU0sCnXlQTwpZO0RqTMMVL7v.pdf>.

159 OHCHR, 2025, p.15

160 Российская Федерация, 2024. *Федеральный закон от 28 декабря 2024 г. № 543-ФЗ: О внесении изменений в Федеральный закон "Об основных гарантиях прав ребенка в Российской Федерации"*. [online] Available at: <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/document/0001202412280047?index=1>

161 Kvitka, Kseniya. "Get a Passport or Leave: Russia's Ultimatum to Ukrainians," HRW, 25 March 2025. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/03/25/get-passport-or-leave-russias-ultimatum-ukrainians>

162 Save Ukraine Interview

163 Save Ukraine Interviews

164 Омбудсмен України, «Спеціална доповідь: „Переопілені“. Системна російська політика знищення української



Russian passports issued to Ukrainian citizens who subsequently escaped the TOT.

After the house search, I found out my children were put on a list of those who had refused to go to Russian schools. The Russians had already prepared a document with addresses, and my house was on it. They said: 'Get ready for a raid. September is the start of the school year - time for re-education.' I was terrified. In the village, people said that if a family didn't obey the occupying regime, the children would be taken away either far from the parents, into orphanages, or into Russian social services. And the parents would face 're-education' in the basement. In our village school, the Russians set up a real torture chamber: a pit, rods, chains, electric shocks... After the torture, people were brought to the hospital barely alive. Even after I got Russian documents, they kept checking on me. Because to them, the passport isn't protection. They decide whether you're a 'proper mother' — and whether you deserve to raise your own children.¹⁶⁵

Mother, Kherson region

ідентичності дітей», 2023, p. 18 Available at: https://www.ombudsman.gov.ua/storage/app/media/uploaded-files/C%D0%B-F%D0%B5%D1%86%D1%96%D0%B0%D0%BB%D1%8C%D0%BD%D0%B0_%D0%B4%D0%BE%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%B2%D1%96%D0%B4%D1%8C_%D0%9F%D0%95%D0%A0%D0%95%D0%9E%D0%9F%D0%98%D0%9B%D0%95%D0%9D%D0%86_.pdf

165 Save Ukraine Interview

Our survey uncovered numerous cases of intimidation against Ukrainians who refused Russian passports: consequences included denial of school access, employment, medical care, and travel, as well as physical violence. Several respondents reported threats of being sent to “the pit” - likely referencing punishment systems reportedly used against Russian soldiers.¹⁶⁶

Educational Indoctrination

Russian authorities have imposed the Russian curriculum at schools and cancelled teaching in Ukrainian: around 600,000 school-aged children live in TOT.¹⁶⁷ After the occupation of some Ukrainian territories after 24 February 2022, Russia introduced new mandatory lessons at schools – “Conversations about Important Things” - where the objectives of the “special military operation” were explained. At these lessons, teachers stated that Russian soldiers were heroes, and Ukraine was not represented as an independent country.¹⁶⁸ Indeed, this program was one of the most frequently referenced by the children we surveyed. One noted:

Back in occupied Luhansk, I enrolled in college. They introduced “Conversations About Important Things” - a weekly 45-minute propaganda session. Every Monday, we raised the Russian flag. Teachers repeated the same line: “Ukraine started the war, Russia is protecting us.” Soldiers came to the college and made us prepare “voluntary-compulsory” aid packages for the Russian army. We were told FSB agents might come to inspect our phones.¹⁶⁹

Boy, 18, city of Luhansk

The Russian Ministry of Education has introduced the compulsory subject “Fundamentals of Security and Defence of the Homeland” for all 8th-grade students, including training on small arms and sniper rifles.¹⁷⁰ There were also other educational activities - lectures, thematic lessons, and media programs around Russia’s geopolitical agenda and promotion of “traditional Russian spiritual and moral values.”¹⁷¹ At some of such events, participants in the Russian “special military operation” are invited to speak. After the lessons, children are commonly forced to write “letters to soldiers” thanking Russian troops for their fighting.¹⁷²



Children in the TOT writing letters to soldiers

166 Schreck, Carl. “‘Simply Medieval’: Russian Soldiers Held In Pits And Cellars For Refusing To Fight In Ukraine”, RFE, 15 July 2023. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-soldiers-punished-refusing-fight-ukraine/32505035.html>; Save Ukraine interviews

167 Ombudsman of Ukraine, 2025, p.11.

168 Герои Специальной операции, 2024. Графические новеллы о подвигах участников специальной военной операции, награжденных медалью «Золотая Звезда». [online] Available at: <https://xn--80afgaaqda2ccjchj6ff.xn--p1ai/#rec599450539>

169 Save Ukraine Interviews

170 Министерство просвещения Российской Федерации, 2024. Приказ Министерства просвещения Российской Федерации от 01.02.2024 № 62 “О внесении изменений в некоторые приказы Министерства просвещения Российской Федерации, касающиеся федеральных образовательных программ основного общего образования и среднего общего образования” (Зарегистрирован 29.02.2024 № 77380). [online] Available at: <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/document/0001202402290059>

171 Almenda Center for Civic Education, “Youth Movements as the Instrument of Indoctrination and Militarisation,” 2023, p.11. Available at: <https://almenda.org/en/molodizhni-ruxi-yak-instrument-indoktrinacii-i-militarizacii-na-okupovanix-teritoriyax/>

172 Save Ukraine Interviews

Survey participants also cited OBZR classes, which blend basic emergency training with militarised content¹⁷³

On OBZR classes, they forced us to march. “If you don’t march, you fail,” the teacher said. It didn’t matter if we were tired, if we didn’t want to. March or get punished. They were going to start something like Yunarmiya or shooting practice, too. My classmate was picked to carry the flag because he was tall. They even played their military songs during the events. We didn’t have a choice. Every day felt like we were being reshaped into something we weren’t. They didn’t treat us like kids. They wanted us to behave like their soldiers. And all the while I kept thinking - this isn’t school. This isn’t normal.¹⁷⁴

Girl, 16, Kherson region

Furthermore, evidence suggests that ill treatment of parents and teachers has been a core part of the Russian indoctrination effort. Russia either coerced educators into cooperating or replaced them with Russian educators.¹⁷⁵ Additionally, teachers have been subjected to torture, including electroshock, to obtain pupil records.¹⁷⁶ Our research has uncovered instances of parents being threatened with fines or separation from their children if they did not send their children to schools under Moscow’s auspices.¹⁷⁷

Teachers loyal to Ukraine were dismissed or fled; remaining staff promoted pro-Russian ideology. Some of them instructed students not to speak Ukrainian and claimed Ukraine no longer existed.¹⁷⁸ Children were taught to denounce pro-Ukrainian views and to ascertain which family members

173 Save Ukraine Interview

174 Save Ukraine Interview

175 Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights, *Special Report: ‘Re-educated’*, p. 21.

176 Human Rights Watch, “Education under Occupation: Forced Russification of the School System in Occupied Ukrainian Territories,” 20 June 2024. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/06/20/education-under-occupation/forced-russification-school-system-occupied-ukrainian>

177 Save Ukraine Interviews

178 Save Ukraine Interview

supported Ukraine.¹⁷⁹ Russia also deployed propaganda in the guise of educational material, according to the surveyed children.

Parents weren’t allowed inside the school — just on the grounds. A soldier stood at the entrance, fully armed. They gave us new Russian textbooks. On every one of them, the homework section said: “Assignment from Putin.”

They registered us in the Russian school without our guardians’ permission - “these are state children,” they said. There were rumours in the village that if kids didn’t go to school, they’d be taken away. They didn’t like how we spoke surzhyk - they called us “Khakhols,” [a Russian slur for Ukrainians] “Banderites” [Ukrainian nationalists]. The school forced on us the Russian language, the anthem, and poems.¹⁸⁰

Girl, 14, city of Luhansk

ONE OF THE MOST NOTABLE RUSSIAN INITIATIVES HAS BEEN THE INTRODUCTION OF A SERIES OF NEW HISTORY TEXTBOOKS

179 Human Rights Watch, *Education Under Occupation*, p.28.

180 Save Ukraine Interviews



New Russian history textbook issued in 2023

One of the most notable Russian initiatives has been the introduction of a series of new history textbooks in both Russia itself and TOT.¹⁸¹ Drafted under the supervision of Putin advisor Vladimir Medinsky, they serve to discredit the West and present justifications for the ongoing war against Ukraine.¹⁸²

Analysis from Ukraine's Foundation for Democracy Assistance suggests that there is an attempt to develop a comprehensive "architecture of influence" over Ukrainian children in the TOT.¹⁸³

One potential manifestation of this is the "Where does the Motherland Begin?" project, reportedly launched in Buryatia (a Russian republic in eastern Siberia) in 2024 and now being rolled out across other Russia regions. In August 2025, a website for the project was created, outlining best practices

181 "Школы ЛНР к 1 сентября получают учебники по истории с разделами об СВО – Минобрнауки", 8 September 2023. Available at: <https://lug-info.ru/news/shkoly-lnr-k-1-sentya-brya-poluchat-uchebniki-po-istorii-s-razdelami-ob-svo-minobrazovaniya/?utm>

182 Ibid

183 Foundation for Democracy Assistance, forthcoming research paper.

for patriotic education across a wide range of settings.¹⁸⁴

Ideological indoctrination and the enforcement of Russian culture occur through multiple channels. Children from TOT are sent on propaganda trips to Moscow, St. Petersburg, Rostov on Don, and Tula through programmes such as Cultural Map 4+85, Youth Route, and University Sessions.¹⁸⁵



Panels from "The Heroes of the Special Military Operation" comic

Pop culture also plays a role. One notable example are comic-based depictions of soldiers fighting for Russia. Russian Ministry of Education in collaboration with other educational agencies launched the project "The Heroes of the Special Military Operation", designed to tell children about the "feats" of the Russian soldiers in the war with Ukraine in a "bright and easily understandable graphic style".¹⁸⁶ These comics were distributed to multiple schools across Russia for classroom sessions of "Conversations about Important Things". Notably, it encompassed dozens of schools in the Ukrainian territories under occupation, spanning Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia regions and the Crimean Peninsula.¹⁸⁷

184 Патриотическое воспитание в Бурятии, 2025. С чего начинается Родина: лучшие практики для педагогов, воспитателей, родителей и организаторов на предприятиях. [online] Available at: <https://patriot03.ru>

185 "Россияне вывезли 40 тысяч украинских детей в лагеря перевоспитания в течение лета 2024 года," ZMINA, 2 September 2024. Available at: <https://zmina.info/ru/news-ru/rossiyane-vyvezli-40-tysyach-ukrainskih-detej-v-lageriya-perevospitaniya-v-techenie-leta-2024-goda/>

186 Герои Специальной операции, 2024. Графические новеллы о подвигах участников специальной военной операции, награжденных медалью «Золотая Звезда». [online] Available at: <https://xn--80afgaaqda2ccjchhj6ff.xn--p1ai/#rec599450539>

187 For detailed location of schools see map: Map created with Yandex Map Constructor. [online] Available at: <https://yandex.com/maps/?ll=44.429840%2C44.189921&mode=usermaps&source=constructorLink&um=constructor%3A657f7c4d-e1499dc50056926cc47dd03b3c92b405fe0cf341c-1737f9a3907d9e6&z=16>

CHAPTER TEN

In Their Own Words

This chapter presents the direct testimonies of Ukrainian children and parents. Their accounts describe deception of parents, strict military discipline, weapons training, punishments, and indoctrination into pro-Russian narratives. Children recount experiences of fear, coercion, loss of trust, and even exposure to life-threatening situations, alongside violations such as lack of medical care and forced draft notices. These testimonies provide first-hand evidence of a systematic policy to militarise and assimilate Ukrainian children, conditioning them psychologically and physically for future service in the Russian armed forces while eroding their identity and rights.

Life at the child military training camps

Interviews with children who returned from Russia and the TOT revealed many cases of forced child participation in military training camps. The experiences described by a 17-year-old returnee girl highlight the dangers children were exposed to.

They are taking all children from the age of 14. But there was even a 13-year-old boy — he was sent to a camp for training. From Kherson, Luhansk, Donetsk regions - from all the occupied territories, children are being taken “for training” to prepare for war, for the army, to fight against Ukraine.

Mum came and said: you will go to the camp. I thought that we will go to rest by the sea like before, under Ukraine, when we went to Skadovsk.

When we arrived, the camp supervisors met us. They divided us into platoons: I was in the 8th platoon, 4th company. We settled in a regular room, it was warm, tidy... Then they said: that's it, let's start. The first lesson - communication: how to transmit information. A soldier came up to me and said: “Did you come here to rest, or what? If you don't like it go back”. Then our supervisor appeared. He led tactics, training, showed how to handle weapons, how to disassemble a machine gun.

They didn't beat us, but they made us squat 125–140 times. The last three days were the hardest. They gave us air rifles, taught us how to shoot. I hit the target four times. An older man came up and said: Young lady, are you ready to join the army?” I said: “I'm a girl.” And he said: “Girls are going too.”

The director shouted: “Why are you late? You scum! Do you know what your task is?” They put us in the middle of the field - squat 145 times. The guys - do 100 push-ups, 5 minutes of plank. Whoever can't stand it squats again... Then they took pictures of everyone and gave them certificates: “We passed military training.” I asked: “Why do we need this?” - “Because you're going to join the army.”

One night, at 3 o'clock, we were taken to the “Motherland” [colloquial name of a mountain / cliff face]. We had to climb up. The wind was blowing; there was no fence. If you fell, you would die. We were told: “Rest here, and in 20 minutes down”. Then in the morning we had to climb up again at 7 am. And then another “excursion”: the arrival of tanks, shooting, grenade explosions. We stood for two hours in the rain, wanting to eat and go home. They gave us buckwheat and bread. We had breakfast, and they took us back to the tents.

There were only children from 14 to 17 years old there. I threw a grenade once. I was taught how to disassemble an automatic rifle. We were shown to set a stretcher: they gave us a grenade, a piece of string - you tied the grenade to a tree or pole, pulled it tight and wound it up. Then they made someone walk by - it would work. We carried mines for tanks. We were made to carry them and hide them, and then your partner had to look for them with a mine detector - they gave us a long stick. Then you throw it back (imitation of a mine) and catch it. They also gave us gloves and training equipment, showed us how to de-mine them.

At first, it was difficult with machine guns. We just stood and aimed, were shown how to stand correctly. And after a few days, they started taking us for training. We assembled machine guns, studied them. Then I learned to assemble them in a minute. Later, they gave us real weapons. In the last two days, they took us to a training ground. There, they gave us machine guns - we shot, ran. We threw real grenades, worked with mines, stretchers. This was the specific reason why we were taken.¹⁸⁸

Girl, 17, Kherson region

Deception of parents

Ukrainian parents allowed or were coerced by schools and Russian authorities to give their permission to allow their teenage children to be taken to camps, only to be informed that their children wouldn't be returned when promised or kept indefinitely.

The situation has changed, go and take them back yourselves. After some time, the classroom teacher who travelled with the children admitted they had planned for the children to be taken for a 3-month stay, but they never told the parents about it.¹⁸⁹

Mother of 14 year old girl, Kherson region

The Russians refused to return the children from the camp to Ukraine. At the school, the parents were told that the abduction had been planned from the beginning. The children were then informed about the next relocation to Pskov, followed by adoption, explained with the words: 'These will be children of Russia.'¹⁹⁰

Boy, 16 years old, Kherson region

One of the camp staff told me directly: 'If your mother doesn't find you within six months, a Russian family will adopt you.'¹⁹¹

Boy, 17, Kherson region

Lack of medical care

In the TOT, Ukrainians were forced to apply for Russian passports. In their absence, people, including children, were effectively deprived of access to medical services.

At first, they didn't demand Russian passports very much. But then they wouldn't let us into the hospital without passports, they wouldn't give us medicine. It was difficult to move around the village because the police or military police would come or stop us and ask: where are the documents? At the checkpoint, they said that if we didn't do it soon, there would be problems. And the Russians would set fire to the houses of civilians or shoot into the houses.¹⁹²

Boy, 16, Kherson region

Contact with parents

Testimonies indicate that many children taken to camps were allowed only to have just a single 20 min phone conversation per week. All contact was under adult supervision, which limited the child's ability to freely express complaints or report violations.

Days off were only on Saturdays. We were given 20 minutes to talk to our parents. It was strict. Anyone who misbehaved was beaten and thrown into a cold pool. As punishment, they made us pull waist-high weeds and dig up fields. They said the same would happen to the girls if they disobeyed.¹⁹³

Girl, 17, Kherson region

Torture and solitary confinement

A 16-year boy, along with his group of approximately 100 'cadets', was deported to the children's camp "Druzhba" (Friendship) in Yevpatoria, in the TOT of Crimea.

188 Save Ukraine Interview

189 Save Ukraine Interview

190 Save Ukraine Interview

191 Save Ukraine Interview

192 Save Ukraine Interview

193 Save Ukraine Interview

While I was in the camp, I tried to protest against the occupiers. One day, I just took down the Russian flag from the flagpole. For that, and a few other things they didn't like, they put me in a punishment room - just a tiny space, about two by three meters, with a bed and a window. They took my phone away. I stayed there for nearly a week, with nothing to watch, read, or do. No one to talk to. I felt completely cut off from the world. At some point, I started having suicidal thoughts.¹⁹⁴

Boy, 16 years old, Kherson region

Military notices issued to children

16 and 17-year-olds share testimonies of being handed a summons for military service or witnessing other teenage boys being handed them.

That day I was resting at home, watching TV, then two representatives of the army came to me. They were with service weapons, one definitely had a firearm, the other had documents. They asked for a passport to establish my identity. We went further into the kitchen where they handed it [a summons] in a raised tone, it says that I must appear at the military registration and enlistment office to undergo a medical examination for military service. Then they took a picture of me with a Russian passport and a signed document. I didn't argue with them, because they had firearms. They said that I would serve somewhere in Russia.¹⁹⁵

Boy, 17 years old, Kherson region

Another teenager, recounted how he was violently arrested, forced into a vehicle, and taken to the military enlistment office under the pretext of registration, with threats of conscription upon reaching adulthood.

I went to the town to collect my Russian passport. I arrived at the passport office and picked up the documents. I mumbled something — they gave me the passport, and along with it, a contract for military service. They promise millions, apartments, a house in Crimea. There's a checkbox indicating whether you want to serve or not. But they tell you: "You understand that no matter where you go, they'll give you a paper — and you'll be forced to sign it".¹⁹⁶

Boy, 16 years old, Kherson region

I was sitting at home and stepped outside for a smoke. A Lada Vesta pulled up. Three men in black got out. They came in and said: you're coming with us to register for military service. They twisted my arms, slammed me face-down, put me in handcuffs, and loaded me into the car. They were silent on the way, didn't say where we were going. They said: you'll undergo a medical check now, and at 18, you'll go serve. I asked to make a phone call - they refused at first but then allowed it. They said we are 'citizens of Russia' and must fight for the Motherland, defend it. I sat in the hallway in handcuffs for four hours. I was the only one they brought in handcuffed. My grandmother came and got me out. I lived with her for a week and then returned home [to Ukraine].¹⁹⁷

Boy, 17, Kherson region

I saw the Russians driving down the street and stopping to hand out draft notices to underage boys - 17 years old. They were told to report to the commandant's office for army service, to work for the Russian military and become soldiers.¹⁹⁸

Boy, 17, Kherson region

194 Save Ukraine Interview

195 Save Ukraine Interview

196 Save Ukraine Interview

197 Save Ukraine Interview

198 Save Ukraine Interview

Bullying and punishment for pro-Ukrainian views

In the TOT, children who openly express pro-Ukrainian views or show attachment to Ukrainian identity can be subjected to bullying, humiliation, and punitive measures - both by peers and educators.

When I first arrived [at the school], they said, 'You're Ukrainian? Ew, Ukrainians...!' All my friends that support Ukraine were insulted and humiliated. The deputy principal kept telling us that Ukraine is useless, and Russia is better. She told me: 'If you don't do this' [referring to participation in pro-Russian militarised events] 'then you'll get failing grades.' One time I came in and shouted 'Glory to Ukraine!' - the police came, and the principal hit me, and said that in Russia you're only allowed to say 'Glory to Russia'¹⁹⁹

Boy, 10, Kharkiv region

In some cases, entire families deemed pro-Ukrainian can face cruel and degrading punishment.

Then my brothers, their wives, and my father were thrown into a pit and kept there for a week. We had pro-Russian neighbours who reported that we were Ukrainian. In the pit, they had just one mattress, weren't allowed to sleep or use the toilet. They were forced to chop and carry wood. It was a trench with no exits covered with a roof, with a door like in prison. They were called 'khokhols' [a slur for Ukrainians] and told they were pro-Ukrainian.²⁰⁰

Boy, 16, Kherson region

Impunity for violations of children's rights and threats of parental rights termination

The systemic impunity bestowed on representatives of the occupying administration and Russian Federation security forces has created an atmosphere of fear and legal arbitrariness for children and their parents. Parents and children can be summoned to juvenile affairs commission after perceived bad behaviour.

¹⁹⁹ Save Ukraine Interview

²⁰⁰ Save Ukraine Interview

I DIDN'T ARGUE WITH THEM, BECAUSE THEY HAD FIREARMS.

I understood what this could mean for us - it would be very frightening. I stayed silent, didn't express myself. I tried to appear neutral to them.²⁰¹

Mother of 18-year-old boy, Kherson region

It's impossible to fully describe or explain how my child ended up in that sanatorium. I'll put it briefly... Voluntarily-forced: the Russians said that if children didn't attend kindergartens, schools, or other educational institutions, parents would be stripped of their rights. The wellness camps were also part of this program.²⁰²

Mother of 14-year-old girl, Kherson region

A teenager shared an incident in which Russian soldiers forced him and his friend into a vehicle, demanding they reveal the location of a girls' home.

My friend and I were walking a girl home when soldiers suddenly pulled up. The car stopped abruptly. They said, 'You go on, we'll walk her.' We refused. The Russians started dragging us into the car. We resisted but eventually ended up inside. They told us to show them the way to the girls' home.²⁰³

Boy, 16 years old, Kherson region

²⁰¹ Save Ukraine Interview

²⁰² Save Ukraine Interview

²⁰³ Save Ukraine Interview

Another case involves a boy, 16, who was arrested along with his friends by Russian military personnel and detained. Later at school he was threatened with being separated from his family.

My friends and I planned to bike near the river, we went through a field and were stopped by soldiers. They took us to their base, detained us, and threatened to call the traffic police and FSB. They said they'd call the police. They took me to the police station, locked me in a holding cell, and waited for my parents to arrive. At school, they threaten that if we don't attend, child protection services will come and take us away.²⁰⁴

Boy, 16, Zaporizhzhia region

They took my father just because the word 'Armed Forces of Ukraine' (ZSU) appeared in a chat with my teachers. They used that chat to send us homework, but that was enough for them to start torturing him. He said they used electric shocks and asked things like: 'What is ZSU?', 'Do you support them?', 'Do you send them money?'

After that, his vision started deteriorating, his legs stopped working, and his speech became slurred - like he was drunk. We took him to the hospital, but they just shrugged their shoulders. He was only 42. He died. So young.²⁰⁵

Boy, 17, Kherson region

**MY BROTHERS,
THEIR WIVES, AND
MY FATHER WERE
THROWN INTO
A PIT AND KEPT
THERE FOR
A WEEK.**

204 Save Ukraine Interview

205 Save Ukraine Interview

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Ukrainian Children Fighting for Russia

While Chapter 8 addressed Russia's militarisation of Ukrainian children, this chapter focuses on detected instances of them taking part in such fighting, chiefly as adults. Most of the examples we have identified have come from individuals who were living in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine at the time of its seizing of those territories by Russia in 2014. Case studies of individuals who were resident in the TOT occupied by Russia since February 2022 are scarcer – in part owing to the limited time elapsed only allowing a limited number of those who were children in 2022 'aging in' to being military recruits.

Evidence of Current Participation

Reports of Ukrainian youths fighting against their own country surfaced well before the 2022 invasion. In 2016, a coalition of 17 Ukrainian NGOs operating under the banner "Justice for Peace in Donbas" recorded 37 cases of children being recruited in the TOT Donetsk and Luhansk. Most were between 16 and 17 years old, and nearly half said they had enlisted voluntarily. Their duties ranged from staffing checkpoints and conducting patrols to taking part in combat operations.²⁰⁶ By 2020, Ukrainian courts had convicted at least 29 minors for serving in Russian-controlled proxy forces in eastern Ukraine, including one who was just 16 years old at the time.²⁰⁷

A Ukrainian government report released in July 2023 estimated that Russia had mobilised about

60,000 Ukrainian men.²⁰⁸ Since the start of the full-scale invasion, there have been reports of forced recruitment in newly TOT regions such as Zaporizhzhia and Kherson.²⁰⁹ In September 2024, Putin signed a decree for an autumn conscription period lasting from October 1 to December 31, 2024²¹⁰. It was tightly connected with the forceful passportisations in the TOT, where those possessing the Russian passports also fall under the Russian conscription decree.²¹¹ In October 2024, Volodymyr Saldo, the Russian-installed head of Kherson region, announced that citizens in that region be conscripted into the Russian armed forces from 1 October 2024 through the end of the year, showing the readiness of the occupying authorities to assist the Russian Armed Forces.²¹²

In November 2024, the first such groups from Kherson and Zaporizhzhia reportedly travelled to Russia and Crimea for service, following an already established pattern in other TOT. The Ukrainian

208 Defence Intelligence of Ukraine, "Andrii Cherniakh, "Russia Forcibly Mobilizes about 60,000 males in temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine", 31 July 2023. Available at: <https://gur.gov.ua/en/content/na-okupovanykh-terytoriiakh-ukrainy-rosiya-pry-musovo-mobilizuvava-blyzko-60-000-cholovikiv-andrii-cheraniak.html>

209 Georgetown University – Global Children's Issues, "Russia Is Turning Abducted Ukrainian Children into Soldiers", 5 April 2023. Available at: <https://globalchildren.georgetown.edu/posts/russia-is-turning-abducted-ukrainian-children-into-soldiers>

210 Reuters, "Putin orders conscription of 133,000 servicemen in Russia's autumn draft," 30 September 2024. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-orders-conscription-133000-servicemen-russias-autumn-draft-2024-09-30/>

211 PBS, "AP report: Russia imposes its passport on occupied Ukraine, coercing hundreds of thousands into citizenship," 15 March, 2023. Available at: <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/russia-imposes-its-passport-on-occupied-ukraine-coercing-hundreds-of-thousands-into-citizenship>

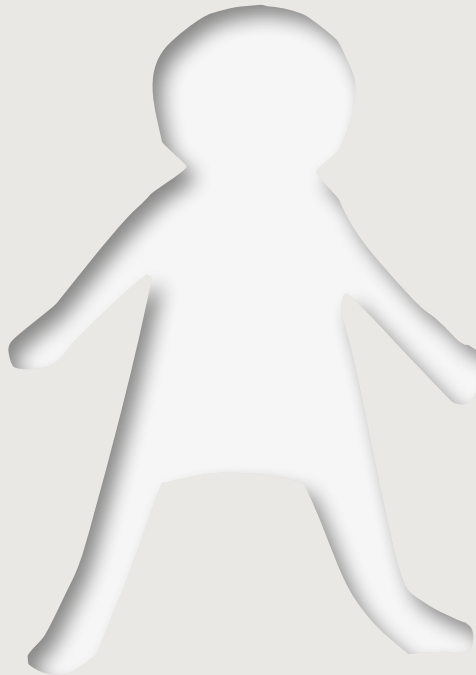
212 Ukrainska Pravda, "Russians announce conscription in temporarily occupied territories of Kherson Oblast," 2 October 2024, Available at: <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2024/10/2/7477812/>

206 Burov, S., Lazarenko, O., Ianova, G., Nekrasova, A. and Shcherbachenko, V. (2016). *Eastern-Ukrainian Centre for Civic Initiatives, Involvement of Children in Armed Formations*. [online] Warsaw: HDIM, p. 7 Available at: <https://hfhr.pl/upload/2022/01/zaangaz-owanie-dzieci-w-formacje-zbrojne-podczas-konfliktu-militarnego-w-donbasie.pdf>

207 Promote Ukraine Media, "Militants have been recruiting teenagers in Donbas for six years," 2 June 2020. Available at: <https://www.promoteukraine.org/militants-have-been-recruiting-teenagers-in-donbas-for-six-years/>

Defence Ministry urged citizens subject to drafting to flee to Ukraine.²¹³ Russian officials conducted an official ceremony in Crimea (with priests, flags, media and various tributes) for newly conscripted youth from Kherson and Zaporizhia regions, as well as the young men from Mariupol, marking the formal recognition and facilitation of the conscription efforts in the TOT.²¹⁴

Russia, pledges that they will not be sent to the frontline - a statement that has previously been challenged by previous unofficial coercive Russian practices in the TOT, including manipulating conscripts into signing professional military service contracts.²¹⁵ Whilst autumn 2024 marked the “normalisation” of Russian conscription efforts in the TOT of Eastern Ukraine by the Russian government itself - a violation of international law - previous reports of this practice since 2014 include an official but low-key round in the eastern TOT in autumn 2023, suggest that the transformation of civilian manpower into conscripts under occupational authorities is an integral part of the Russian war efforts.²¹⁶ While conscripts have been previously called up - in 2019, the UN reported that around 18,000 Ukrainians in Crimea had been



called up since 2015 - they would have been at a lower risk during this period prior to the war's escalation.²¹⁷ To the Crimean conscripts placed at risk by the war must be added the those drafted as part of the September 2022 mobilisation.²¹⁸

It appears inevitable some of those who were children during the 2022 invasion will by now have been drawn into Russia's conscription and mobilisation system as adults. Given the 12-month service period of conscripts, it is likely that additional information will emerge on this in the coming months. In September 2024, UK intelligence assessed that Russia would likely continue to force conscripts to sign contracts following completion of their service.²¹⁹ Should this occur, it is likely that Ukrainian ex-conscripts from the autumn 2024 conscription wave will be appearing in substantial numbers on the battlefield fighting for Russia from early 2026.

Media accounts tell of Ukrainian youths who moved from groups like Yunarmiya into active service with Russian forces. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty profiled three examples: Illya Zozulskiy, 23, from Poltavka in Crimea, joined Yunarmiya as a boy and later served as a Russian artilleryman, earning the Zhukov Medal; Russian media list him among 50 former Yunarmiya “mentors” now fighting in Ukraine. Stanislav Sikorskiy from the TOT of Horlivka, once in both Yunarmiya and the Young Guard, says he fought alongside Russian troops. Hanna Lisovenko

213 Starcevic, Seb. “Russia enlists more Ukrainians from occupied regions to fight their own country,” Politico, 20 November 2024, available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-ukraine-war-occupied-country-state-media-army-fight-kremlin-regime/>

214 TACC, В “Крым впервые прибыли призывники из Запорожской и Херсонской областей” Available at: <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/22420545>

215 Asadzade, Ulviyya, “Putin's Broken Promise: Young Russian Conscripts Dying In Ukraine Invasion,” RFE/RL, 19 March 2025. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-conscripts-youth-dying-ukraine-putin/33351828.html>

216 Kyiv Independent, “New round of Russian conscription will include Ukraine's occupied territories” 30 September, 2023. Available at: <https://kyivindependent.com/new-round-of-russian-conscription-will-include-ukraines-occupied-territories/>; HRW, “Crimea: Conscription Violates International Law,” 1 November 2019. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/11/01/crimea-conscription-violates-international-law>

217 OHCHR, “Report on the human rights situation in Ukraine 16 May to 15 August 2019.” p.24 Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Countries/UA/ReportUkraine-16May-15Aug2019_EN.pdf

218 Human Rights Watch, “Russia Forces Ukrainians in Occupied Areas into Military” 20 December, 2023. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/12/20/russia-forces-ukrainians-occupied-areas-military>

219 Defence Intelligence “Intelligence Update,” X, 24 September 2024. Available at: <https://x.com/DefenceHQ/status/1839584853441880138>

from Donetsk joined the Young Guard–Yunarmiya “Spartans” in 2017 and is reported to have become a Russian drone operator.²²⁰

There have been reports of forcibly deported Ukrainian children being issued Russian draft notices. In November 2023, Radio Free Europe highlighted the case of Bohdan Yermokhin from Mariupol, who was placed under Russian guardianship. While he received a draft notice, Russia’s Children’s Rights Commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova claimed he would get a deferment due to college and in any case was planning to leave Russia with his sister. However, his lawyer stated that during a meeting with Lvova-Belova, Yermokhin was coerced into writing a statement saying he wanted to stay in Russia.²²¹

There have been deaths. The majority of these were children at the time of Russia’s seizure of the Crimea and intervention in parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions in 2014 and mobilised as adults by the Russian-controlled local militias in 2022. Some were members of youth military groups.

A notable example is Ivan Shifman of Donetsk. Aged 13-14 in 2014, he was a member of a local military-patriotic youth club called “Heirs of Victory” which was part of Yunarmiya. In 2019, at age 18, he enlisted in the People’s Militia of the Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) after finishing school and began service in the 1st Separate Guards Motorised Rifle Brigade (known as the 1st “Slavyansk” Brigade). Following the start of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Shifman fought on some of the most intense frontline sectors in Donetsk. Shifman was 20 years old when he was killed in action on April 14, 2022.²²²

220 Savchuk, Maksym. “How Russia Prepares Children In Occupied Ukraine For War Against Their Own Country,” RfE/RL, 3 December 2024. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-prepares-children-occupied-ukraine-war/33217789.html>

221 RfE/RL, “17-Year-Old Taken From Ukraine Last Year Received Draft Summons From Russian Military, Lawyer Says,” 9 November 2023. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-deported-teenager-yermokhin-russian-military-draft/32677282.html>

222 Barkhush, Amira. “Russia’s Child Soldiers: How the Kremlin Trains Ukrainian Kids and Sends Them to the Frontlines,” United 24, 7 July 2025. Available at: <https://united24media.com/war-in-ukraine/russias-child-soldiers-how-the-kremlin-trains-ukrainian-kids-and-sends-them-to-the-frontlines-9627>; Dilo, S. i (2022). У так называемых ‘Л/ДНР’ оккупанты мобилизуют подростков, есть погибшие — Денисова. [online] Слово и Дело. Available at: <https://ru.slovoudilo.ua/2022/04/16/novost/obshchestvo/tak-nazyvaemyx-ldnr-okkupanty-mobilizuyut-po->



Mural image of Captain Alexander Vladimirovich Miroshnik, and Gleb Vikhrov in the TOT of Luhansk

Murals are often used to underline the link between the Yunarmiya and soldiers who have died in battle. The above was painted in TOT of Luhansk, and reportedly shows Guard Captain Alexander Vladimirovich Miroshnik, who died in the war in June 2022, and commander of the Yunarmiya detachment of the Kamenobrodsky district of the city of Lugansk, Gleb Vikhrov.²²³

Other instances of deaths while serving in local militia include Yaroslav Serhiyovych, Bykadorov who was a student at the Zasyadko Mining College in Torez. He was a child when Russian-allied forces took over the region in which he lived in 2014. He was mobilized into the People’s Militia of the DPR and was killed on 30 April 2022 in Zaporizhzhia region aged 20.²²⁴

Others were part of the Russian military proper. Born and raised in Crimea, Vladyslav Turubara had by March 2014, become deeply involved in patriotic and military-oriented activities despite only being 16 years of age. Local officials noted that

drostkov-est-pogibshie-denisova; Telegram. (2025). Юнармия. [online] Available at: <https://t.me/yunarmya/1701>

223 Telegram. (2025). Юнармия. [online] Available at: <https://t.me/yunarmya/1671>; armystandard.ru (2022). Донбасс. Граффити. Защитник. [online] Сетевое издание ‘Армейский стандарт’. Available at: <https://armystandard.ru/news/20221220951-utcuR.html>

224 livejournal. (2024). Павшие герои Освободительного похода (студенты). [online] Available at: <https://yadocent.livejournal.com/1645165.html>

Turubara “from a very young age tied his life with the military starting with Zarnitsa [military games] and culminating as a graduate of a military school.” After finishing school in 2015, Turubara immediately joined the Russian Armed Forces. He enrolled as a cadet at the Tyumen Higher Military-Engineering Command School in Tyumen, Siberia. He was killed in Kherson in August 2022.²²⁵

Vasyl Potapov of Crimea enlisted with the Russian military at 18 in around 2023 after finishing school. He was deployed as part of the “special military operation” and was killed in combat on 20 January 2025 at the age of 19. Hailing from the village of Pryvitne in Crimea, Potapov is one of the youngest known fighters (by birth year) to have died in the Ukraine war.²²⁶

Additionally, Oleg Zotov, a teenager from the TOT area of Donetsk and a former Yunarmiya member, was reported in May 2025 to have had signed a contract with Russian forces at 18. He was killed in combat one week later. His case is among the first verified examples of a militarised Ukrainian youth dying while fighting against Ukraine, highlighting the pipeline from youth indoctrination to frontline deployment.²²⁷

The above is by no means an exhaustive list but should be seen as illustrating a clear trend.

Testimonies

Verifying the use of Ukrainian forcibly recruited young people in combat remains difficult. In July 2025, Yale HRL reported investigating numerous allegations of forcibly recruited Ukrainian youths entering the Russian military upon turning 18. Executive Director Nathaniel Raymond told *The Times* that the issue is under active scrutiny.²²⁸

Andriy Yermak, President Zelensky’s chief of staff, has also claimed that the bodies of these individuals are being found on the battlefield.²²⁹

The testimonies we have gathered have further bolstered the case that Russia is recruiting current and former children into a pipeline ending in military service.

We have a subject called “Conversation About Important Things.” It’s mostly focused on military topics. Most likely, that’s what influenced the students. I didn’t personally know the boy. When he was 16, soldiers came to him and asked if he wanted to serve, and two weeks later, they brought back his corpse. It’s possible that his parents were also pro-Russian. They sent him off to serve without any preparation. And he died at the age of 16²³⁰

Boy, 14, Kherson region

We have recorded many instances of individuals being forcibly taken to a military enlistment office, where, without consent, they were registered as fit for military service and handed draft notices.²³¹ Others were sent for draft registration:

One day after class, two 11th-graders came in and said they had received military summons and were going to the draft office for a check-up. That happened just recently, in early February. At the time, I didn’t think much about it, but now I realise I could be registered for conscription too.²³²

Boy, 14, Kherson region

225 Крымская газета, 2023. Не допустил прорыва: школа в Сакском районе носит имя Героя СВО. [online] Available at: <https://gazetacrimea.ru/news/ne-dopustil-proryva-shkola-v-sakskom-rayone-nosit-imya-geroya-svo/>

226 Комсомольская правда, 2025. В Крыму простятся с 19-летним бойцом, погибшим в зоне СВО. [online] Available at: <https://www.crimea.kp.ru/online/news/6397656/>

227 Східний варіант, 2025. Досягнувши повноліття, “юнарієць” з окупованого Донецька загинув на війні проти України. [online] Available at: <https://v-variant.com.ua/dosiagnuvshy-pov-nolittia-iunarmiiets-z-okupovanoho-donetska-zahynuv-na-vi-yni-proti-ukrainy/>

228 Dunn, Tom Newdon, “Russia ‘sending kidnapped Ukrainian children to front line’,” *Times*, 24 July 2025. Available at: <https://>

www.thetimes.com/world/russia-ukraine-war/article/russia-sending-kidnapped-ukrainian-children-to-front-line-0jz8b2zch

229 Ibid.

230 Save Ukraine Interview

231 Save Ukraine interviews

232 Save Ukraine Interview

A further testimony we received was from an 18-19 year old whose mother and grandmother, both of Russian ethnicity, held pro-Russian views. During the Ukrainian counter-offensive in the Kherson direction, the family relocated the boy to the Krasnodar region of Russia, where they received housing through a government certificate program.²³³

Throughout their time in Russia, the boy's family continuously pressured him to join the Russian military, insisting he should serve "like a real man." Despite his opposing views, which he consistently expressed to his relatives, he refused their proposals, leading to constant family conflicts over this issue.

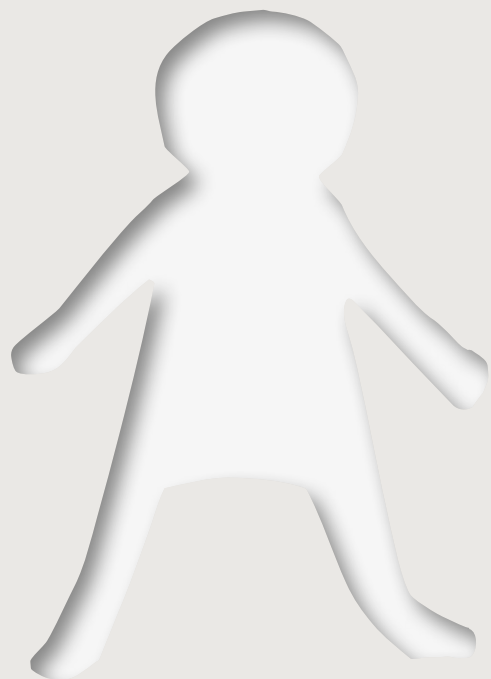
The situation escalated unexpectedly when he received a "red" summons to the military commissariat - in Russia, this designation requires immediate reporting to the nearest recruitment office. Upon arrival, he discovered that his own mother had "requested" acquaintances within the Russian security apparatus to issue the conscription notice to her son. He subsequently served for a year, chiefly in Crimea. After the end of his service, he escaped from Russia to Ukraine.

The critical component in this process is the 'passportisation' outlined in Chapter 9. The pipeline appears thusly: Ukrainian children are issued a Russian passport at birth or otherwise forced to obtain one via Russian administrative barriers and intimidation. Upon receipt of the passport, the child is registered in the Russian central database:

When you turn 17, they issue you a draft notice for military registration. The first and second notices don't bring penalties, but the third can lead to court and fines. In my case, they posted an announcement at the town shop with my full name, summoning me to appear by a certain date with my Russian passport. I was given a paper summons stating I had to register for military service by January 25. I did not go. I didn't want to fight - especially not against my own people.²³⁴

Boy, 17, Kherson region

Supporting this process is a system of indoctrination and militarisation that fosters willingness among children to serve. Legally, conscripts cannot be deployed outside Russia - only contract soldiers can. Yet, reports describe violations of this rule, with conscripts coerced into signing contracts. Indoctrination increases the likelihood of such manipulation succeeding.²³⁵ In modern warfare, with drones and missiles, serving in the Russian military is dangerous regardless of deployment location. Moreover, the exemption from frontline service does not apply to the mass mobilisation Russia launched in 2022.



233 Save Ukraine Interview

234 Save Ukraine Interview

235 Asadzade, Ulviyya. "Putin's Broken Promise: Young Russian Conscripts Dying In Ukraine Invasion," RFE/RL 19 March 2025. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-conscripts-youth-dying-ukraine-putin/33351828.html>

CHAPTER TWELVE

Violations of child rights and other contraventions of international law

This chapter will examine the matter of the militarisation of Ukrainian children through the lens of international law violations. It focuses on clear breaches such as the forced transfer and unlawful deportation of children from Ukraine, their recruitment into armed forces, and related matters. We outline below the key legal provisions of international bodies relevant to the treatment of Ukrainian children.

International Criminal Law

The core elements of International Criminal Law (ICW) are chiefly codified in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), which came into effect in 2002. Ukraine has been a party to the statute since 1 January 2025, having already accepted the court's jurisdiction retroactively back to 21 November 2013.²³⁶ ICC prosecutorial powers against individuals cover responsibility for the crime of aggression, crime of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes.

Crime of Aggression

Article 8bis of the Rome Statute defines aggression as a state's armed force against another's sovereignty, territorial integrity, or political independence, including "any annexation by the use of force."²³⁷ Russia's 2022 invasion and annexation meet this definition, but as it is not an ICC State Party and can veto UN referrals, the ICC cannot prosecute for the crime of aggression. Accountability is pursued through mechanisms like a proposed special tribunal, while the ICC addresses crimes within its remit.

²³⁶ Kmiotek, Celeste. "Ukraine ratifies Rome Statute but must address concerns over ICC jurisdiction," Atlantic Council, 27 August 2024. Available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/ukraine-ratifies-rome-statute-but-must-address-concerns-over-icc-jurisdiction/>

²³⁷ ICC, *Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court*, p.10. Available at: <https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/2024-05/Rome-Statute-eng.pdf>

Genocide

Article 6(e) of the Rome Statute and Article 2(e) of the Genocide Convention define genocide to include "forcibly transferring children of the group to another group."²³⁸ While no indictments yet cite this, on 8 May 2025 the European Parliament condemned Russia's "genocidal strategy" in Ukraine, citing forced child transfers, Russification, and militarisation.²³⁹

Crimes Against Humanity

Under Article 7 of the Rome Statute, crimes against humanity include: "deportation or forcible transfer" ((I)(d)), "persecution against any identifiable group" ((I)(h)), and "enforced disappearance" including concealment of a person's whereabouts ((I)(i), (2)(i)).²⁴⁰ However, at the time of writing, no charges have been brought under this statute regarding Russia's treatment of Ukrainian children.

War Crimes

Articles 8 of the Rome Statute list war crimes including unlawful deportation, transfer, confinement (Art 8(2)(a)(vii)) the deportation or transfer of all or parts of the population of the occupied territory within or outside this territory ((2)(b)(viii)); and forcing protected persons into military service (Art 8(2)(v)).²⁴¹

²³⁸ ICC, Rome Statute, p.3; United Nations, *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*, 9 December 1948. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-prevention-and-punishment-crime-genocide>

²³⁹ European Parliament, *European Parliament resolution of 8 May 2025 on the return of Ukrainian children forcibly transferred and deported by Russia*, 8 May 2025, available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2025-0096_EN.html

²⁴⁰ ICC, Rome Statute, p.4 and 7

²⁴¹ ICC, Rome Statute, p.5-6.

A 15 March 2023 UN report found Russia's deportation of Ukrainian children violates humanitarian law and is a war crime.²⁴² An ICC arrest warrants for Vladimir Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova was issued on 17 March 2023

International Humanitarian Law

Key protections for children under International Humanitarian Law are found in the Fourth Geneva Convention (GC IV), which classifies them as "protected persons." Both Russia and Ukraine are parties to GC IV and its Additional Protocols: I–III for Ukraine, and I–II for Russia.²⁴³

Article 24 requires care for orphans or separated children and culturally appropriate education. Article 49 bans forcible transfer or deportation except for security needs, while Article 47 forbids using annexation to remove rights. Article 50 bars status changes or enlistment and requires identifying children and parentage; Article 136 mandates sharing information on protected persons. Article 51 prohibits forcing them into armed or auxiliary service. Additional Protocol I bans recruiting under-15s (Art. 77) and evacuating children abroad without parental consent and return records (Art. 78).²⁴⁴

Convention on the Rights of the Child

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), binding on Russia and Ukraine, defines a child as under 18 (unless stated as earlier under national law). It requires states to prioritise best interests (Art. 3), preserve identity (Art. 8), and prevent parental separation (Art. 9). Article 10 mandates prompt family reunification and freedom of movement. Articles 11(1) - (2) require combating illicit transfer and non-return abroad. Article 17 ensures access to diverse information, and Article 29(c) mandates education that supports cultural identity, language, values, and respect for national values. Article 32(1) protects from harmful work, and Article 38(2) bans

recruiting under-15s into armed forces.²⁴⁵

The Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, ratified by both Russia and Ukraine, prohibits the conscription of anyone under 18 (Art. 2) and allows voluntary enlistment below that age only with genuine consent and the approval of a parent or guardian (Art. 3(3)(a)).²⁴⁶

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

This treaty was signed in 1966 and has been in effect since 1976, with both Russia and Ukraine as parties. It includes Article 1(1), affirming the right to pursue economic, social, and cultural development; Article 23(1), protecting the family; and Article 24(1), guaranteeing children's protection appropriate to their status as minors.²⁴⁷

International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

Also in force since 1976, this 1966 treaty, ratified by both Russia and Ukraine, affirms in Article 10(1) the importance of the family. Article 10(3) requires protection of children from economic and social exploitation, banning work harmful to their health, morals, or development.²⁴⁸

The International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance

Ukraine is a party to this treaty, but Russia is not. Article 2 defines "enforced disappearance" as an arrest, detention, or abduction carried out with state involvement, accompanied by concealment of the person's fate or whereabouts.²⁴⁹ Article

242 OHCHR, 2023, 14-16.

243 ICRC, *Geneva Convention (IV) relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War*. Geneva, 12 August 1949. Available at: <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/gciv-1949/article-4?activeTab=GCIV>,

244 Ibid; ICRC, *Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I)*, 8 June 1977. Available at: <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/api-1977?activeTab=1949GCs-APs-and-commentaries>

245 Ibid.

246 *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict*, 25 May 2000. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/optional-protocol-convention-rights-child-involvement-children>

247 United Nations, *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, 16 December 1966. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>

248 United Nations, *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, 16 December 1966, p.710. Available at: <https://www.refworld.org/legal/agreements/unga/1966/en/33423>

249 United Nations, *International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance*, 20 December 2006. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-convention-protection-all-persons-enforced>

25(1)(a) obliges states to prevent and punish the wrongful removal of children subjected to enforced disappearance, including through the falsification or concealment of identity documents. It also requires efforts to locate and return these children, restore their identities, and annul any adoptions or placements arising from the disappearance.²⁵⁰

UN Security Council Resolution 1261, 1882, 1998 and 2225

UN Security Council Resolution 1261, adopted on 25 August 1999, highlights the recruitment of child soldiers, abduction, and forced displacement as some of the most serious violations of children's rights. It expresses concern and reaffirms existing treaty-based protections.²⁵¹ Resolution 1882 (2009), 1998 (2011) and 2225 (2015) reiterate 1261's critical points.

UN Children in Armed Conflict Report

Children in Ukraine (2022-2025)

The United Nations documentation of grave violations against children in the ongoing Ukraine conflict reveals significant disparities in both the scale and nature of violations committed by different parties to the conflict. This analysis, based on verified UN data from the annual Children in Armed Conflict Reports spanning 2022-2024, provides an assessment of verified incidents. It should be noted that these figures do not represent the full picture of grave violations, they highlight only those cases the UN was able to verify.²⁵²

250 Ibid.

251 United Nation Security Council Resolution 1261 (1999), 25 August 1999. Available at: [https://docs.un.org/en/S/RES/1261\(1999\)](https://docs.un.org/en/S/RES/1261(1999))

252 United Nations, 2023, *Children and armed conflict: Report of the Secretary-General*. UN General Assembly and Security Council, A/77/895–S/2023/363, 5 June, Available at: <https://docs.un.org/en/A/77/895> (Accessed: 22 August 2025); United Nations, 2024, *Children and armed conflict: Report of the Secretary-General*. UN General Assembly and Security Council A/78/842 S/2024/384 4 June 2024, Available at: <https://docs.un.org/en/S/2024/384> ;. United Nations, 2025, *Children and armed conflict: Report of the Secretary-General*. UN General Assembly and Security Council A/79/878-S/2025/247 17 June 2025, Available at <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Secretary-General-Annual-Report-on-Children-and-Armed-Conflict-Covering-2024.pdf>

Scale of Documented Violations

UN verification data demonstrates substantial differences in the number of violations attributed to various parties across the three-year period examined. In 2022, Russian armed forces and affiliated armed groups were attributed with 658 child casualties (136 killed, 518 maimed) while Ukrainian armed forces accounted for 255 child casualties (80 killed, 175 maimed).²⁵³ This pattern persisted through subsequent years, with Russian forces responsible for 287 child casualties in 2023 and 474 in 2024, compared to Ukrainian forces' 40 and 26 respectively.²⁵⁴ That the actions of both sides have resulted in children's deaths should not be seen as an indication of comparable conduct.

It is nevertheless important to emphasise that Ukraine has implemented comprehensive measures to protect civilians, with a particular focus on children in conflict zones. Following Russia's February 2022 invasion, authorities conducted evacuations of tens of thousands of civilians, including coordinated operations with the UN and ICRC, such as the May 2022 evacuation from the Azovstal plant in Mariupol.²⁵⁵ In August 2025 alone, 894 children were evacuated from settlements in Donetsk Oblast.²⁵⁶ These measures underscore Ukraine's commitment to safely evacuating civilians from high-risk areas.

Similarly, attacks on educational and healthcare facilities show marked disparities: Russian forces conducted 480 such attacks in 2022, 249 in 2023, and 696 in 2024, while Ukrainian forces were attributed with 212, 70, and 56 attacks respectively during the same periods.²⁵⁷

253 United Nations, 2023, p.37.

254 United Nations, 2024, p.38; UN, 2025, p.25.

255 Gillard, E., 2024. *Enhancing the security of civilians in conflict: Notifications, evacuations, humanitarian corridors, suspensions of hostilities and other humanitarian arrangements*. Chatham House, p. 19. Available at: https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/2024-04-24-enhancing-security-of-civilians-in-conflict-gillard_0_0.pdf

256 Антон Степура (2025). 3 Донеччини за тиждень евакуювали 894 дитини — залишаються понад 2 тисячі. [online] Суспільне | Новини. Available at: <https://suspiine.media/donbas/1095222-z-doneccini-za-tizden-evakuuvali-894-ditini-zalisautsa-ponad-2-tisaci/>.

257 United Nations, 2023, p.37; UN, 2024, p.39; UN, 2025, p.25.

Nature of Violations and Implications for Child Protection

The documented violations reveal distinct patterns with particular relevance for forced displacement and family separation concerns. Russian forces and authorities were responsible for all verified cases of child abduction in 2022 (92 children), with an additional 122 children abducted in 2023.²⁵⁸ The UN also verified the transfer or deportation of children from Ukrainian territories to the Russian Federation, including 46 children in 2022 and 33 in 2023.²⁵⁹

Trends in Violation Patterns

The UN Secretary-General has noted contrasting trends between parties over the reporting period. Ukrainian authorities demonstrated engagement with UN mechanisms, resulting in what the Secretary-General described as a “significant decrease in the verified number of children killed and maimed and attacks on schools and hospitals attributed to the Ukrainian armed forces” by 2023.²⁶⁰

Conversely, the reports show an escalation in violations by Russian forces, with the Secretary-General expressing being “deeply alarmed by the increase in grave violations attributed to the Russian armed forces and affiliated armed groups” in 2024.²⁶¹

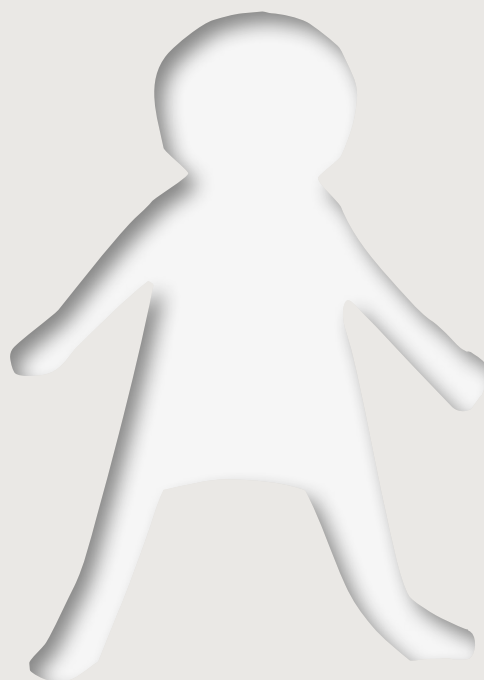
These divergent trends have direct implications for the safety and protection of children in affected areas and underscore the importance of continued monitoring and advocacy for child protection measures by all parties to the conflict.

European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)

Article 3 bans torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; Article 5 guarantees liberty except in lawful circumstances; and Article 8 protects the right to private and family life. Under Protocol No. 4, Article 2 affirms freedom of movement, including the right to leave any country, while Article 3 (2) forbids denying a person entry to their own country.²⁶²

International Labour Organisation

ILO’s Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, No. 182 Article 3 (a)(3) 9a) prohibits exploitation, including “forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict”.²⁶³



258 United Nations, 2023, p.37

259 United Nations, 2023, p.37; UN, 2024, p.39.

260 United Nations 2024, p. 39

261 United Nations 2024 , p.40

262 Council of Europe, European Convention on Human Rights, Council of Europe, p.7-8

263 ILO, Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999, 1 June 1999. Available at: https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/normlex_en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C182

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Impact on well-being, reintegration prospects, and other consequences

This chapter presents findings from an in-depth psychological assessment of ten children, aged 14 to 20, who were returned by Save Ukraine from the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine or from the Russian Federation.

Assessment Cohort and Objective

Of the ten respondents, six were boys and four were girls. In terms of age, two participants were between 14 and 16 years old, while the majority - eight participants - were aged 17 to 20.

The primary objective of the study is to explore how militarisation and other potential war crimes have affected the children's current psycho-emotional and mental well-being. It also aims to identify factors influencing the depth and nature of these experiences, assess the long-term consequences of trauma, and develop evidence-based strategies for psychosocial support.

Focusing on individual cases of militarisation and other systemic violations, the study investigates events children identified as traumatic, with the goal of analysing the severity of their psychological impact and helping shape effective coping and recovery mechanisms. The assessment offers important insights into the psychological reactions of children to war-related trauma and contributes to building tailored, trauma-informed support interventions.

Methodology Summary

This study is grounded in a comprehensive psychological assessment based on semi-structured in-depth interviews, clinical observation, psychodiagnostic tools, and documentary evidence collected by the Save Ukraine team. All data collection was conducted with strict adherence to ethical standards, including informed oral consent, confidentiality, and the principles of a trauma-informed approach to ensure children's psychological safety.

The psychological evaluation employed a set of internationally recognised tools to examine trauma-related symptoms, including:

- **Childhood War Trauma Questionnaire (CWTQ)** – a semi-structured tool for qualitative analysis of a child's wartime experiences;
- **Life Events Checklist for DSM-5 (LEC-5)** – used to screen exposure to potentially traumatic events;
- **Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI)** – to assess cognitive, affective, and somatic symptoms of anxiety;
- **PTSD Checklist for DSM-5 (PCL-5)** – a self-assessment tool for identifying symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder according to DSM-5 criteria.

Findings

This analysis revealed that most of the assessed children experienced multiple forms of rights violations, often overlapping in nature. Among the ten children assessed, the most common included separation from family, indoctrination, and militarisation, reported by eight of the participants. Violent detention and torture or cruel treatment was reported by three, while conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) was reported by two. Only one child experienced deportation.

Psychological Consequences of War-Related Trauma in Children

Traumatic experiences caused by war can have profound and long-lasting effects on children's mental health, emotional development, and social functioning.²⁶⁴ These experiences often overwhelm a child's internal resources, leading to a loss of

²⁶⁴ War-related trauma linked to increased sustained attention to threat in children, SRCD (Society for Research in Child Development, 11 February 2022. Available at: https://srcd.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cdev.13739?utm_source=chatgpt.com

control, fear, and an inability to make decisions – conditions under which children begin to form survival strategies that may hinder their long-term development.²⁶⁵

Such trauma can result in a wide range of psychological disorders, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), acute stress reactions, depression, anxiety, panic attacks, sleep disturbances, dissociative symptoms, and behavioural issues such as aggression or antisocial conduct.²⁶⁶ In some cases, trauma may also lead to the development of addictions.²⁶⁷

Children affected by war face trauma across all areas of life – emotional, physical, social, and cognitive.²⁶⁸ Key contributing factors include loss of basic needs, family separation, discrimination, and the normalisation of violence.²⁶⁹ Interviews with returned children confirm exposure to these conditions. The psychological impact depends on each child's perception, coping capacity, and adult support.

Traumatic Stress

All ten children assessed through in-depth interviews and psychological tools (CWTQ and LEC-5) had experienced events with strong potential to cause traumatic stress. The most commonly reported experiences were direct exposure to explosions, armed attacks, and combat,

which were universal across all respondents.

- **Fire or explosion:** All ten children lived in areas subjected to shelling, missile and drone strikes. They experienced explosions nearby, triggering acute stress reactions. Two children were directly impacted when a drone hit their home. One child had been under occupation since 2014 and endured such attacks from early childhood.
- **Armed violence:** All ten children were exposed to armed violence. Three respondents experienced violence involving torture. Seven witnessed violence against others. Six reported being threatened with weapons.
- **Combat exposure:** All ten children reported witnessing active combat, including clashes and military movements. One child had served as a conscripted soldier. Three had close family members in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, contributing to heightened fear and emotional strain.
- **Physical violence or torture:** Four children experienced direct physical aggression, and seven had witnessed it.
- **Conflict-related sexual violence:** Two respondents experienced sexual harassment by Russian soldiers.
- **Sudden violent death of a close person:** Reported by five children; including one case involved death due to lack of medical care.
- **Severe suffering:** Nine experienced significant psychological distress, with eight reporting traumatic separation from family, and others citing the death or torture of loved ones.
- **Other traumatic events:** These included the use or display of torture devices intended to threaten loved ones, threats involving firearms, and mistreatment at Russian military checkpoints during the children's return to Ukraine. One child experienced acute psychological distress after being threatened with separation from his mother and placement in institutional care.

Anxiety Levels Among Adolescents (BAI Results)

The Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI) revealed that eight of the children assessed showed elevated levels of anxiety, indicating a significant psycho-emotional burden among those returned from occupation.

265 Impact of war and forced displacement on children's mental health—multilevel, needs-oriented, and trauma-informed approaches, *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 14 March 2022. Available at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s00787-022-01974-z>

266 Mental health of children living in war zones: a risk and protection perspective, *World Psychiatric Association*, 19 January 2018. Available at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/wps.20496>

267 Childhood Trauma, Combat Trauma, and Substance use in National Guard and Reserve Soldiers, 1 October 2018. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1080/08897077.2018.1443315>

268 Living through war: Mental health of children and youth in conflict-affected areas, *International Review of the Red Cross*, August 2019. Available at: <https://international-review.icrc.org/articles/living-through-war-mental-health-children-and-youth-conflict-affected-areas>

269 Impact of war and forced displacement on children's mental health—multilevel, needs-oriented, and trauma-informed approaches, *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 14 March 2022. Available at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s00787-022-01974-z>

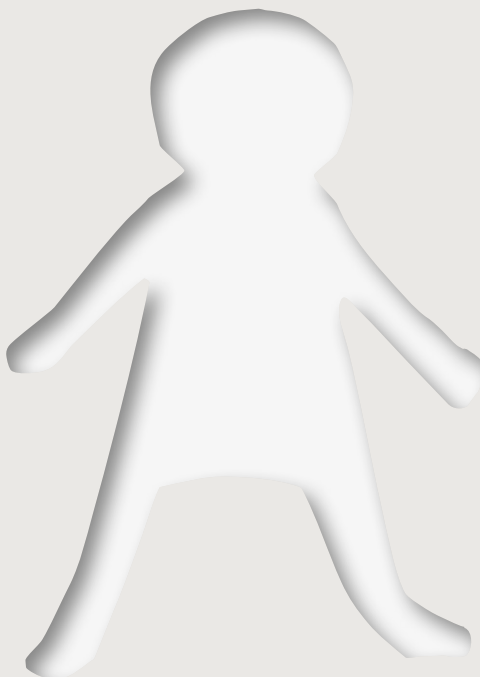
- **Seven respondents demonstrated a moderate level of anxiety**, marked by frequent somatic symptoms (e.g. rapid heartbeat, sleep disturbance, shortness of breath) and anxious thoughts that may affect daily functioning.
- **One respondent presented a high level of anxiety**, scoring 29 points, with intense symptoms that severely impact quality of life and daily activities.
- **Only two respondents fell within the normal range**, showing minimal anxiety symptoms that did not interfere with functioning.

These findings, while limited to a very small study cohort, suggest a high prevalence of anxiety-related distress among returned children and underline the need for targeted psychological support to reduce anxiety, strengthen resilience, and promote adaptive coping strategies.

PTSD Symptom Severity (PCL-5 Results)

All ten respondents reported exposure to traumatic events, as confirmed by the Life Events Checklist (LEC-5), making them eligible for PTSD screening. The PCL-5 self-assessment revealed varied severity levels of post-traumatic stress symptoms:

- **Four respondents** scored in the **low range** (0–32), showing limited PTSD symptoms and generally adaptive emotional responses.
- **Four respondents** exhibited a **moderate level** of PTSD (32–49), with recurring symptoms such as flashbacks, avoidance, and sleep disturbances.
- **Two respondents** showed a **high severity** of PTSD (50+), marked by intense intrusions, physiological arousal, and emotional dysregulation.



In total six participants demonstrated moderate to high PTSD symptomatology, suggesting that trauma has not been fully processed and may significantly impact their mental health. These results underscore the close link between anxiety and post-traumatic responses in war-affected

children and confirm the need for trauma-informed therapeutic interventions using evidence-based approaches.

Child-Reported Factors Affecting Psycho-Emotional Well-Being

Children identified several key experiences that severely impacted their emotional and psychological health:

- **Indoctrination and Identity Suppression:** eight respondents reported systematic erasure of their Ukrainian identity through bans on language, symbols, and history. These actions led to confusion and emotional disorientation, especially as they contradicted the children's lifelong cultural worldview.
- **Militarisation and Normalisation of Violence:** Also reported by eight respondents, militarisation involved forced participation in military camps and school-based training in weapons handling, tactical medicine, and drill exercises. This exposure, particularly damaging during adolescence, frequently exceeded their psychological capacity to process trauma. Three children (30%) described inhumane conditions in camps, including lack of medical care, intimidation, and instances of cruel treatment.
- **Disruption of Education:** Eight also experienced interrupted schooling, school closures, or forced transfer to Russian-run institutions where Ukrainian identity was erased. Some children studied in isolation online for extended periods, fearing exposure, and were cut off from peers and normal social interaction. Schools were also used for military purposes, making them unsafe learning environments.

These experiences illustrate the layered nature of the trauma endured by Ukrainian children in occupied territories, combining cultural erasure, forced militarisation, and deprivation of basic developmental needs.

The longer the war continues, the more severe and lasting these consequences are likely to become. As children accumulate adverse experiences, the psychological toll may increase with age - particularly given their underdeveloped coping mechanisms, which make them especially vulnerable to chronic stress and trauma.

Summary of Psychological Impact and Implications for Support

Children returned from temporarily occupied territories were not exposed to isolated incidents, but rather to multiple, overlapping traumatic events - including militarisation, separation, violence, and identity erasure. This multi-layered exposure significantly increases the risk of developing PTSD, chronic anxiety, sleep disturbances, somatic symptoms, and emotional exhaustion.²⁷⁰

Many children reported that traumatic events affected both themselves and their loved ones, highlighting the high density and complexity of trauma. Results from the Childhood War Trauma Questionnaire (CWTQ) and LEC-5 confirm a very high level of traumatisation across the sample.

While this study is again small in nature, the findings indicate the urgent need for a structured, long-term psychological support programme focused on trauma recovery, the development of adaptive coping strategies, and the strengthening of resilience in war-affected children.

Consequences and Risks for War-Affected Children

Children in Ukraine face widespread and multifaceted risks as a result of the ongoing war, including direct exposure to violence, loss, displacement, and the breakdown of critical infrastructure and support systems.

270 Traumatic events and posttraumatic stress symptoms in a treatment-seeking sample of Ukrainian children during the war, *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health*, 09 February 2024. Available at: https://capmh.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13034-024-00715-1?utm_source=chatgpt.com

1. Exposure to Violence and Militarisation

Children are killed, injured, or maimed by shelling, drones, and mines. Some experience torture, forced militarisation, or are compelled to take part in military training. This exposure not only endangers their physical safety but also causes deep psychological harm.

2. Destruction of Essential Infrastructure

The war has severely damaged educational, medical, and social institutions. Many children lack access to schools, healthcare, psychological support, and legal protection due to destroyed facilities and a shortage of specialists.

3. Humanitarian Crisis and Health Risks

Widespread poverty, loss of parental employment, and poor living conditions contribute to malnutrition, disease, and lack of access to life-saving medication. Without heat, electricity, or clean water, children's basic survival and development are compromised.

4. Family Separation and Loss

Many children have lost one or both parents or have been forcibly separated from their families. As a result, many are raised by single mothers or live in constant fear for loved ones still in occupied territories.

5. Displacement and Social Isolation

Children forced to flee their homes often struggle with repeated displacement, losing their social environment and the ability to build lasting peer relationships. Social isolation heightens vulnerability to physical, emotional, and sexual violence.

6. Disrupted Education and Loss of Future Opportunities

Educational access has been severely disrupted by insecurity, teacher shortages, and the militarisation of learning environments. Some children study remotely in unsafe or isolating conditions. Many lose the opportunity to obtain vocational education and the ability to plan for the future.

7. Loss of Identity and Discrimination

Children face cultural suppression and discrimination based on nationality, language, or beliefs. The loss of identity contributes to psychological distress and a breakdown of self-worth and belonging.

8. Lack of Parental Attention and Overwhelming Burden

As families struggle for survival, children are often left to cope alone with emotional trauma, loss, and overwhelming responsibilities that far exceed their developmental capacity.

Prospects for Reintegration

Reintegration is a long-term recovery process essential for children returned from occupation and forcible transfer. It must restore their identity, well-being, and access to services. Aligned with Article 39 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, reintegration should uphold the child's best interests and dignity.

A successful approach requires a systemic, state-supported framework, inclusive of all war-affected children, with active child and community involvement. Reintegration efforts must ensure access to education, healthcare, and psychosocial support, while building adaptive coping skills and resilience.

**REINTEGRATION
EFFORTS MUST
ENSURE ACCESS
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PSYCHOSOCIAL
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BUILDING ADAPTIVE
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RESILIENCE.**

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Accountability and Justice

This chapter examines legal efforts to address the forced transfer and militarisation of Ukrainian children, focusing on the ICC and other international bodies. It also explores long-term prospects for repatriation.

Child Abduction and the ICC Process

On 17 March 2023, the ICC issued arrest warrants for President Vladimir Putin and Children's Rights Commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova for war crimes involving the forced transfer of Ukrainian children. The charges cite Article 8(2)(a)(vii), Article 8(2)(b)(viii), joint and indirect commission (Art. 25(3)(a)), and superior responsibility (Art. 28(b)).²⁷¹

Russia, which withdrew from the ICC in 2016, rejected the arrest warrant as “outrageous and unacceptable,” and Lvova-Belova defended the child transfers as humanitarian rescues.²⁷² On 20 March 2023, Russia opened a criminal case against ICC prosecutors and judges, and in April 2023, passed a law criminalising cooperation with international bodies to which it is not a party.²⁷³

Human rights groups like Freedom House, the Regional Center for Human Rights, and ZMINA have submitted evidence to the ICC on the political indoctrination and militarised re-education of abducted children in Belarus, urging recognition of these as war crimes, crimes against humanity and

genocide. No charges have been issued to date against the Minsk government.²⁷⁴



Vladimir Putin and Children's Rights Commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova.

Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine

The ICC cannot prosecute aggression in the Russia–Ukraine war unless referred by the UN Security Council - which Russia can veto - or if all involved states are ICC members that have ratified the Kampala Amendments. Ukraine's ICC's membership took effect in January 2025, but Russia's lack of membership of the ICC and Security Council veto shields it from prosecution.²⁷⁵

In June 2025, Ukraine and the Council of Europe agreed to create a Special Tribunal to prosecute Russian leadership for aggression.²⁷⁶ Though not focused on child rights, such aggression enabled

271 ICC, “” Situation in Ukraine: ICC judges issue arrest warrants against Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin and Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova, 17 March 2023. Available at: <https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/situation-ukraine-icc-judges-issue-arrest-warrants-against-vladimir-vladimirovich-putin-and>

272 “Reactions to ICC's arrest warrant for Putin citing Ukraine war crime,” Reuters, 17 March 2023. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/reactions-iccs-arrest-warrant-putin-over-ukraine-war-crimes-2023-03-17/>

273 Jochecova, Ketrin. “Russia blasts back at ICC over Putin arrest warrant,” Politico, 20 March 2023. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/putin-russia-icc-criminal-case-moscow-ukraine-war/>; “Russia: Law Targets International Criminal Court,” Human Rights Watch, 5 May 2023. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/05/05/russia-law-targets-international-criminal-court>

274 Stolen Childhood: How the Belarusian Regime is Erasing Ukrainian Children's Identity through Displacement, Re-education, and Militarization, Freedom House, 8 October 2024. Available at: https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/FH_ReportEN_FINAL_Oct8.pdf

275 “Russia withdraws from International Criminal Court treaty,” BBC News, 16 November 2016. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-38005282>

276 “PACE calls for an ad hoc international criminal tribunal to hold to account perpetrators of the crime of aggression against Ukraine,” Council of Europe, 28 April 2022. Available at: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/pace-calls-for-an-ad-hoc-international-criminal-tribunal-to-investigate-war-crimes-in-ukraine>

those violations. Preparatory work is underway via the ICPA, launched in July 2023.²⁷⁷

International Court of Justice (ICJ)

Unlike the ICC, the ICJ hears disputes between states. Ukraine filed a case in March 2022 under the Genocide Convention, challenging Russia's false claims of genocide as a pretext for invasion.²⁷⁸ Ukraine later argued Russia's use of force and recognition of the DPR and LPR also violated the Convention. In February 2024, the ICJ ruled it lacked jurisdiction on those points, allowing only the claim over false genocide allegations to proceed.²⁷⁹

European Court of Human Rights

On 9 July 2025, the ECHR ruled in *Ukraine and the Netherlands v. Russia*, a case combining four proceedings. Ukraine presented evidence of Russia's refusal to return children sent to "summer camps."²⁸⁰ The court found a clear pattern from 2014–2022 of removing Ukrainian children and integrating them in Russia, violating Articles 3, 5, and 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights and Article 2 of Protocol No.4.²⁸¹

Separately, in January 2023, the Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union submitted an application to the EHCR concerning the alleged transfer of ten Ukrainian children from Crimea to Russia for adoption in 2014. The allegations state that Russian nationality was imposed upon these children, and

that there is no current evidence of the children's whereabouts. If proven, these actions would violate Articles 5 and 8 of the Convention.²⁸²

Ukrainian National War Crimes Investigations

While international courts play a key role, war crimes should primarily be prosecuted nationally if possible. Ukraine's Prosecutor General has opened a case on the forcible transfer of children, pressing charges in absentia against officials including Denis Pushilin, head of the so-called Donetsk "People's Republic," his children's commissioner, Eleonora Fedorenko, and official Svitlana Maiboroda.²⁸³ Similar charges target Inna Shvenk, children's commissioner of the so-called Luhansk "People's Republic".²⁸⁴

Ukraine is investigating Russian foster families who took in deported children, focusing on those who collaborated with occupation authorities. Law enforcement is also examining the Russification of education and youth militarisation. One case targets Yunarmyia leaders in the TOT of Crimea for promoting Russian military service, potentially violating Article 51 of the GC IV.²⁸⁵

The first war crimes case brought by Ukraine against a Russian national in its custody is currently underway. Dmitry Kurashov is accused of executing a Ukrainian soldier in 2024 prior to his capture.²⁸⁶

277 "One year on since the launch of the International Centre for the Prosecution of the Crime of Aggression Against Ukraine (ICPA)," European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation, 3 July 2024. Available at <https://www.eurojust.europa.eu/news/one-year-launch-international-centre-prosecution-crime-aggression-against-ukraine-icpa>

278 Allegations of Genocide under the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Ukraine v. Russian Federation), ICJ, 7 March 2022. Available at: <https://www.icj-cij.org/public/files/case-related/182/182-20220307-ORA-01-00-BI.pdf>;

279 Marchuk, Iryna and Wanigasuriya, Aloka. "The Curious Fate of the False Claim of Genocide," *Verfassungsblog*, 24 February 2024. Available at: <https://verfassungsblog.de/the-curious-fate-of-the-false-claim-of-genocide/>

280 *Case of Ukraine and the Netherlands v. Russia: (Applications nos. 8019/16, 43800/14, 28525/20 and 11055/22): Judgement*, ECHR, 1500-1505. Available at: [https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/#/{%22tabview%22:\[%22document%22\],%22itemid%22:\[%22001-244292%22\]}](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/#/{%22tabview%22:[%22document%22],%22itemid%22:[%22001-244292%22]})

281 Ibid, 1588-1590.

282 *Application no. 6719/23 Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union on behalf of ten Ukrainian children against Russia lodged on 14 January 2023, communicated on 25 March 2025*, ECHR, 14 April 2025. Available at: [https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#/{%22itemid%22:\[%22001-242887%22\]}](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#/{%22itemid%22:[%22001-242887%22]})

283 *The Kyiv Independent*, "Ukraine names pro-Russian collaborators suspected of forcibly deporting Ukrainian children," 1 October, 2024. Available at: <https://kyivindependent.com/ukraine-officials-suspected-of-forcibly-deporting-children/>

284 Motorevska, Yevheniia, "Investigating the Deportation of Ukrainian Children," Institute for War and Peace Reporting, 16 January 2025. Available at: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/investigating-deportation-ukrainian-children>

285 Ibid

286 Gunter, Joal. "The first trial of its kind: A Russian soldier takes the stand for an execution," BBC News, 15 June 2025. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cp8ylx534j0o>

Other national and collaborative investigations

Additionally, the principle of universality allows for third-party countries to investigate and prosecute allegations of war crimes. Notably, the UK Met Police's War Crimes Team have issued appeals for information regarding potential war crimes in Ukraine. As of February 2023, they had received over 100 referrals, although at present, the evidence gathered will be used to support ICC efforts.²⁸⁷

International sanctions against perpetrators

On 18 July 2025, the EU adopted its 18th sanctions package against Russia. Amongst its provisions was one on an individual involved in Russia's "military education" of Ukrainian children, bringing the total number of individuals sanctioned relating to the deportation and indoctrination of Ukrainian children to 90.²⁸⁸ Other national governments and international bodies have sanctioned individuals.

The UK has imposed sanctions on individuals involved in the deportation and indoctrination of Ukrainian children. On 17 July 2023, sanctions were announced against figures including Moscow Children's Commissioner Ksenia Mishonova and Education Minister Sergey Kravtsov, for roles in forced transfers and "re-education camps."²⁸⁹

On 19 November 2024, further sanctions targeted those involved in deportation, indoctrination, and propaganda, including Yunarmiya, care institution staff, and individuals linked to Artek camp in Crimea.²⁹⁰

287 Counterterrorism Policing, "Met Police refreshes appeal for evidence of war crimes in Ukraine," 17 February 2023. Available at: <https://www.met.police.uk/news/2023/02/17/met-police-refreshes-appeal-for-evidence-of-war-crimes-in-ukraine/> | Counter Terrorism Policing

288 "Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine: EU adopts 18th package of economic and individual measures," Council of the European Union, 18 July 2025. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/07/18/russia-s-war-of-aggression-against-ukraine-eu-adopts-18th-package-of-economic-and-individual-measures/>

289 "UK announces new sanctions in response to Russia's forced deportation of Ukrainian children," UK FCDO, 17 July 2023. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-announces-new-sanctions-in-response-to-russias-forced-deportation-of-ukrainian-children>

290 "UK sanctions perpetrators of Russia's forced deportation and brainwashing of Ukrainian children on 1000th day of full-scale invasion of Ukraine," UK FCDO, 14 November 2024. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-sanctions-perpetrators-of-russias-forced-deportation-and-brainwashing-of-ukrainian-children-on-1000th-day-of-full-scale-invasion-of-ukraine>; UK Sanctions Publication List, FCDO, updated 23 July 2025. Available at: <https://docs.fcdo.gov.uk/docs/UK-Sanctions-List.html>

Future Prospects for Justice

In addition to ongoing legal proceedings, a range of bodies - including the proposed Special Tribunal for Aggression, national authorities, the UN, the ICC, the ICJ, and NGOs such as the Ukraine 5AM Coalition, the Regional Centre for Human Rights, the "Almenda" Centre for Civil Education, East SOS, and Where Are Our People? - are working to assemble a robust body of evidence for future prosecutions.²⁹¹

The ICC focuses on those bearing the greatest responsibility. Potentially hundreds could face charges, rising to thousands if the scope of prosecutions are broad, ranging from senior leaders and generals to officials who oversaw deportations, operated camps, or enabled recruitment into Russian forces. However, these cases face major legal and procedural obstacles.

As a non-member, Russia has no duty to surrender suspects or assist investigations and can veto any Security Council referral. ICC members South Africa sought to avoid arresting Putin before his visit to the country was canceled, and Mongolia refused to arrest him during his visit to the country in September 2024.²⁹² Prosecutors also lack access to

291 European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation, International Centre for the Prosecution of the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine. Available at: <https://www.eurojust.europa.eu/international-centre-for-the-prosecution-of-the-crime-of-aggression-against-ukraine?utm=>; Office of the Special Prosecutor's, Government of Ukraine. Available at: <https://war-crimes.gov.ua/en/>; United Nations, "Call for Submissions by the United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine," 8 July 2024. Available at: <https://unis.unvienna.org/unis/pressrels/2025/unisous450.html>; ICC, "Ukraine: Situation in Ukraine." Available at: <https://www.icc-cpi.int/situations/ukraine>; ICJ, Allegations of Genocide under the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Ukraine v. Russian Federation), 31 January 2025. Available at: <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/182/182-20250131-pre-01-00-en.pdf>; ZMINA, "Proper documentation of crimes underpins future justice – Ukraine 5AM Coalition reports on results of one year of full-scale invasion," 23 February 2023. Available at: <https://zmina.ua/en/event-en/proper-documentation-of-crimes-underpins-future-justice-ukraine-5am-coalition-reports-on-results-of-one-year-of-full-scale-invasion>; Almenda, "Analytical Report 'Russian Propaganda Camps': Where and Why Russia Takes Children from the Temporarily Occupied Territories," 24 October 2024. Available at: <https://almenda.org/en/analitichnij-zvit-tabori-rosijskoi-propagandi-kudi-i-navish-ho-rosiya-vivozit-ditej-z-okupovanix-teritorij>; Regional Centre for Human Rights, "Human Rights." Available at: <https://rchr.org.ua/en/humanrights>; East SOS, "Documenting War Crimes." Available at: <https://east-sos.org/en/directions/war-crimes-documentation/>; Where Are Our People? "About Our Project." Available at: <https://deportation.org.ua/about-our-project/>

292 Farouk Chothia, Faruk and Greenall, Robert. "South Africa plans law change over Putin ICC arrest warrant," BBC News, 30

Russian-controlled areas, and Russia's constitution prohibits the extradition of its citizens.²⁹³ A change in Moscow's leadership could shift that, as shown in 2001 when Serbia extradited Slobodan Milosevic after his removal from power.

The ICJ has limited jurisdiction over genocide charges. Yet, forcibly transferring children is explicitly defined as genocide under Article II(e) of the Genocide Convention. Ukraine and others argue Russia's abduction and "Russification" of Ukrainian children violates these obligations. Scholars have suggested Russia's actions may meet the ICJ's genocide threshold.²⁹⁴ Ukraine has not yet brought such a case. Even if the ICJ ruled against Russia, it would only affirm Russian obligations to prevent and punish genocide, not prosecute its own individuals. Russia could also veto any UNSC effort to enforce the ruling.²⁹⁵

The July 2025 ECHR ruling against Russia marks Ukraine's most significant legal victory on child deportations. Russia was expelled from the Council of Europe - and announced its withdrawal - on 15 March 2022.²⁹⁶ However, the Court affirmed its jurisdiction over violations by Russia that occurred up to 16 September 2022.²⁹⁷

Russia no longer participates in the Committee of Ministers system overseeing ECHR compliance and has declared the Court's rulings "null and void."²⁹⁸ However, future efforts to restore ties with Europe may require compliance - potentially including the return of deported children.

In May 2023, the Council of Europe adopted the "Declaration on the situation of children of Ukraine," condemning the unlawful transfer, detention and adoption of Ukrainian children by Russia and Belarus.²⁹⁹ The creation by the Council of Europe of a position of "Special Envoy on the situation of children of Ukraine" in February 2025 indicates that the Council sees a role for itself in raising awareness of the issue.³⁰⁰

May 2023. Available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-65759630>: Comerford, Ruth. "Putin welcomed in Mongolia despite ICC arrest warrant," BBC News, 3 September 2024. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cwy527yex0no>

293 Russian Federation Constitution European Commission for Democracy Through Law, 4 February 2021. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/constitution-of-the-russian-federation-en/1680a1a237>

294 Ioffe, Yulia. "Forcibly Transferring Ukrainian Children to the Russian Federation: A Genocide?" *Journal of Genocide Research*. Vol. 25, Issue 3-4 (July 2013): 315-351. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2023.2228085>

295 Article 94 (2) *UN Charter, Chapter XIV: The International Court of Justice*, United Nations. Available at: <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/chapter-14>

296 "The Russian Federation is excluded from the Council of Europe," Council of Europe, 16 March 2022. Available at: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/the-russian-federation-is-excluded-from-the-council-of-europe>

297 "Resolution of the European Court of Human Rights on the consequences of the cessation of membership of the Russian Federation to the Council of Europe in light of Article 58 of the European Convention on Human Rights," ECHR, 22 March 2022 https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/d/echr/Resolution_ECHR_cessation_membership_Russia_CoE_ENG

298 Hajyahia, Alaa. "ECtHR finds Russia Committed Grave International Law Violations in Ukraine," American Society of International Law, 14 July 2025. Available at: <https://www.asil.org/ILIB/ecthr-finds-russia-committed-grave-international-law-violations-ukraine>

299 Reykjavik Declaration: United Around Our Values, Council of Europe, 16-17 March 2023, 11 and 14. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/4th-summit-of-heads-of-state-and-government-of-the-council-of-europe/1680ab40c1>

300 "Special Envoy of Council of Europe Secretary General on the situation of children of Ukraine appointed," Council of Europe, 5 February 2025. Available at: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/special-envoy-of-the-secretary-general-of-the-council-of-europe-on-the-situation-of-children-of-ukraine-appointed>

Future Prospects for Repatriation

Ukrainian officials have demanded the return of deported children in every negotiation and international forum. Ukrainian Deputy Foreign Minister Mariana Betsa said in April 2025 that “These are red lines for Ukraine.”³⁰¹ During peace talks in Istanbul in June 2025, the Russian delegation was reportedly handed a list of 339 transferred Ukrainian children, although the Kremlin appeared to indicate that the issue did not require urgent attention.³⁰² Alternatively, this may be a feint, with the Kremlin instead hoping to “buy time,” delaying returns while children are being assimilated and evidence of their origins erased.

Russia’s retention of Ukrainian children gives Kyiv a powerful moral argument. While this issue has been less critical amid evidence of other Russian violations, it may become more politically useful - especially under shifting attitudes within U.S. leadership. Thought it would appear that even this has limits: a letter from the U.S. First Lady passed to Putin during his Alaska summit with Trump raised the importance of the protection of children, but no specific reference to the return of those Ukrainian children under Russian control.³⁰³ However, during the White House summit between Trump, Zelensky and European leaders on 19 August, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen highlighted the critical importance of the children’s return, although Trump avoided mentioning Russia by name.³⁰⁴



Children who have returned to Ukraine from the TOT

**UKRAINIAN
OFFICIALS HAVE
DEMANDED
THE RETURN
OF DEPORTED
CHILDREN IN EVERY
NEGOTIATION AND
INTERNATIONAL
FORUM.**

301 “Return of Ukrainian children forcefully deported to Russia is non-negotiable, Kyiv says,” Euro News, 17 April 2025. Available at: <https://www.euronews.com/2025/04/17/return-of-ukrainian-children-forcefully-deported-to-russia-is-non-negotiable-kyiv-says>

302 “The Hidden War Over Ukraine’s Lost Children,” Time, 17 July 2025. Available at: <https://time.com/7302345/ukraine-lost-children-russia-war/>

303 Helmore, Edward. “Donald Trump delivers letter from first lady to Vladimir Putin,” The Guardian, 17 August 2025. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/aug/16/melania-trump-vladimir-putin-letter-donald>

304 Ursula von der Leyen, X, 19 August 2025. Available at: <https://x.com/vonderleyen/status/1957586557289865416?s=43&t=HR5Lcgh7xXVgf8BHe9Kxiw>

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Conclusions

This report has traced, chapter by chapter, the unfolding reality of how Russia's war against Ukraine has extended beyond the battlefield to target children as instruments of war and assimilation. The findings demonstrate that the deportation, indoctrination, and militarisation of Ukrainian children are not accidental consequences of occupation, but deliberate state policy. Together they form a coherent strategy designed to erase Ukrainian identity, sever children from their families and communities, and put them into service in the Russian Armed Forces, including against their own country (Chapters 6–9).

The evidence of deliberate policy

Across the evidence base, a pattern emerges that cannot be dismissed as incidental. From the testimonies of children who were promised seaside “holidays” only to find themselves drilling with rifles, to accounts of schools where lessons begin with the Russian anthem and end with military training exercises, the through-line is unmistakable. Indoctrination and militarisation have been woven into every level of childhood experience under Russian control.

Chapter 6 traced the roots of this strategy to Russia's national security doctrine, which for more than a decade has prioritised “patriotic education” as a cornerstone of military preparedness. Since the 2022 invasion, the budgets allocated to youth militarisation have skyrocketed, reflecting the centrality of this agenda. Chapter 7 documented how this policy is implemented through an expanding network of camps in Russia, Belarus, and occupied Ukraine, many disguised as recreation or rehabilitation centres. Chapter 9 further showed how schools and cultural life have been repurposed as tools of indoctrination: Ukrainian language and history stripped away, Russian curricula imposed, and compulsory programmes like *Conversations About Important Things* used to glorify Russia and denigrate Ukraine.

The deliberate nature of this policy is reinforced by the role of state institutions. As documented in

Chapter 7, the Russian Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Emergency Situations, and Interior Ministry all play roles in relocating children, shaping curricula, and embedding military training. Chapter 9 highlighted the Russian Orthodox Church's endorsement, framing military service as a sacred duty. Together these institutions form a multi-layered apparatus of control operating across territories and age groups.

The human cost

Behind the data are the lives of children whose sense of identity and belonging has been violently disrupted. Chapter 4 highlighted the breadth of violations: over half (55%) of those surveyed reported indoctrination, 41% militarisation, and 39% unlawful transfers. Many experienced these abuses in combination, compounding their trauma.

Children spoke of being separated from their families (Chapters 5), of being forced to wear military uniforms and participate in patriotic rituals (Chapters 7–9), and of being instructed to denounce their Ukrainian heritage (Chapter 9). Some were subjected to torture, cruel treatment, or sexual violence (Chapter 10). Others described the fear of being forced to accept Russian documents, with threats that their parents would lose custody if they refused (Chapter 9). These accounts reveal not only physical harm, but profound psychological wounds: confusion over identity, severance of family bonds, and the fear that returning to Ukraine might never be possible (Chapter 13).

Chapter 5 underscored the scale of unlawful transfers. While precise numbers remain contested, credible estimates suggest tens of thousands of children have been moved, with 19,546 cases officially documented in 2023 by the Ukrainian government. International organisations such as the OSCE, OHCHR, and Yale HRL corroborate this scale or highlight it as a significant underestimation.

Legal characterisation

The violations documented in this report strike at the heart of international humanitarian and human rights law. Forced transfer and deportation of

children constitute war crimes under Articles 8(2)(a)(vii) and 8(2)(b)(viii) of the Rome Statute (Chapter 12). When carried out systematically and on a large scale, they also constitute crimes against humanity under Article 7(1)(d).

Perhaps most gravely, Article 6(e) of the Rome Statute defines the forcible transfer of children from one group to another, with the intent to destroy that group in whole or in part, as genocide. The deliberate attempt at erasure of Ukrainian identity through coerced citizenship, enforced adoption, and systematic cultural suppression may provide evidence of intent (Chapters 5 and 9).

The European Court of Human Rights, in July 2025, has already found Russia responsible for the unlawful transfer of Ukrainian children (Chapter 5). The ICC's issuance of arrest warrants for Russian officials, including the Commissioner for Children's Rights, signals the beginning of accountability - but justice remains far from complete.

Strategic and geopolitical implications

The militarisation of children is not merely a humanitarian tragedy. It is a geopolitical weapon. By assimilating Ukrainian children into Russian society and military structures, Russia seeks to undermine Ukraine's capacity to regenerate its national identity and sovereignty. The report shows how this strategy serves both immediate and long-term purposes: bolstering Russia's war effort in the present, while reshaping the demographic and cultural future of TOT (Chapters 6–8).

The parallels with past conflicts are stark. Just as the forced displacement and ethnic cleansing campaigns of the 1990s sought to permanently alter the demographic fabric of the Balkans, Russia's policies today aim to dismantle the foundations of Ukraine's future. In scale, organisation, and intent, this constitutes the largest grave violation of children's rights in Europe since the end of the Yugoslav wars. Yet in its systematic militarisation of children - including their use by Russia on the battlefields of Ukraine - it may represent a dangerous evolution of such crimes.

Responsibilities and next steps

The findings of this report demand urgent action at multiple levels. Ukraine and its civil society partners must be supported in their efforts to identify, recover, and reintegrate deported children. As Chapter 3 illustrates, organisations like Save Ukraine have already rescued and rehabilitated

hundreds of children and operate nationwide centres for psychosocial care, family reunification, and rehabilitation. They must be resourced and protected.

The international community must intensify pressure on Russia. Diplomatic efforts must be paired with legal accountability. Evidence documented here should be preserved and submitted to the ICC and other relevant mechanisms (Chapter 4 and 10). States must consider sanctions targeted at individuals and institutions implicated in child deportations and militarisation.

Broader awareness and advocacy are also essential otherwise the systematic nature of these crimes risk being obscured by the daily headlines of war.

Final reflections

The forcible displacement, deportation, indoctrination and militarisation of children is not only a violation of their individual rights; it is an assault on an entire generation of children and a challenge to the principles of humanity that underpin international law. If left unchecked, it risks setting a precedent that children can be weaponised on mass in modern conflict with impunity.

This report has provided evidence that is both sobering and galvanising. It documents immense suffering, but it also points to avenues for justice and recovery. Children who have returned speak of their relief and their determination to rebuild their lives. Their voices remind us that even amid deliberate attempts to erase identity, resilience endures.

The international community now faces a choice. To act decisively is to defend not only the rights of Ukrainian children, but the global commitment that children in war are never legitimate targets, never pawns in geopolitical games, never resources for armies. To fail to act is to normalise one of the gravest child rights violations of our time.

The protection of children has long been recognised as a red line in international law. Russia has crossed that line. The task now falls to Ukraine and the international community, to international justice institutions, and to all who uphold the dignity of childhood to ensure that this crime does not stand - and that every child has the chance to return home, to heal, and to grow in freedom.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Recommendations

Recommendations to the United Nations (UN) & UN Human Rights Mechanisms

- The United Nations should establish a dedicated Special Rapporteur focused on the rights of children affected by armed conflict and occupation in Ukraine, providing sustained international attention and systematic documentation of violations.
- UN bodies including UNICEF, OHCHR, UNHCR, and IOM should scale up trauma-informed, cross-border reintegration programs that recognise the unique psychological impact of militarisation on child development, including specialised psychosocial assistance addressing identity confusion created by forced indoctrination.
- The UN should champion transitional justice frameworks that include child survivors in reparations, rehabilitation, and truth-telling mechanisms, acknowledging their distinct needs for healing, education support, and long-term psychological care extending beyond the immediate post-conflict period.

Recommendations to European Union (EU)

- The European Union must systematically include Ukrainian child deportations, transfers and militarisation in all EU-level human rights dialogues with Russia and potential Russian aligned states, coupled with targeted sanctions against individuals and institutions directly involved in these programs. The EU should make clear that such sanctions regimes will not be dropped until large scale repatriation efforts are undertaken by Russia.
- Ukraine's EU accession process should explicitly incorporate children's rights benchmarks addressing conflict-specific vulnerabilities. The adoption of the *acquis communautaire* must include enhanced victim protection aligned with the EU's anti-trafficking directive, child-friendly justice principles from the 2021 EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, and comprehensive frameworks for education continuity and trauma treatment.

- The EU should establish dedicated funding for national child recovery programs including mobile trauma-response units for rural and liberated areas, community-based mental health services addressing militarisation-specific impacts, and education continuity projects helping children reconnect with Ukrainian curricula and identity
- Children must be recognised as active stakeholders in Ukraine's recovery and peacebuilding. The EU should: establish child participation mechanisms in recovery planning, consistent with the Convention on the Rights of the Child; support youth-led initiatives in education, civic engagement, and peacebuilding, and; promote community healing and cultural identity programs to strengthen resilience.
- The EU should extend targeted sanctions to the entire supply and support chain, including suppliers of non-military equipment and services when they are effectively used in child militarisation, indoctrination, transfer or deportation programs (IT, communications, transport/logistics, insurance, payment services, advertising/media platforms, venue leasing).

Recommendations to Council of Europe

- GRETA and the Lanzarote Committee should develop thematic guidance addressing trafficking risks related to militarised child displacement, conflict-related sexual violence within military training contexts, and protection gaps in transnational child abduction cases.

Recommendations to International Criminal Court

- The International Criminal Court should apply Rome Statute definitions to investigate systematic forcible transfer of Ukrainian children, forced militarisation through indoctrination programs, denial of identity and access to Ukrainian education, and psychological torture inherent in military-focused re-education. Investigations should prioritise testimony from

returned children while ensuring their safety and psychological well-being.

- In addition to the articles already identified, request that the ICC Office of the Prosecutor assess additional legal characterisations, namely: (i) persecution as a crime against humanity (including on grounds of national or linguistic-cultural identity); (ii) the infliction of severe mental suffering as inhuman treatment/“other inhumane acts”; and (iii) the linkage of the “seamless upbringing/indoctrination” practice, as a matter of state policy, to the forcible alteration of a child’s identity (linguistic, cultural, civic), with an assessment of responsibility across the full chain of command, including the role of civilian institutions (education, youth, media).

Recommendations for the Government of Ukraine

- Ukraine should create a national reintegration program for children affected by occupation, providing long-term psychological, social, and educational support through evidence-based trauma interventions, mobile mental health units, and community care. The National Mental Health Programme must be strengthened to train child psychologists on war trauma, standardise assessment tools across institutions, and build referral systems from frontline agencies to specialist services. The government should appoint specialised prosecutors and judges trained in child protection and war crimes, provide comprehensive legal and psychosocial support to children as witnesses or victims, and establish forensic psychological examination protocols aligned with international standards for child-friendly justice.
- Establish a methodology to assess the impact of indoctrination on the psychological state of the child and design a formula to calculate the monetary equivalent of the damage caused, ensuring compensation within the International Register of Damage for crimes committed by the Russian Federation;
- Should expand the age continuum in recognising children as victims of deportation, forced displacement, or the risk of deportation. This includes individuals aged 18 to 23, provided that at the time of their deportation they were under 18 years of age.
- Education recovery efforts must prioritise rebuilding schools as safe, inclusive spaces for all children, including those repatriated from TOT or Russia. Reintegration programs should include language restoration and identity work, supported by teachers trained in post-trauma educational environments.
- Ukraine should support systematic collection of survivor testimonies and evidence of child-specific war crimes for use by the ICC, Ukrainian law enforcement, and international commissions of inquiry.

Recommendations for the UK Government

- Expand targeted sanctions against Russian and Belarusian officials, institutions, and organisations implicated in the deportation, indoctrination, and militarisation of children, including administrators of “re-education” camps and leaders of Yunarmiya and coordinate sanctions policy with allies in the EU, US, Canada, and G7 to ensure coherence and effectiveness.
- Extend targeted sanctions to the entire supply and support chain, including suppliers of non-military equipment and services when they are effectively used in child militarisation, indoctrination, transfer or deportation programs (IT, communications, transport/logistics, insurance, payment services, advertising/media platforms, venue leasing).
- Continue to provide UK financial, intelligence, and legal resources to strengthen investigation and prosecutions efforts at the International Criminal Court.
- Strengthen the Metropolitan Police War Crimes Unit with dedicated resources to collect testimony from child victims.
- Explore the use of universal jurisdiction to prosecute individuals responsible for grave breaches of international law where possible.
- Provide technical and financial support to Ukrainian prosecutors and civil society groups engaged in documenting unlawful transfers, forced adoptions, and militarisation practices.
- Lead efforts to establish a UN Special Rapporteur or monitoring mechanism focused on children in conflict in Ukraine.
- Use the UK’s position at the UN Security Council

and Human Rights Council to maintain sustained international attention on child deportations, despite Russian obstruction.

- Provide logistical and financial support for family tracing, safe return, and reintegration, including assistance with cross-border documentation and travel.
- Support trauma-informed teacher training and Ukrainian-language recovery programmes.
- Elevate the issue of child deportations and militarisation in UK foreign policy messaging as a clear “red line” violation of international law.
- Create special protection status for transferred Ukrainian children. Introduce dedicated immigration pathways and legal protections for Ukrainian children who have been forcibly transferred and subjected to forced passportisation, and wish to return to Ukraine or temporarily relocate to third countries, including simplified procedures for family reunification.

Wider Recommendations

- A comprehensive Multi-Stakeholder Action Plan covering international institutions, governments and NGOs should be developed covering health and trauma care, family tracing and reunification, education and identity restoration, and legal protection and monitoring. Children at greatest risk including those forcibly displaced, militarized, tortured, or orphaned should receive priority case management, cross-sectoral protection, and long-term psychoeducation support.
- Independent monitoring and evaluation of reintegration outcomes must be funded to track PTSD and recovery progress, social integration, educational re-entry, and resilience-building indicators, ensuring accountability and continuous improvement of support programs.

AUTHORS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was written by:

Rowan Allport

(Deputy Director,
Human Security Centre)

Julia Sachenko

(Anti-trafficking and Child Protection
Director, Save Ukraine)

Anna Bohdanova

(Psychologist, Save Ukraine)

Sasha Zadesenets

(Research Assistant,
Human Security Centre)

Kateryna Tsybenko

(Independent Researcher)

And edited by:

Hratche Koundarjian

(Head of Communications and
Campaigns, War Child UK)

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