

SICOLEN GENERATIONS

A Systematic Violation of Ukraine's Future

Megan Gittoes

Foreword:

Human history is rife with individual conflicts, arguments and insults that evolve into major horrific wars driven by ethnic and racial prejudice, religious zealotry, contrived and false assumptions over the jurisdiction of another's land. Without exception these pernicious events are driven by powerful, charismatic individuals whose respect for truth and honesty has been replaced with the certainty and righteousness of their cause. The drive for power and the disregard for other perspectives is a necessary attribute to fulfill the quest for power.

Disregard for the humanity of those that stand in their way is a hallmark of those that have led these quests for dominance. So it is with the current Russian regime whose leader exemplifies these nefarious characteristics.

Justifying slavery, mass forced migrations, coerced embracing of another culture or religion, tolerance for enormous disparities in individuals' ability to thrive and finally ethnic cleansing and genocide are all the outcomes of these events.

Fortunately, as the American Civil Rights leader Martin Luther King opined "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice". It will require an enormous commitment by all segments of Ukraine's society to maintain the direction of that arc for millions of citizens whose traumas inflicted on them impede their ability to return to lives and communities with a sense of well being and optimism. A recognition that a commitment to provide and implement strategies to allow healing will require an effort analogous to the fight to repel the Russian invasion. International help for this effort may not be commensurate with the need.

This report skillfully and systematically documents the pernicious human crimes inflicted on Ukraine by the Russian invasion. The physical destruction of the war is obvious and significant but can be remedied once there is a cessation of conflict, the psychological and emotional sequela to both children and adults are so extensive they will require decades of remedies well outside the scope of what has been implemented in any past conflict.

The psychological impact on soldiers who experience combat is well documented. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is pervasive amongst soldiers. Millions of citizens have been displaced from their homes and communities.

Children and adults have been preyed upon by criminals who take advantage of vulnerable refugees and force them into being trafficked as human commodities. Thousands of children have been kidnapped and taken from their parents and communities and required to either submit to giving up their familial and Ukrainian identities or being punished and subjected to egregious abuse. The upheaval of what was a "normal" life for the vast majority of Ukranians is extensive.

Bringing back a sense of security, enthusiasm and optimism for the future will require the commitment, creativity and intellectual power that has been the hallmark of Ukraine's history. The challenge is significant, but the resolve, energy and "grit" is so much a part of the Ukrainian identity.

Forward provided by Dr Trupin.

Professor at the University of Washington Medical School. He directs the Division of Public Behavioral Health and Justice Policy in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences. Developing and implementing evidence-based interventions for children with behavioral health disorders has been a focus of his career.

Author Biography:

Megan is an Associate Fellow at GLOBSEC and Director of Communications and Policy at a defence and foreign policy think tank in London, where she oversees strategic output and communications across both traditional and digital media.

She has a background in political communications and public affairs, having led the team of Rt Hon. Tobias Ellwood, former Chair of the House of Commons Defence Select Committee, and managed the public affairs function of a large corporate organisation.

As a Senior Aide to Rt Hon. Tobias Ellwood, Megan supported his work scrutinising the Ministry of Defence, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and the UK Government's broader security strategy from within his House of Commons office.

Megan has conducted field research in Ukraine several times since the start of the full-scale invasion in 2022. She previously launched a report in March 2024 on conflict-related sexual violence in contemporary proxywarfare.

Acknowledgements:

The Emile Foundation and Mariam Lambert for their logistical support in Ukraine, valuable insight and contacts to people in Ukraine and abroad, whose testimonies brought significant added value.

Deniz M. Dirisu, International OSINT consultant and co-founder of OSINT for Ukraine; Olena Glushenko, Head of United Actions Ukraine and Child Psychologist in Kherson; Kateryna Rashevska Legal expert for Regional Center for Human Rights (RCHR); The Ukraine Security and Cooperation Center; Joseph Jones OSINT Investigator at Paliscope; Tim Nelson Co-founder and CEO of Hope for Justice; and representatives from the Counter Trafficking Network.

Government bodies in Ukraine including but not limited to the Office of the Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights, Office of the Commissioner for Missing Persons and Office of the Prosecutor General.

Experts, professionals and all those who wished to remain anonymous for either their personal safety, privacy or for their employment security.

The families and guardians of forcibly transferred and deported children for sharing their stories and trusting Megan with this information.

Hannah Stephens, King's College London Masters postgraduate student for providing research assistance.

Executive Summary:

Russia's weaponization of population displacement and the deportation of children represents one of the most deliberate and devastating assaults on a civilian population in modern European history. Any future reconstruction of Ukraine will depend not only on infrastructure but on the restoration of its human capital to ensure long-term economic and social stability. Since 2014, Ukraine has endured the systematic deportation and forced assimilation of its children, practices that only gained significant international recognition in 2022. More recently, these actions have occurred alongside mass refugee movements, exposing millions to the risks of trafficking and exploitation. Far from being unintended consequences of war, these are core components of the Kremlin's hybrid warfare strategy, designed to weaken Ukraine's demographic resilience in what has become a protracted conflict.

International Humanitarian Law (IHL) has thus far been ineffective, fostering a culture of impunity. The private technology sector has made substantial strides in innovation by partnering with law enforcement to investigate these crimes, attempting to fill the gaps left by international institutions and diplomacy. More importantly, technology based solutions such as Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT), Artificial Intelligence (AI) and other specialised online platforms ensure that investigations into potential war crimes committed by the Kremlin and Russian forces remain active, focused on protecting civilians and bringing perpetrators to justice.

1. Ukraine's War-time and Recovery **Population**

Russia's hybrid war has deliberately targeted Ukraine's civilian population to create long-term demographic erosion and undermine post-war recovery. Attacks on civilian infrastructure, hospitals, and schools are designed to make Ukrainian regions uninhabitable, accelerating displacement and migration. This recognised tactic of the Kremlin - used notably in Syria and Libya - has drawn renewed warnings. In 2024, Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas cautioned that Putin is now weaponizing migration to destabilise Europe: "Their goal is to make conditions in Ukraine unbearable, creating migration pressures on Europe."

Ukraine's population has dropped from 41 million in 2021 to an estimated 31 million in

early 2025, including occupied territories - a decline of nearly 10 million people in three vears.

- Nearly 7 million Ukrainians have fled the country, with the majority now settled in EU host countries. Many displaced children have spent formative years abroad and may no longer remember life in Ukraine.
- At least 1.6 million children remain in Russianoccupied territories, where they are subjected to militarised camps, ideological indoctrination, and active conscription preparation. Over 500 schools are currently under Russian occupation
- In April 2023, Russia passed legislation requiring Ukrainians in occupied regions to accept Russian citizenship or risk being declared "stateless". A move that could separate families and strip parental rights.
- Ukraine's birth rate fell from 12.2 births per 1,000 in 2014 to 7.9 in 2021, with war-related displacement, increased mortality, and damage to the healthcare system driving a further collapse.

The long-term impact includes a reduced labour force, slowed economic recovery, and the fragmentation of Ukraine's cultural and familial cohesion - all outcomes aligned with Russia's strategic objectives.

2. Forced Deportation and **Assimilation of Ukrainian Children**

Since the launch of the full-scale invasion in 2022. Ukrainian authorities have confirmed at least 19.546 cases of forcibly transferred or deported children. While some claims bring estimates in the hundreds of thousands, the true scale remains unclear due to the deliberate erasure of records, falsified identities, and legal grey zones exploited by Russian authorities.

Children have been taken from state-run institutions, schools, and families in occupied territories, under cover of evacuation, medical treatment or "summer camps".

- Upon arrival in Russia or Belarus, many are reregistered as Russian citizens, renamed, and placed in state-sanctioned adoption networks.
- ➤ Testimony collected from Ukrainian legal guardians reveals Russia's obstruction of parental rights, refusal to cooperate with Ukrainian legal authorities, and reissuance of birth documents to conceal true origins.
- ► Testimony gathered for the report also reveal, parents and guardians face immense intimidation and questioning from Russian agents when travelling to bring their child home.

Open-source investigations have confirmed the presence of children listed on official federal adoption platforms as early as October 2022. OSINT analysis was used to track individuals via Russian VK groups promoting adoption, where potential parents expressed preferences for "war orphans" perceived to be physically and mentally healthier than institutionalised children. Some adoptive parents had previously fought in Chechnya or were linked to the Orthodox Church and Russian state-sponsored NGOs.

3. Educational Indoctrination and Militarisation

In occupied regions, Russia has rapidly deployed the "Crimean scenario", a blueprint for cultural erasure through educational control used as a test case in Crimea.

- Ukrainian curricula, textbooks and language instruction have been purged. Students are now taught distorted Russian history, celebrate Kremlin-approved holidays, and are frequently forbidden from speaking Ukrainian
- Specialised "cadet" classes and "Yunarmiya" youth units have been introduced in schools to militarise the student body. Some schools host military recruiters; others administer mandatory patriotic education and ideological compliance tests.
- ► Teachers are coerced into compliance or replaced - in some instances arrested and tortured. Parents refusing Russian schooling have faced threats of having their children removed and themselves facing the same fate.
- ► From the outset of its invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia intensified its 'Russification'

strategy on children, which has been underway since 2014.

One student described attending Russian school by day and secret Ukrainian online classes by night, a form of educational resistance increasingly difficult to sustain under surveillance. During the interview he also claimed education was pointed towards a war with NATO. In Kherson and Zaporizhzhia, the removal of Ukrainian schoolbooks and destruction of records was undertaken systematically after occupation.

4. Refugee Vulnerability and Human Trafficking

The displacement of more than 10 million Ukrainians, of whom 90% in the early waves were women and children, has created one of the largest refugee crises in Europe since WWII - and one of the most heavily exploited.

- Across Europe, particularly in Poland, Romania, and Moldova, trafficking networks have flourished amid gaps in border registration, fragmented legal systems, and the collapse of protection in war-torn zones.
- Despite widespread displacement from Ukraine, early humanitarian efforts focused on immediate relief, with minimal anti-trafficking infrastructure in place. High-risk transit hubs were largely unmonitored, enabling traffickers to operate unchecked.
- Although official data has yet to show a sharp rise in trafficking cases, frontline accounts and NGO interventions revealed frequent and severe exploitation attempts, suggesting significant underreporting and victim identification challenges.
- ▶ Established trafficking networks shifted operations to target Ukrainian refugees, especially women and children. Deceptive job adverts and coordinated "spotter" tactics were used to lure victims across borders with minimal resistance from authorities.
- The refugee crisis coincided with a drastic rise in demand for Ukrainian women in pornography and sexual services, further underscoring the scale of exploitation and linking online trends to real-world trafficking activity.

Findings highlight a significant disconnect between official trafficking figures and the lived realities

on the ground during the Ukrainian refugee crisis. Without robust, early-stage safeguards and consistent anti-trafficking oversight at transit points, vulnerable populations remain acutely exposed to exploitation.

5. Legal Impunity and the Failure of International Humanitarian Law

The international legal system has so far proven incapable of deterring - let alone reversing - the deportation and assimilation of Ukrainian children.

- ▶ The International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants in 2023 for Vladimir Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova for the unlawful deportation of children. Yet Russia's non-cooperation and UN permanent Security Council veto-wielding seat has made enforcement impossible.
- International humanitarian law lacks a clear mechanism for child repatriation. While Article 49 of the Geneva Convention prohibits deportation of occupied populations, its implementation is inconsistent and lacks an enforcement arm.

Even international aid organisations face obstacles. While neutral parties have facilitated some cross-border returns, these rely entirely on Russian permission and all sit at the mercy of diplomatic relations. Meanwhile, thousands of families in Ukraine remain without information, access or support.

6. Reintegration and Repatriation Challenges

The return of deported Ukrainian children is hampered not only by bureaucracy and propaganda, but by the psychological damage inflicted through forced re-education and militarisation

- Reports and first-hand accounts describe children returning from camps or institutions unable to speak Ukrainian, fearful of authorities, or exhibiting loyalty to their captors..
- Reunification cases often involve complex legal and diplomatic manoeuvring, as families are forced to travel through Belarus, Crimea or Russian checkpoints - often at great personal risk - some are placed under arrest and questioned.
- In the absence of an international standard, repatriation is ad hoc, slow, and traumatising

- with some children having spent over three years in Russian custody before being located.

Legal guardians interviewed for this report described feeling ignored and abandoned. This sense of abandonment is compounded by a lack of coordinated support upon return, leaving both children and their caregivers lost in a bureaucratic system

7. Strategic Implications

Demographic Warfare as Policy

Russia's deportation of children, dismantling of institutions, and exploitation of migration flows point to a deliberate strategy of demographic conquest. This is not about territory alone, but the erasure of Ukrainian nationhood

Children as Instruments of Hybrid War

The ideological reprogramming of children into "citizens" of the occupying power serves dual purposes: immediate control and long-term fragmentation. This generation is not just a casualty - it is the battleground as the Kremlin builds their forces of tomorrow using Ukrainian children.

Education as a Theatre of Occupation

Russia's takeover of schools and curricula constitutes cultural violence and identity theft on an international scale. What began in Crimea in 2014 has been expanded into a systemic occupation-era policy.

Legal Erosion and Western Paralysis

International law is being stress-tested and found wanting. Without enforcement, legal precedent, or child-specific recovery frameworks, the West is left relying on diplomacy in the face of crimes designed to exploit its delays. President Trump's rejection of Ukraine's NATO membership and embrace of a transactional peace removes key leverage. If the US withdraws as guarantor of rights, Europe must step into that role - especially for children trapped in occupied territories. Failure to meet the challenge will result in fighting what has been described as the "Big War" by experts.

Methodology:

This study employs a qualitative and multi-source research approach to examine the trafficking of Ukrainian refugees, the forcible transfer and deportation of Ukrainian children by the Russian Federation, and broader human security concerns in occupied territories. The methodology integrates key informant interviews, case study analysis, and document analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of these interrelated crises.

Data Collection Methods

- ► Key Informant Interviews (KIIs):
 - Conducted with professionals from NGOs, law enforcement, humanitarian organisations, and governmental agencies working on counter-trafficking, child protection, and human rights.
 - ► Reviewed documentation, video footage and collected online evidence from these sources from their own ground observations on events since 2014.
- ▶ Media and Online Content Analysis:
 - Reviewing news reports, investigative articles, and Russian propaganda on social media platforms.
- Document and Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT) Investigation and Analysis:
 - Similarly to media and online content analysis, the report gained insight from public data sources such as Russian state broadcast TV and radio, social media, and websites
 - ► In addition, advance use of OSINT was provided to this report by specialists.

Scope and Limitations

- The research examines events from 2014 to early 2025, focusing on the trafficking of Ukrainian refugees, the forced transfer and deportation of Ukrainian children by the Russian Federation, and the use of civilians in occupied territories as part of Russia's hybrid warfare tactics.
- Due to the clandestine nature of trafficking and child deportation, some cases remain undocumented or unverifiable, this report relied on information and developments that was available at the time of research.
- Access to occupied territories is restricted, necessitating reliance on testimonies from escapees, humanitarian organisations, and satellite imagery analysis.
- ► The study does not claim to quantify the full scale of these issues but rather looks to identify patterns, vulnerabilities, and potential state-backed mechanisms of abuse.

This methodology ensures a rigorous, multiperspective approach to investigating these grave human rights violations, contributing to evidencebased advocacy and policy recommendations.

On some occasions the identity of many key informant interviews remains confidential for either their personal safety, privacy or for their employment security. The transcripts and the identity are recorded separately and their provided evidence was corroborated.

Introduction:

Now in its third year, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has assumed the characteristics of a prolonged conflict. Eroding the enemy's resolve to continue fighting has become a central objective of the Russian Federation and President Vladimir Putin's military and non-military efforts. Russia has long deployed a compound of hybrid war strategies in its historic interference and aggression in Ukraine. This was heavily accelerated following the launch of the full-scale invasion on the 24th February 2022.2 Beyond the catastrophic human cost to the armed conflict, these instruments of Russian warfare have devastated the lives of countless Ukrainians and will shape International Humanitarian Law and global response to issues of human security permanently. Any future reconstruction of Ukraine will require a population to ensure economic and social stabilisation, a prospect that has been shattered by the ongoing refugee crisis, the isolation, assimilation, forcible transfer and deportation of Ukrainian children by the Russian Federation into Russia, Russian controlled territory and Belarus.

In February 2022 a refugee crisis began at levels not witnessed in Europe since the Second World War. As of January 2025 6,863,400 Ukrainian refugees were recorded globally, and an estimated 4 million others displaced internally within Ukraine.³ The news was flooded with stories of goodwill, charity and volunteers offering their time and resources at borders to help those fleeing the war. However, this resulted in nefarious actors exploiting the crisis and operating with relative impunity as Europe struggled to cope with the crisis. It is estimated that 90% of those who fled at the start of the war were women and children - the two most

vulnerable groups falling victim to rising rates of labour and sexual trafficking.4

Trafficking of refugees is not the only critical concern for Ukraine's population, the Ombudsman of Ukraine has reported to have identified just under 20 000 confirmed cases of unaccompanied Ukrainian children that have been forcibly deported or transferred by the Kremlin. Some estimates of this figure say it could be as high as 750 000.5 These children face forced Russian citizenship, placement into Russian families through coercive adoptions, forcibly stripped of Ukrainian culture and language and face barriers imposed to their reunification with their families and homeland. In doing so, the Russian state-orchestrated displacement, assimilation and brainwashing of these unaccompanied children and those in annexed Ukraine results in the complete forced erasure of their identity, making potential repatriation and reintegration complicated.6

Upon returning to the White House in 2025, President Donald Trump has pursued a transactional approach to negotiations with Russia disregarding Ukraine's sovereignty and the security of civilians and children living in occupied territories. His administration has ruled out Ukraine's NATO membership, dismissed the goal of restoring pre-2014 borders as "unrealistic," and threatened to suspend US military aid, weakening Ukraine's position in any future settlement.⁷ In February 2025 the proposed deal sought to force territorial concessions to Russia, demanded Ukraine's withdrawal from the Kursk region, and pressured President Volodymyr Zelensky to recognise Russia's sovereignty over occupied land.8 President Trump

- Oleksandr V. Danylyuk, "What Ukraine's Defeat Would Mean for the US, Europe and the World," RUSI, January 24, 2024, accessed December 12, 2024. https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/what-ukraines-defeat-would-mean-us-europe-and-world
- 2 Arsalan Bilal, "Russia's hybrid war against the West," NATO Review, April 26, 2024, accessed December 12, 2024, https://www.nato.int/docu/review/ articles/2024/04/26/russias-hybrid-war-against-the-west/index.html
- 3 UNHCR, "Ukraine Refugee Situation," Operational Data Portal, last modified February 19, 2025, https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine
- UN Women, "Rapid Gender Analysis of Ukraine," May 4 2022, https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2022/05/rapid-gender-analysis-of-ukraine
 - Bauer-Babef, Clara, "Trafic d'êtres humains : les réfugiés ukrainiens dans le piège des petites annonces en ligne." EURACTIV, last modfied August 25, $2023, \underline{https://www.euractiv.fr/section/sante/news/trafic-detres-humains-les-refugies-ukrainiens-dans-le-piege-des-petites-annonces-en-ligne/\\ Berger, \underline{https://www.euractiv.fr/section/sante/news/trafic-detres-humains-les-refugies-ukrainiens-dans-le-piege-des-petites-annonces-en-ligne/\\ \underline{https://www.euractiv.fr/section/sante/news/trafic-detres-humains-les-refugies-ukrainiens-dans-le-piege-des-petites-annonces-en-ligne/\\ \underline{https://www.euractiv.fr/section/sante/news/trafic-detres-humains-les-refugies-ukrainiens-dans-le-piege-des-petites-annonces-en-ligne/\\ \underline{https://www.euractiv.fr/section/sante/news/trafic-detres-humains-les-refugies-ukrainiens-dans-le-piege-des-petites-annonces-en-ligne/\\ \underline{https://www.euractiv.fr/section/sante/news/trafic-detres-humains-les-refugies-ukrainiens-dans-le-piege-des-petites-annonces-en-ligne/\\ \underline{https://www.euractiv.fr/section/sante/news/trafic-detres-humains-le-piege-des-petites-annonces-en-ligne/\\ \underline{https://www.euractiv.fr/section/sante/news/trafic-detres-humains-humains-le-piege-des-petites-annonces-en-ligne/\\ \underline{https://ww$ Miriam, "Human trafficking likely to increase as Ukraine war drags, groups warn," The Washington Post, May 10, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost. com/world/2022/05/10/human-trafficking-ukraine-war-russia-refugees/
- 5 "Children of War," last modified June 11 2024, https://childrenofwar.gov.ua/ $\underline{\text{https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2024/754442/EXPO_STU(2024)754442_EN.pdf.} \\ \underline{\text{https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2024/754442/EXPO_STU(2024)7544442_EN.pdf.} \\ \underline{\text{https://www.europarl.europa.eu$
- 6 Interfax-Ukraine, "Yermak discussed cooperation with the executive director of UNICEF to stop the deportation of Ukrainian children by the occupiers," April 25 2024, https://interfax.com.ua/news/general/906026.html
- BBC News. "Trump's Ukraine 'Plan': What Each Side Wants from a Peace Deal," February 14, 2025, accessed February 24, 2025, https://www.bbc. com/news/articles/crlkypydyn6o. Foy, Henry, and Felicia Schwartz, "Return to Pre-2014 Ukraine Borders 'Unrealistic', Says US Defence Secretary," Financial Times, February 12, 2025, accessed February 24, 2025, https://www.ft.com/content/8561c634-82c1-45b8-816c-4f23ba033bdd
- 8 Latschan, Thomas, "What Is Known of Donald Trump's 'peace Plan' for Ukraine?" Deutsche Welle, February 13, 2025, accessed February 24, 2025, https://www.dw.com/en/what-is-known-of-donald-trumps-peace-plan-for-ukraine/a-71598106

called for Russia's reinstatement into the G7, further legitimising diplomatic relations with Moscow while signaling a retreat from Western commitments to Ukraine's defence.⁹ By ceding critical leverage, Washington left the future of Ukraine's most vulnerable - especially children under occupation - at the mercy of an occupying force. Ceding territory must be understood in these terms.

Ukraine's story highlights the complex and stark impacts warfare can have on a society outside of the wider armed conflict. Not only must Ukraine contend with defending its sovereignty but it must also contend with the challenges that arrive with peace. Both of the crises outlined in this report have been weaponised and in instances, orchestrated by the Kremlin in Ukraine since 2014. They only received formal recognition from the international community following the full-scale invasion in 2022.10 International Humanitarian Law (IHL) has thus far been ineffective, fostering a culture of impunity. The private technology sector has made substantial strides in innovation by partnering with law enforcement to investigate these crimes, attempting to fill the gaps left by international institutions and diplomacy. More importantly, technology based solutions such as Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT), Artificial Intelligence (AI) and other specialised online platforms ensure that investigations into potential war crimes committed by the Kremlin and Russian forces remain active, focused on protecting civilians and bringing perpetrators to justice.

⁹ Samuels, Brett, "Trump says he wants Russia back in the G7," *The Hill,* February 13, 2025, accessed February 24, 2025, https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/5143894-trump-russia-g7-reinstatement/

loffe, Yulia, and Andreas Umland, "Forcible Transfer and Deportation of Ukrainian Children: Responses and Accountability Measures," European Parliament: Directorate General for External Policies of the Union (January 2024): 27, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2024/754442/EXPO_STU(2024)754442_EN.pdf

Demographic Warfare and Ukraine's Wartime **Population Decline:**

Any assessment of the war in Ukraine and the resulting humanitarian crises must acknowledge the complex and multifaceted challenges the nation faces in its recovery and the ways at which it has been fragmented. The future reconstruction of Ukraine will be severely hindered by the Russian Federation's deliberate targeting and exploitation of civilians as part of its hybrid warfare tactics. Russia's strategy of weaponising migration, eroding Ukraine's population, targeting civilian infrastructure, and forcibly assimilating Ukrainian children are just some of the many compounded tools deployed by the Kremlin in its war of aggression against Ukraine now surpassing 10 years.

According to the UNHCR, as of December 2024, over 6 million people have fled Ukraine across Europe, with the majority going to neighbouring EU countries: 993 795 (15.77%) to Poland, 177 715 (2.82%) to Romania, 61 470 (<1%) to Hungary, 389 830 (6.18%) to Czech Republic, 132 120 (2.1%) to Slovakia and 135 860 (2.16%) to Moldova. Now 3 years on from the start of the refugee crisis many have settled in their new host-countries, with some children likely no longer having recollections of their lives in Ukraine. The decision to move back in the event of victory will be a complicated one for anyone who fled. As of early 2025, Ukraine's population is estimated

to be around 31 million, including in the territories occupied by Russia. In contrast, before the full-scale war in 2021, the population stood at approximately 41 million, marking a decline of about 10 million people over three years.12

According to the Ukrainian government, three years after Russia's full-scale invasion - and eleven years since the annexation of Crimea and parts of Luhansk and Donetsk - an estimated nearly 6 million Ukrainians, including 1.6 million children, remain in Russian-controlled areas.¹³ Over 500 Ukrainian schools reportedly remain under Russian occupation.14 These figures reflect the population of four regions illegally annexed by Moscow - Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia, along with the Crimean peninsula - Together, these territories make up nearly 20% of Ukraine's internationally recognised territory. An area larger than Hungary or Portugal.¹⁵ In April 2023, President Putin signed new legislation stipulating that residents who have not obtained Russian citizenship by July 2024 would be classified as "foreigners or stateless persons". Those who do not comply face worsening living conditions under occupation including the potential loss of their children, who could then be vulnerable to being transferred or deported into Russia.¹⁶ Most alarmingly, Daria Zarivna, Advisor to the Head of the

UNHCR, "Ukraine Refugee Situation," Operational Data Portal, last modified February 19, 2025, https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine

¹² Visit Ukraine Today, "How many people live in Ukraine now, and how has the population changed since the outbreak of full-scale war?" February $2,\,2025,\,accessed\,\,Februrary\,\,20,\,2025,\,\underline{https://visitukraine.today/blog/5576/how-many-people-live-in-ukraine-now-and-how-has-the-population$ changed-since-the-outbreak-of-full-scale-war?srsltid=AfmBOorupPVslvIJpf9Rh4ecoqsHxAYRArmte1Jcuq-2CUepnQrc0T37#demoqraphic-reali-like and the state of the stateties-in-2025-how-many-people-live-in-ukraine

¹³ Beketova, Elina, "Behind the Lines: Russia's Struggle to Colonize Ukraine," CEPA, February 20, 2025, https://cepa.org/article/behind-the-lines-russiasstruggle-to-colonize-ukraine/

Novikova, Victoria, Antipenko, Ivan, "Occupation of education. How Russia distorts the consciousness of Ukrainian children in the Kherson region," The Reckoning Project, September 2, 2024, accessed May 9, 2025, https://life.pravda.com.ua/society/okupaciya-osviti-yak-rosiya-spotvoryuye-svidomist-ukrajinskih-ditey-na-hersonshchini-303445/

¹⁵ Bowler, Emiliano Bos et al., "Russification in Occupied Ukraine," Eurovision News, November 16 2023, https://investigations.news-exchange.ebu.ch/ russification-in-occupied-ukraine/

¹⁶ Rashevska, Kateryna (legal expert for Regional Center for Human Rights (RCHR)), interview with author, August 5 2024.

Office of the President and COO of Bring Kids Back UA reported that Over 1.6 million Ukrainian children are still trapped in Russian-occupied territories, where they are forced into a sprawling network of militarized camps aimed at conditioning them for combat in a potential future European war. Although the timeline for such a conflict remains unclear, Russia has already begun active conscription from Ukrainian children since 2014.¹⁷

Historical examples illustrate the challenges Ukraine may face in rebuilding its population and economy. During the 1990s, Bosnia and Herzegovina saw its birth rate decline by approximately 50% during the war.¹⁸ This decline was driven by a rise in perinatal and maternal mortality, resulting from damaged healthcare infrastructure, inadequate access to medical services, and the loss of healthcare professionals to emigration or combat roles.¹⁹ These historical precedents highlight how the destruction of health systems and loss of reproductive-age populations can lead to generational impacts on national recovery. As Ukraine grapples with these challenges, integrating lessons from past conflicts into reconstruction efforts will be essential to address the immediate demographic crisis and foster long-term resilience and recovery.

The Russian Federation is well aware of this dynamic between conflict and citizens and has long weaponised panic and displacement as part of its hybrid warfare tactics. Forcing citizens to flee, spreading fear, and undermining law and order are deliberate attempts to destabilise and weaken Ukraine.²⁰ In May 2024, Kaja Kallas the Estonian Prime Minister stated that Vladimir Putin aims to exploit the threat of mass migration to divide and destabilise Europe, as Ukraine's supporters increasingly struggle politically sustaining a united front against Russia.²¹

"Our adversaries understand that migration is a weak spot for us," ... "Their goal is to make conditions in Ukraine unbearable, creating migration pressures on Europe – and that is exactly what they are doing."

Evidence of this can be noted through Russia's attacks on Ukraine's civilian infrastructure including, but not limited to schools, critical energy infrastructure and hospitals.²² The use of migration as a hybrid warfare tool has become a recurrent tactic utilised by the Russian government to destabilise the West and Ukraine, with evidence existing across multiple regions. From the Middle East to Africa, Russia's military activities reveal a pattern of engineered migration, seen prominently in its targeting of civilians in Syria in 2016.²³

Data from the State Statistics Service of Ukraine shows the national birth rate decreased from 12.2 births per 1,000 people in 2014 to just 7.9 births in 2021, indicating a notable decline even before the invasion.²⁴ The war has further worsened this situation by increasing mortality rates, especially among men of reproductive age.²⁵ Decreased birth rates, exacerbated by increased mortality rates in conjunction with the radicalisation and assimilation of Ukrainian children by Moscow all point to a demographic shift that will hinder the rebuilding of Ukraine. A reduced population growth rate limits the labour force and economic productivity essential for recovery and development.²⁶ Addressing these challenges will be essential to ensuring Ukraine's resilience, sovereignty, and sustainable recovery in the aftermath of war.

Bring Kids Back UA (@Bringkidsback_ua), "If we don't stop Putin now, he won't stop at Ukraine," Instagram, February 11 2025, accessed February 18, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DF7aSvVs6n0/?img_index=2&igsh=MTBnaHZ0MG93ZDVyNg%3D%3D

Skokić, Fahrija, Selma Muratović and Gordana Radoja, "Perinatal and Maternal Outcomes in Tuzla Canton during the 1992-1995 War in Bosnia and Herzegovina." Croatian Medical Journal 47, no. 5 (October 16, 2006): 718, https://hrcak.srce.hr/4741

¹⁹ lbid, 715, https://hrcak.srce.hr/4741

Zavershinskaia, Polina, "State's Legitimisation of Violence through Strategic Narration: How the Kremlin Justified the Russian Invasion of Ukraine," *The International Spectator* 59, no. (2024): 18–36. doi:10.1080/03932729.2024.2327492

Wintour, Patrick, "Putin Seeking to Weaponise Threat of Mass Migration, Warns Estonian PM," *The Guardian*, May 17, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/may/17/putin-is-seeking-to-weaponise-threat-of-ukraine-mass-migration-says-estonian-pm

²² The Guardian, "Ukraine War Briefing: Day of Mourning in Dnipro after Russian Attack on Schools and Hospitals," July 4, 2024, accessed December 12, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jul/04/ukraine-war-briefing-day-of-mourning-in-dnipro-after-russian-attack-on-schools-and-hospitals

Amnesty International, "Russia/Ukraine: Latest Massive Missile Strike on Critical Infrastructure Is a War Crime," November 28, 2024, accessed December 12, 2024, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/11/russia-ukraine-latest-massive-missile-strike-on-critical-infrastructure-is-a-war-crime/

²³ Seely, Dr Robert MBE (author of The New Total War), interview with author, November 16 2024.

^{24 &}quot;Data Bank | State Statistics Service of Ukraine," n.d., https://stat.gov.ua/en/explorer?urn=SSSU%3ADF_DEMOGRAPHICS_OF_ENTERPRIS-ES%286.0.0%29&filter=BIRTH_RATE.%2A.%2A.%2A.

²⁵ Gryshchenko, Mykola, Valentyn Parashchuk, and Christophe Blockeel, "The Impact of War on Reproductive Medicine in Ukraine," Reproductive Biomedicine Online 47, no. 4 (July 22, 2023): 2, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rbmo.2023.103306

Reuters, "Ukraine's Economic Growth to Slow to 2.7% in 2025, Says Deputy Economy Minister," January 16, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/markets/europe/ukraines-economic-growth-slow-27-2025-says-deputy-economy-minister-2025-01-16/

The Forcible Transfer and Deportation of **Ukrainian Children:**

Children in occupied territories of Ukraine are being forcibly deported and transferred to Russia. Belarus and Russian controlled territory, and in many cases face adoption into Russian families. As of 15 May 2024, the Ombudsman of Ukraine reported at least 19 546 children that have been forcibly transferred and deported in Ukraine by the Russian Federation. This figure is somewhat contested. While some estimates and reports have indicated numbers in the hundred of thousands there is significant disparity in confirmed figures as tracing and confirming children's identities is by design, full of complexities. At the time of interview with Special Representatives of the Office of the Ukrainian Parliamentary Commissioner for Human Rights in July 2024 only around 800 children had been returned.²⁷ Reports from November 2024 state roughly 1012 children have been returned from Russia and occupied territories of Ukraine.²⁸ The transfer and deportation of Ukrainian children is often concealed behind more benign-sounding activities such as vacation, education or medical treatment.²⁹

The Russian Federation is creating a long-term fragmented future generation of Ukrainians. These children are placed with Russian families, attend

Russian schools, and are prohibited from speaking Ukrainian.30 Those within Russian controlled territories are compelled to take Russian citizenship, subjected to intense propaganda re-education, and often enlisted into the Russian Youth Army.31 When placed under forced adoption into Russian families they're issued new documentation - including passports and birth certificates - with altered personal identification.³² Many of those forcibly deported into Russia reside in camps promoted as 'integration programs.'33 Russia claims the children do not have parents or quardians, and state media propagates this as an act of generosity.³⁴ Although Ukraine has high levels of child institutionalisation with around 100,000 children recorded in institutions just months before the full-scale invasion - over 90 percent of these children have at least one living parent. This includes those placed in infant homes for children aged 0 to 4 years.³⁵ Many cases of deportation or transferred children pertain to children without parental care in institutions located in occupied territory and while this is significant, these were categorically not the only children at risk. In addition, Russian Federation forces deployed multiple tactics such as, separating pro-Ukrainian parents from their children, seizing children

Special Representatives of the Ukrainian Parliamentary Commissioner for Human Rights (Kyiv), interview with author, July 25 2024.

RBC-Ukraine, "Number of Children Russia Deported since Start of Full-Scale War, Ombudsman Reveals," November 20, 2024, https://newsukraine.rbc. 28 <u>ua/news/number-of-children-russia-deported-since-1732097285.html</u>

²⁹ Bring Kids Back UA (@Bringkidsback_ua), Instagram, accessed May 9th 2025. https://www.instagram.com/p/DJWbYgEMeNL/?img_index=1&igsh=czdiaDc1aWtqMzJt

loffe, Yulia, and Andreas Umland, "Forcible Transfer and Deportation of Ukrainian Children; Responses and Accountability Measures," European Parliament: Directorate General for External Policies of the Union (January 2024): 14, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2024/754442/ EXPO_STU(2024)754442_EN.pdf

³¹

[&]quot;Decree of the President of the Russian Federation No. 11: 'On the definition of certain categories of foreign citizens and stateless persons who have the right to apply for admission to citizenship of the Russian Federation," January 4, 2024, http://actual.pravo.gov.ru/content/content.html#pnum=0001202401040003

³³ loffe, Yulia, and Andreas Umland, "Forcible Transfer and Deportation of Ukrainian Children: Responses and Accountability Measures," European Parliament: Directorate General for External Policies of the Union (January 2024): 31, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2024/754442/ EXPO_STU(2024)754442_EN.pdf

³⁴ Ankel, Sophia, "Why is Russia kidnapping Ukrainian children?" ITVX, February 25, 2025, https://www.itv.com/news/2024-02-23/why-is-russia-kidnapping-ukrainian-children

³⁵ Hope and Homes for Children et al., "A worrisome U-turn on ending the institutionalisation of children in Ukraine," October 2021, accessed February 1 2025, https://eurochild.org/uploads/2021/10/Joint-Statement_Care-reform-in-Ukraine_October-2021.pdf

from schools, and offering to keep children safe temporarily from the war in summer camps.³⁶

This Russian Federation policy has been taking place in occupied regions since 2014 following the Russian annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and Eastern Donbas. A programme called "The Train of Hope - Crimea" was carried out under Russian non-governmental organisations in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea.³⁷ Article 21 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child stipulates that member states which recognise or permit the system of adoption must ensure that there is approval of a relevant public authority.³⁸ At least 1000 children from the occupied Crimean Peninsula were displaced and sent to Russia to begin the radicalisation process and adoption prior to the full-scale invasion.³⁹ This method of Russian Hybrid warfare was only recognised following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Recognising the implications of this crime on the 17th March 2023 Pre-Trial Chamber II of the the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued arrest warrants for both Mr Vladirmirovich Putin, President of the Russian Federation and Ms Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova the Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights in the Russian Federation.

Mr Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, born on 7 October 1952, President of the Russian Federation, is allegedly responsible for the war crime of unlawful deportation of population (children) and that of unlawful transfer of population (children) from occupied areas of Ukraine to the Russian Federation (under articles 8(2)(a)(vii) and 8(2)(b)(viii) of the Rome Statute). The crimes were allegedly committed in Ukrainian occupied territory at least from 24 February 2022. There are reasonable grounds to believe that Mr Putin bears individual criminal responsibility for the aforementioned crimes, (i) for having committed the acts directly, jointly with others and/ or through others (article 25(3)(a) of the Rome Statute), and (ii) for his failure to exercise control properly over civilian and military subordinates

who committed the acts, or allowed for their commission, and who were under his effective authority and control, pursuant to superior responsibility (article 28(b) of the Rome Statute).

Ms Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova, born on 25 October 1984, Commissioner for Children's Rights in the Office of the President of the Russian Federation, is allegedly responsible for the war crime of unlawful deportation of population (children) and that of unlawful transfer of population (children) from occupied areas of Ukraine to the Russian Federation (under articles 8(2) (a)(vii) and 8(2)(b)(viii) of the Rome Statute). The crimes were allegedly committed in Ukrainian occupied territory at least from 24 February 2022. There are reasonable grounds to believe that Ms Lvova-Belova bears individual criminal responsibility for the aforementioned crimes, for having committed the acts directly, jointly with others and/or through others (article 25(3)(a) of the Rome Statute).40

Russia's own demographic crisis, exacerbated by falling birth rates and high male mortality - worsened by war losses - poses a strategic challenge for the Kremlin. With the population projected to shrink by 17% in 50 years, demographic growth is noted as a national priority. New federal programmes are being implemented, interdepartmental collaboration is being strengthened, and conferences have been organised to tackle the issue. Russia has compiled a registry of eligible Russian families for Ukrainian children and provides financial incentives for those families - offering up to \$1,000 for a child with disabilities.41 By placing Ukrainian children with Russian families, indoctrinating them, and training them for military service, Russia is undertaking forced assimilation and a potential future mobilisation pool. Legal experts have attributed this as constituting a crime with elements of genocide. 42

Demonstrating the propagation of adopted Ukrainian children are the key figures at the centre of the policy. Maria Lvova-Belova, the Commissioner for Children's Rights in the Office of the President of the Russian Federation herself adopted a child

Uehling, Greta, "Inside Russia's Campaign to Steal and Indoctrinate Ukrainian Children," SAPIENS, July 2, 2024, accessed February 2, 2024, https://www.sapiens.org/culture/russia-stealing-ukraine-children-genocide/

Embassy of Ukraine to Ireland, "On illegal adoption of the orphaned children of Ukrainian nationality in Crimea," October 17 2014, https://ireland.mfa. gov.ua/en/news/2410-komentar-mzs-shhodo-protipravnogo-usinovlennya-ditej-gromadyan-ukrajini-na-teritoriji-krimu

UN General Assembly, Convention on the Rights of the Child, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 1577 (November 20 1989): 3, https://www.refworld.org/legal/agreements/unga/1989/en/18815

³⁹ Rashevska, Kateryna (legal expert for Regional Center for Human Rights (RCHR)), interview with author, August 5 2024.

International Criminal Court, "Situation in Ukraine: ICC Judges Issue Arrest Warrants against Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin and Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova," March 17, 2023, https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/situation-ukraine-icc-judges-issue-arrest-warrants-against-vladimir-vladimirovich-putin-and.

⁴¹ Deeb, Sarah El, Anastasiia Shvets, Elizaveta Tiina, "How Moscow grabs Ukrainian children and makes them Russian," *The Telegraph*, March 17, 2023, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2023/03/17/ukraine-children-adopted-transfer-russia-victims-war/

Rashevska, Kateryna, "Special Demographic Operation: Ukrainian Children for Russia," Centrum Balticum, no. 1 (February 2024), <a href="https://www.centrum-balticum.org/en/publications/baltic_rim_economies_1_2024_-_ukraines_integration_to_west/kateryna_rashevska_special_demographic_operation_ukrainian_children_for_russia

from Mariupol. 43 Sergey Mironov, 70, leader of a Russian political party and currently under UK and EU sanctions, adopted a two-year-old girl reportedly removed from Kherson. The child, originally named Margarita, was among 48 children who disappeared from the Kherson Regional Children's Home during Russian occupation. Within days of her hospital discharge, staff were told to prepare her for transfer. She was then removed from the region and taken to Russia. Russian records show her identity was changed to Marina Mironova, with a new place of birth listed as Podolsk.44

Darina Riepina, the Ukrainian legal guardian of Margarita and her sister Anna, only learned of the adoption in 2023. Her initial response was relief that Margarita was alive, having long feared the worst following reports of widespread trafficking during the occupation.⁴⁵ Researchers working on cases of deported and transferred Ukrainian children confirmed that Margarita's identity changed, and documents altered in Russia. 46 Assisted by investigators, Darina appealed to Ukrainian authorities for help. But the situation remains unresolved. Margarita has not been seen since a televised segment aired in Ukraine, where video footage identified her in the care of Mironov's family. The physical resemblance to her sister was immediately evident, but Darina reports authorities in Russia have refused even basic cooperation, including requests for a DNA test.

It was referenced at the United Nations, where Ukrainian officials presented evidence of the altered documents in front of Russian diplomats. The case, now in the international spotlight, has created immense anxiety for Darina who was without support until May 2024 when she reached out to the Emile Foundation, who she reports now offer assistance and security for her and her children. She continues to press for Margarita's safe return but feels abandoned and powerless with the risks being compounded by the identities of those involved. Her family requires urgent protective measures. Darina also expressed fear for another child taken from

the home at the same time as Margarita, whose fate remains unknown.47

The Russian Federation in its propaganda of this policy narrates that they are saving Ukrainian children who do not have parents or guardians. 48 A notable case is the Oleshky Specialised Boarding School. A first-hand account of the occupation of this school demonstrates the state orchestrated policy of assimilation of Ukrainian children. The Specialised Boarding School, once regarded as one of Ukraine's leading institutions for children with special needs, was located in what is now the liberated Kherson Oblast. The fate of its former residents - some of whom remain unaccounted for - illustrates that persons with disabilities, regardless of age, have found themselves among the most exposed and unprotected.49

Vadym Reutsky, a teacher at the school, recounted the extraordinary challenges faced by staff and children during the first months of the Russian invasion. In the initial hours of the invasion, there was no clear instruction from the Ukrainian authorities. The staff at the school. acting on instinct, began stockpiling medicine and food, uncertain of what lay ahead. By the afternoon, military activity escalated rapidly. Explosions began, including strikes on the nearby Antonivka Road Bridge, and Russian soldiers were seen near the school from the very first day. The staff quickly relocated the children from the upper floors to the basement, which was not equipped for long-term habitation. They worked urgently to make the underground space safe and suitable for the children.

He reported that a single food delivery was arranged in early March through contacts who managed to pass through numerous Russian checkpoints. At each stop, Russian soldiers who themselves were without supplies and hungry - are reported to have confiscated portions of the humanitarian aid and by the time supplies reached the school they received only half of the packages. No further official deliveries followed. From that point on, the school depended entirely on the goodwill of the local community,

⁴³ Vasilyeva, Nataliya, 'Putin's 'child-snatcher' and the mystery of her adopted Mariupol boy,' The Telegraph, July 19, 2023, accessed May 16, 2025, $\underline{\text{https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2023/07/19/maria-lvova-belova-adopted-mariupol-boy-philip-golovnya/lineariupol-bo$

⁴⁴ Andersson, Hilary, 'Missing Ukrainian child traced to Putin ally,' BBC, November 23, 2023, accessed May 3, 2025, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/ world-europe-67488646

⁴⁵ Darina Riepina (guardian of Ukrainian child adopted into Russian family) interview with author, May 2 2025.

Andersson, Hilary, 'Missing Ukrainian child traced to Putin ally,' BBC, November 23, 2023, accessed May 3, 2025, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/ 46 world-europe-67488646

⁴⁷ Author Interview with Darina Riepina a guardian of Ukrainian child adopted into Russian family, May 2nd 2025

⁴⁸ Uehling, Greta, "Inside Russia's Campaign to Steal and Indoctrinate Ukrainian Children," SAPIENS, July 2, 2024, accessed February 2, 2024, https:// www.sapiens.org/culture/russia-stealing-ukraine-children-genocide/

⁴⁹ Novikova, Viktoriia, Sirobab, Nataliia, Antypenko, Ivan, 'In a Propaganda Move, Russia Targeted and Deported Disabled Children From Ukraine,' New Lines Magazine, October 22, 2024 accessed May 2, 2025, https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/in-a-propaganda-move-russia-targeted-and-deporteddisabled-children-from-ukraine/

who volunteered what food and medicine they could spare.

Russian soldiers began making periodic visits to the school, ostensibly to observe conditions but often using the opportunity to mock and intimidate the staff. They warned the Ukrainian director that failure to cooperate would lead to consequences. She steadfastly refused to collaborate. Over the summer, the Russians continued to visit and removed the Ukrainian flag and tore down children's artwork from the walls. Despite increasing pressure, the school leadership resisted seeking aid from occupying forces, knowing that Russian officials were waiting for such dependency to be established.

Vadym relays that in October 2022, Russian-affiliated doctors from Crimea visited the school under the guise of inspections. Shortly afterwards, 16 children were taken to a psychiatric hospital in Crimea. In November, another group of 12 children was removed. The teacher was informed on 4 November that more children would be moved, with the final group taken on 11 November. In each case, the stated reason was that the children were being taken on a recreational holiday. This took place just before Kherson's liberation. As Ukrainian forces advanced, the Russians began relocating residents to areas still under occupation.

The emotional toll of these events is profound. The children were his family, and he was powerless to help them. He continues to advocate for them but feels deep anguish and helplessness. He spoke of the pain of hearing how children were made to sing propaganda songs and recite pro-Russian slogans.

"This boarding school for me was my whole life ... And they took it from me." 50

Additionally, the Russian Federation's claim that the transferred and deported children were without parental care or guardianship is contradicted by numerous cases in which parents and families are actively fighting for the return of their children.⁵¹

Hanna Zamyshliaieva clung to short, infrequent phone calls from staff at the Oleshky Boarding School, where her son, 22-year-old Anton Volkovych, had lived for eight years. Diagnosed early with a neurological disorder, he used a wheelchair and required constant care. The school, one of Ukraine's best facilities

for disabled children and young adults, was a lifeline for Anton. But following Russia's full-scale invasion, the institution was cut off, its staff and residents trapped under occupation. As Russian forces severed access to Ukrainian phone networks, contact became patchy. By autumn 2022, Zamyshliaieva had lost communication entirely. Then, in early November the same year, a medical worker managed to inform her that Anton had been transferred to another occupied city by Russian forces - without her knowledge or consent.

Nearly three years on, she still has no idea where he is. She lives in the torment of uncertainty and blame, desperate for answers and the safe return of her son. Her last contact was in September 2022, however when Russian agents moved residents from Oleshky to Skadovsk, the Ukrainian Ombudsman's office went silent. She once visited Anton frequently and remained in close contact with the medical staff. Even while living at the school, he was never without family support. Now, she knows nothing.

Anton's condition was severe, fluid pressure in his brain caused seizures and required constant monitoring and tightly controlled medication. His health had already been deteriorating before the invasion, with dangerously high blood pressure. She describes herself now as empty, worn down by the silence. She cannot cry anymore, her grief has hardened into anger and she cannot understand why she hears nothing. No one, she says, wants to speak with her about her son. She chose Oleshky because it offered the best care and now, she has no idea where he is or if he is alive.

Despite never being contacted by the Ombudsman, she took the initiative to submit a formal request. After a brief follow-up to confirm details, the line went quiet again. Eventually, she was told that Russian authorities had reported Anton's condition was too fragile for transfer. She was told she needed to appear in person to make a decision, but only alone. But she's not a medical expert and independent evaluation has not been provided.

She feels abandoned. That unless she keeps pressing, nothing will happen. She calls for more proactive communication between officials and families, and protection from the stigma faced

Vadym Reutsky (Teacher from Oleshky Boarding School) interview with author, May 2 2025.

⁵¹ Uehling, Greta, "Inside Russia's Campaign to Steal and Indoctrinate Ukrainian Children," SAPIENS, July 2, 2024, accessed February 2, 2024, https://www.sapiens.org/culture/russia-stealing-ukraine-children-genocide/

by parents of deported children. Sometimes it is assumed these families collaborated with occupying forces and abandoned their children. She hopes her story might offer strength to others. She wants a dedicated authority to manage occupied schools, so staff and students can return together. And she believes every such institution should have a named official actively searching for their missing children.⁵²

Another example was presented to this research from the foster parents of children previously based near the Oleshky school. They took on guardianship after the children's biological mother was legally deprived of her parental rights. Five years ago, while giving birth to her third child, she agreed that all three siblings should be raised together under the care of this family. At the time, she was still formally barred from regaining custody:

The youngest child, born with a disability affecting his legs, remained at the Oleshky institution to receive specialist care. As the war escalated, the foster parents evacuated - facing immediate threats to the children in their care, including a pregnant teenage girl. But they remained determined to reunite the siblings.

Legally, they are now recognised as guardians of the youngest boy. Before Kherson's liberation, they learned that he had been transferred to a facility in occupied Skadovsk. A Russian administrator contacted them roughly 18 months ago, but since then, there has been complete silence. They were told they could travel to Skadovsk, but not only was this deeply unsafe, the suggestion itself they described as shocking.

During their own escape from Kherson, they endured 63 checkpoints. The father, Oleksandr, had his passport confiscated and was stripped by Russian forces, only spared further abuse, he believes, because he was travelling with children. At one point, the family was forced to sleep in the basement of a factory. The psychological toll on the children was severe. He said he could not travel into occupied territory to recover the youngest boy, having heard of Ukrainian parents who attempted the same and were imprisoned. He believes Russia's strategy around Ukrainian children is political and profit-driven, explaining the deliberate obstacles put in place.

Since returning to Ukrainian-controlled territory, the family has been relocated four times as internally displaced persons. Previous condi-

tions were often unfit for children, they shared single rooms, slept on floors, and lived in fear. Only now, after several moves, have they found stability. The family speaks with quiet relief. The children in their care now have space to play, food to eat, and silence instead of sirens. Hundreds of bombs once rained down daily on their city, now they feel a sense of safety.

Foreign Adoptions and Citizenship:

From the outset of its invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia intensified its 'Russification' strategy, which has been underway since 2014.53 The Kremlin issued Resolution No. 348, aimed at the integration of Ukrainian children from the so-called "Luhansk People's Republic" and "Donetsk People's Republic" into Russian society, and the Ministry of Education's Decree No. AB-631/05, aimed at identifying and re-educating deported children with poor Russian language skills in the annexed Ukrainian Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts.⁵⁴ These measures promote loyalty to the Russian state. In May 2022, Moscow issued Decrees 183 and 187, easing the process for Ukrainian children specifically to be granted Russian citizenship in as little as 90 days, rather than the previous period of up to five years.⁵⁵ In December 2022, Putin signed another decree, allowing caregivers in occupied territories to renounce the Ukrainian citizenship of children in their custody.56

Less than a year into the full-scale invasion, a formalised system of adoption was established through a federal registry comprised of suitable Russian families ready to take in Ukrainian children.⁵⁷ The first profiles of 'evacuated children' appeared on the federal database in October 2022, only a week after Russia annexed the Donetsk. Luhansk. Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions of Ukraine.58 From October to November 2022, 263 profiles were entered into this database, in which half of these cases, a child was identified as without parental care

by decision of the court.⁵⁹ By 2023, the number of children undergoing this forced assimilation grew, with the register adding 14 more cases, despite international concern over the illegality of such actions constituting war crimes under international law.60

A decree issued on January 4th 2024 further expedited the adoption and citizenship process of Ukrainian children. Under this decree, orphans and children who fell within the category of Ukrainian citizens without parental care could acquire Russian citizenship by personal decision of the President of the Russian Federation. These measures sought to bypass previous bureaucratic measures. During interview, Kateryna Rashevska, a legal expert at the Regional Center for Human Rights in Kyiv, confirmed that the first stage of Russia's 'passportisation' of Ukrainian children was complete. 61 These children, having been granted Russian citizenship, were now being placed in boarding schools or adopted by Russian families. The Center reports it has identified around 70 adoptive parents, many of whom are teachers, military personnel - including those that fought in the Chechen wars - or individuals with ties to Russia's cultural, religious, and non-governmental organisation sectors.62

Alongside the adoption and citizenship processes, Ukrainian children are subjected to further assimilation through Russian summer camps designed to instill loyalty to Russia and sever their

⁵³ Rashevska, Kateryna (legal expert for Regional Center for Human Rights (RCHR)), interview with author, August 5 2024.

⁵⁴ Umland, Andreas, "Russia's Forcible Transfers of Unaccompanied Ukrainian Children: Responses from Ukraine, the EU and Beyond." Policy Department for External Relations Directorate-General for External Policies of the Union (February 12, 2024): 32, https://www.researchgate.net/ publication/378151527_Russia's_Forcible_Transfers_of_Unaccompanied_Ukrainian_Children_Responses_from_Ukraine_the_EU_and_Beyond

Bilkova, Prof. Veronika, Dr. Cecilie Hellestveit and Dr. Elīna Šteinerte. "Report on Violations and Abuses of International Humanitarian and Human Rights Law and Crimes Against Humanity, related to the Forcible Transfer and/or Deportation of Ukrainian Children to the Russian Federation," OSCE (May 4 2023): 19, https://www.osce.org/odihr/542751

⁵⁶ Al-Hlou, Yousur and Masha Froliak, "Dozens of Children Taken from Ukraine up for Adoption in Russia," The Spokesman-Review, June 2, 2024, accessed November 15, 2024, https://www.spokesman.com/stories/2024/jun/02/dozens-of-children-taken-from-ukraine-up-for-adopt/

⁵⁷ Deeb, Sarah El, Anastasiia Shvets, Elizaveta Tilna. "How Moscow grabs Ukrainian children and makes them Russian." AP News. March 17, 2023, https:// $\underline{apnews.com/article/ukrainian-children-russia-7493cb22c9086c6293c1ac7986d85ef6}$

⁵⁸ Ryzhkova, Anna, Katya Bonch-Osmolovskaya (translated by Sabrina Jaszi), "The Ukrainian Orphans Adopted by Russia," The Dial, June 11, 2024, accessed August 1, 2024. https://www.thedial.world/issue-17/ukraine-children-orphans-russia-adoption

⁵⁹

⁶⁰

Rashevska, Kateryna (legal expert for Regional Center for Human Rights (RCHR)), interview with author, August 5 2024. 61

Sokolova-Stekh, Hanna, "How Are Ukrainian Children Faring in Russian Families? Deutsche Welle, February 2, 2024, accessed August 1, 2024, https:// $\underline{www.dw.com/en/how-are-ukrainian-children-faring-in-russian-adoptive-families/a-68138393}$

ties to Ukraine through a "patriotic education," 63 These camps are part of a broader system in which children are placed in institutions across at least 15 regions of Russia, including Oryol, Nizhny Novgorod, Rostov, Saratov, Bashkortostan, Bryansk, and Kirov regions.64 Russian authorities have even set up a hotline to pair Russian families with children from the Donbas region.⁶⁵ Within Russia, these adoptive families are presented as symbols of charity and compassion, with the faces of their adopted children frequently featured in state-run media to promote a narrative of benevolence, aligning with Maria Lvova-Belova, Russia's Commissioner for Children's Rights, insisting that children are moved into Russia for 'humanitarian purposes'. 66 Prior to the first anniversary of the full-scale invasion, she herself adopted a teen from Mariupol who is referenced frequently in her own public communications.⁶⁷

Potential evidence was retrieved during an OSINT investigation that illustrates how the Russian Federation's adoption policy for Ukrainian children is being implemented, revealing the formation of a network of professional adoptive parents in Russia. The investigation traced children through Russian Federal government adoption databases but when finding that children were not listed via their occupied region - and on occasion would have changed documents - the investigators followed a self-described informal route and instead went to the 'VK' social media platform. As the most popular social media platform among middle-aged citizens, account holders would be likely prospective adoptive parents.68

They determined groups that would be investigated by using a list of key and decided terms. Those groups were:

'Children are waiting' (Дети ждут), A charity fund dedicated to sharing information about children without parental care - including

- photos, videos, descriptions, adoption status, and contact details - while also supporting adoptive families and orphanage graduates. 69
- 'Adoption. I'm looking for you, Mom!' (Усыновление. Я ищу тебя, мама!), A group dedicated to sharing information about children without parental care, providing photos, descriptions, adoption status, and contact details.70
- 'Change one life' (измени одну жизнь), charity fund dedicated to sharing information about orphans and professionally supporting adoptive parents.71
- 'Territory without orphans' (Территория без сирот), a project sharing photos and videos children left without parental care and sharing them online.72
- 'Adoption. Social project "Children's Question" ("Усыновление. Социальный проект «Детский вопрос»"), a project dedicated to helping children without care to find new families.⁷³
- 'Adoption and guardianship. Orphans. Help.' ("Усыновление и опека. Дети сироты. Помощь."). A group for discussing adoption, adoptive kids and related questions.74
- 'Parent Bridge' ("Родительский мост"). А charity fund which prepares professional adoptive parents in St. Petersburg.⁷⁵

On one occasion, a Russian citizen - who publicly supported Russia's war in Ukraine on her account - stated on the social media platform that it was possible to travel to Luhansk and adopt a child. She shared photos and posts documenting her journey alongside images of the 2-year-old child

⁶³ Deeb, Sarah El, Anastasiia Shvets, Elizaveta Tilna, "How Moscow grabs Ukrainian children and makes them Russian," AP News, March 17, 2023, https:// apnews.com/article/ukrainian-children-russia-7493cb22c9086c6293c1ac7986d85ef6

⁶⁴ Ryzhkova, Anna, Katya Bonch-Osmolovskaya (translated by Sabrina Jaszi), "The Ukrainian Orphans Adopted by Russia," The Dial, June 11, 2024, $accessed\ August\ 1,\ 2024.\ \underline{https://www.thedial.world/issue-17/ukraine-children-orphans-russia-adoption}$

⁶⁵ Deeb, Sarah El, Anastasiia Shvets, Elizaveta Tilna, "How Moscow grabs Ukrainian children and makes them Russian," AP News, March 17, 2023, https:// $\underline{apnews.com/article/ukrainian-children-russia-7493cb22c9086c6293c1ac7986d85ef6}$

Court, Elsa, "Lvova-Belova claims 700,000 children deported from Ukraine," Kyiv Independent, July 31, 2023, https://kyivindependent.com/russian-offi-66 $\underline{cial\text{-}reports\text{-}deportation\text{-}of\text{-}700\text{-}000\text{-}ukrainian\text{-}children/}$

Ryzhkova, Anna, Katya Bonch-Osmolovskaya (translated by Sabrina Jaszi), "The Ukrainian Orphans Adopted by Russia," The Dial, June 11, 2024, accessed August 1, 2024. https://www.thedial.world/issue-17/ukraine-children-orphans-russia-adoption

⁶⁷ Roshchina, Olena, "I'll eat you up, little Moskal': Russian Children's Ombudswoman on abducted teen from Mariupol she has 'adopted,'" Ukrainska Pravda, April 5, 2023, https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2023/04/5/7396557/

⁶⁸ Vlagyimirova, Uljana, Eliza Niculescu, Marios T. Afrataios, and Viktoriia Bukhkalova (OSINT for Ukraine) correspondence with author, April 16 2025.

⁶⁹ Webpage link, 'Children are waiting' VK social account, $\underline{\text{https://vk.com/detizhdut}}$

Webpage link, 'Adoption. I'm looking for you mom!' VK social account, https://vk.com/yaishytebyamama. 70

⁷¹ Webpage link, 'Change one life,' VK social account,' https://vk.com/changeonelife

Webpage link, 'Territory without orphans,' VK social account, https://vk.com/opekaweb 72

⁷³ $We bpage \ link, \ 'Adoption. \ Social \ project \ ''Children's \ Question, \ 'VK \ social \ account, \ \underline{https://vk.com/deti.radiorus}$

⁷⁴ Webpage link, 'Adoption and guardianship. Orphans. Help,' VK social account, https://vk.com/krsk_deti_siroty

⁷⁵ Webpage link, 'Parent Bridge,' VK social account, https://vk.com/rodmost

she adopted. Further evidence also emerged of a political event promoting the adoption of children from occupied territories, underscoring the extent to which this policy has been heavily politicised by the Russian Federation. Similarly, a Russian couple posted about their meeting with Maria Lvova-Belova, expressing gratitude for the opportunity and for the gifts she provided for their adopted children from Donetsk. The couple had adopted six children from Donetsk and found that the Head of the Association of Adoptive Parents had offered them a house in a village designated for adoptive families.⁷⁶ Further Information on professional adoptive parents was also present in this investigation and found to be propagated through Russian Christian Orthodox Websites. It was found that one adoptive parent. who had taken in four children in total, received two girls transferred from Donbas to Russia in February 2024 and another in May 2022. One parent, likely a professional adoptive parent, adopted five children from Donetsk and now lives with them in the Russian Nizhny region. All the children concerned are said to be siblings, and alongside these Ukrainian children she has 16 more in her care.77

The investigation materials also detailed online forums where discussions on adopting children from Ukraine were held. There was notable interest among some individuals posting in the groups in adopting children who were without guardians due to "unlucky circumstances." Specifically, children orphaned as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine were preferred over those whose birth parents had lost custody due to negligence. This preference was based on the assumption that such children would be healthier, both physically and mentally. A database for children in the Luhansk region listed the children as only being available for temporary custody as parents were not fully deprived of parental care. Some pages were created as recently as 2024, others were since 2016. One account holder posted on VK about adopting a boy aged 9 from Luhansk; the date of this post could determine he arrived in her care one month following the annexation of the region.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Ibio

⁷⁷ Ibio

Vlagyimirova et al., (OSINT for Ukraine) correspondence with author, April 16 2025.

Re-education and Militarisation

The militarisation of Ukrainian children in Russianoccupied territories is a policy designed to systematically indoctrinate and assimilate local populations. This occurs through state-controlled propaganda, where television broadcasts, social media networks, and Telegram channels disseminate pro-Russian narratives and war propaganda. Olena Glushchenko, Psychotherapist and expert in demilitarisation, and psychological rehabilitation of children in Ukraine explains the Russian Federation deploys audiovisual content, including books, computer games and podcasts to further reinforce militaristic messaging to young people. Educational indoctrination is also central to this process, with school curricula integrating pro-Russian narratives that normalise military aggression and foster allegiance to occupying forces. Beyond the classroom, paramilitary training plays a crucial role. Glushchenko added that when children are exposed to such propaganda for extended periods two to three years or more - it becomes increasingly challenging to help them adapt to a different narrative or lifestyle.79

As part of these initiatives, Ukrainian children are being systematically removed from their homes and transferred to Russian-controlled environments. where they are subjected to prolonged ideological indoctrination. The broader implications of this militarisation strategy extend beyond just the immediate control. The Russian occupation employs a combination of incentives and coercion to secure compliance, offering financial rewards, social privileges, and impunity for those who actively support the war effort. By targeting children, it ensures long-term ideological loyalty, suppresses resistance, embedding Russian influence deep within the next generation.80 Occupation authorities were also found to exert influence over children's out-of-school activities. Children are recruited into extracurricular military programmes such as the "Youth Army" (Yunarmiya), where they receive ideological conditioning and basic military training.

The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) enforces further control through supervisors who impose extracurricular tasks, such as photographing children with Russian flags, visiting Russian military checkpoints, or writing letters to Russian soldiers. Non-compliance with these directives can have severe consequences, including the removal of children from their families into state-controlled institutions or the arrest and intimi dation of parents.81

Since 2014, Russia's occupation of Crimea and the Donetsk and Luhansk regions has been marked by the deliberate erosion of Ukrainian identity among children, chiefly through the dismantling of Ukrainian education systems. Events in Crimea are now used as a blueprint for similar efforts in occupied areas of Zaporizhzhia and Luhansk. The so-called "Crimean scenario" has seen schools repurposed to instil loyalty to the Russian Federation. President Putin himself has stated that education in these territories should demonstrate "the advantages of accession to the Russian Federation". Despite official denials, the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk "People's Republics" have, from the outset, operated under the effective control of the Kremlin. In practice, the occupation authorities have pursued a consistent policy of educational Russification, replacing Ukrainian curricula with Russian content and using schools as instruments of ideological assimilation. While the occupation of Donetsk and Luhansk mirrors that of Crimea in intent, key differences remain. Crimea was swiftly and openly absorbed into the Russian Federation. By contrast, until 2022, Moscow denied formal control over Donetsk and Luhansk, leaving these areas in a legal vacuum that created a chaotic blend of Ukrainian, Russian, and improvised local rules. This disorder extended to education, where policy was ideologically driven.82

In December 2014, Crimea's occupation authorities introduced a formal doctrine promoting the Russian patriotic and moral education we now see replicated

⁷⁹ Podobed-Frankivka, Olena (Executive Director of National Ukrainian Youth Association) interview with author, November 26 2024.

⁸⁰ Glushenko, Olena (Head of United Actions Ukraine and Child Psychologist in Kherson) interview with author, January 17 2025.

⁸¹

Vorobiova, A., M. Sulialina, "The 'Crimea scenario': how the Russian Federation is destroying the Ukrainian identity of children in the occupied territories," analytical report, Kyiv, 2023, 4.

in other parts of occupied Ukraine. It mandated that both formal and informal education foster a Russian identity in children and portray participation in stateled wars as a "sacred duty". This was accompanied by military training for youth, aimed at preparing them for future combat roles.83 The international community has condemned these practices. On 7 December 2020, UN General Assembly Resolution 75/29 criticised Russia's use of education in Crimea to indoctrinate children for military service, urging an end to combat training in schools and the integration of Crimean institutions into Russia's "militarypatriotic" system.84 Following the 2014 annexation, schools were swiftly transformed into ideological spaces. Classrooms adorned with portraits of socalled war heroes, and monuments such as the one of Mikhail Kalashnikov - Soviet and Russian military engineer best known for designing the AK-47 erected on school grounds.85

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 marked a dramatic escalation, with forces crossing into Kherson from occupied Crimea. By early March, Russian troops had seized key urban centres including Kherson, Berdyansk, Melitopol, and Enerhodar. In September, Moscow staged illegitimate referendums in occupied regions, followed by decrees falsely recognising their sovereignty. While parts of Kherson were liberated in November 2022, large areas of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia remain under occupation. There, Russian authorities are rapidly dismantling Ukrainian education and replacing it with Russian curricula. Unlike the hybrid educational model seen in Donetsk and Luhansk prior to 2022, these territories have been swiftly absorbed into the Russian system, accelerating efforts to erase Ukrainian identity and militarise children.86 In occupied Zaporizhzhia and Kherson, children are increasingly drawn into informal activities designed to erode Ukrainian identity. Initiatives such as the "Clean Streets" campaign involve the removal of Ukrainian symbols and their replacement with Russian imagery. Programs like "Region for Youth" offer young

people access to Russian state benefits, grants, and ideological events. Additionally, campaigns like the "New Year Mail" - led by the United Russia party - involve children in crafting messages and cards for Russian troops engaged in the so-called "special military operation".87

This strategy can be understood through the following tools: replacing Ukrainian language, culture, and textbooks with Russian alternatives, banning Ukrainian history, and promoting distorted narratives - particularly about Ukraine. Schools are being militarised through "Cadet" and "Cossack" classes, and teachers are either replaced or subjected to ideological re-education. Weekly indoctrination sessions such as "Conversations about the Important" reinforce pro-Kremlin views, glorify military service, and present Ukraine and the West as enemies. Informal education also plays a role, with children pushed into militarised youth organisations like "Young Army" and holiday camps promoting patriotic training. In some cases, school staff have reportedly faced threats, coercion, or even torture for refusing to cooperate.88

A stark demonstration of the devastating impact of Russian occupation is the fate of Ukrainians who were children when the Russian Federation and its paramilitaries annexed Crimea and Eastern Donbas - some of whom have since died fighting against Ukraine on the battlefield since 2022. They have as a result, been celebrated for their bravery and allegiance to 'mother Russia' and further used as propaganda in educational settings.89 This underscores a significant pillar of Putin's long term war strategy - slowly destabilising Ukraine and moving its borders West, by absorbing its children into fighting age citizens and fragmenting the nation. The militarisation of children stands as one of the most perilous instruments of Russian occupation, aiming to shape the younger generations' minds to facilitate Ukraine's absorption. Illia Moskvitin, a 16-year-old member of "Yunarmiya" in the occupied Donetsk Oblast, tragically lost his life on 14 April

Vorobiova, A., M. Sulialina, "The 'Crimea scenario': how the Russian Federation is destroying the Ukrainian identity of children in the occupied territories," analytical report, Kyiv, 2023, 5.

Vorobiova and Sulialina, "The 'Crimea scenario': how the Russian Federation is destroying the Ukrainian identity of children in the occupied territories" 2023 6

Coynash, Halya, "Russia's militarization of childhood hits new low in occupied Crimea," The Information Portal of the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group, May 1, 2025, https://khpg.org/en/1574277866

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid

⁸⁸ Ibid.

[&]quot;Cross-Pollinated: Russia's Systematic Policy of Destroying Children's Ukrainian Identity," Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights on the Observance of Children's Rights in the Context of Armed Aggression against Ukraine: Ombudsman of Ukraine (July 2024): 26, https://www.ombuds-man.gov.ua/storage/app/media/uploaded-files/Special%20Report%20_CROSS-POLLINATED_.pdf

2022 after stepping on an anti-personnel mine. 90 Similarly, Ivan Shifman from Donetsk Oblast joined in 2019. Upon turning 18, he enlisted in the "People's Militia of the Donetsk People's Republic." Ivan participated in combat across various parts of Donetsk Oblast during Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine. His life was cut short on 14 April 2022, at the age of 21. Dmytro Kotov, a resident of Dzhankoi, Crimea, experienced the Russian occupation of the peninsula in 2014. After joining "Yunarmiya," he went on to serve aboard the Russian Black Sea Fleet landing ship Novocherkassk following his university studies. Dmytro died in 2022 while fighting in Russia's war against Ukraine, aged just 24.91

A few months into the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Volodymyr Sahaydak, Director Stepanivka Center for Social and Psychological Rehabilitation, in Kherson said that Russian agents entered the school with rifles and began auditing records kept within the administration offices. Sahaydak had understood that the orphaned children in his care may be taken by the Russian Federation, based on events in Donbas and Crimea in 2014.92 He stated "The children were very frightened. I asked where they were taking the children. They said, "Well, it's not your business." I said that it is my business, "I'm the director [Children's Home in Kherson]. I need to know where the children go. Either you tell me where they're going or they go nowhere." And of course, I was threatened. Then I found out that they were taken to Crimea."93

The same year, Russian 'integration programmes' were established in occupied regions. In these programmes children were prohibited from speaking Ukrainian, and have Russian propoganda imposed

on them from as early as the first grade. 94 Eleven of these camps are located more than 800 km from Ukraine's border with Russia, including two in Siberia and one in Vladivostok - 9000 km from their homeland.95 By the end of 2022, the Yale School of Public Health's Humanitarian Research Lab identified at least 32 of these 43 camps as engaging in systematic political re-education.⁹⁶ Many were told it would be a short stay of a few weeks while the war resumed. Some have since then been placed into Russian families. 97 Children report being made to stand and sing the Russian national anthem, that they are given guns to hold, and told that they will soon be doing the brave deeds of their grandfathers.98

By September 2023, Crimea, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson saw the implementation of 'cadet classes'.99 Camps in Crimea, Luhansk, and Russia have been set up to transform Ukrainian youth into members of the Yunarmiia (youth army), using them as propaganda to motivate other Ukraine youth to fight for Russia. 100 This militarisation of education complicates repatriation efforts and deeply integrates these children into Russian society.

Valeriia, 15 year old girl who left occupied Kherson region for Yevpatoria (Crimea) to Luchystyi camp:

"In the camp, she was forced to sing the Russian national anthem and to stand up when she heard it...had to learn Russian songs. She was forbidden to communicate, read, and correspond in Ukrainian...[the schools also] taught 'disoriented' history... reports state the children

- Bring Kids Back UA (@Bringkidsback_ua), Instagram, accessed January 20, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DFC7_geM5QI/?img_index=9&igsh=b- 91 zlyYTk0cHF5d2Nl
- 92 Garrido, Mahsa Aminolahi et al., "The Empty Orphanages of Kherson," Eurovision News, February 14, 2023, https://investigations.news-exchange.ebu. ch/the-missing-children-of-ukraine/empty-orphanages-of-kherson
- 93 "Children of Ukraine Transcript," Frontline, n.d., https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/documentary/children-of-ukraine/transcript/
- Rashevska, Kateryna (legal expert for Regional Center for Human Rights (RCHR)), interview with author, August 5 2024. 94
- 95 Khoshnood, Kaveh et al., "Russia's Systematic Program for the Re-education and Adoption of Ukraine's Children," Humanitarian Research Lab at Yale $School of Public Health, February 14\ 2023, \underline{https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/humanitarian-research-lab-yale-school-public-health-russias-systematical-lab-yale-school-public-health-russias-systematic-health-russias-systematic-health-russias-systematic-health-russias-systematic-health-russias-systematic-health-russias-systematic-health-russias-systematic-health-russias-systematic-health-russias-systematic-health-russias-systematic-health-russias-systematic-health-russias-systematic-health-russias-systematic-health-russias-systematic-health-russias-systematic-health-russias-systematic-health-russias-system$ ic-program-re-education-adoption-ukraines-children-enruuk
- loffe, Yulia, and Andreas Umland, "Forcible Transfer and Deportation of Ukrainian Children: Responses and Accountability Measures," European Par-96 liament: Directorate General for External Policies of the Union (January 2024), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2024/754442/ EXPO_STU(2024)754442_EN.pdf
- 97 "Children of Ukraine Transcript," Frontline, n.d., https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/documentary/children-of-ukraine/transcript/
- 98
- "Cross-Pollinated: Russia's Systematic Policy of Destroying Children's Ukrainian Identity," Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights on the 99 Observance of Children's Rights in the Context of Armed Aggression against Ukraine: Ombudsman of Ukraine (July 2024): 25, https://www.ombuds- $\underline{man.gov.ua/storage/app/media/uploaded-files/Special\%20Report\%20_CROSS-POLLINATED_.pdf$
- 100 lbid. 26.

⁹⁰ "Military-patriotic movement 'Yunarmiya' created in Russia," INTERFAX.RU, August 3, 2026, accessed January 20, 2025, https://www.interfax.ru/

First Deputy Minister of Justice of the Russian Federation Sergei Gerasimov on Wednesday presented a certificate of registration of the All-Russian military-patriotic movement "Yunarmiya" to the Chief of the General Staff of this organization, Olympic champion Dmitry Trunenkov. "In accordance with the law on public associations, the All-Russian children's and youth military-patriotic movement "Yunarmiya" received state registration on July 29. From the moment of registration, the organisation received its flag, emblem, and became a legal entity," Gerasimov said at the ceremony to present the certificate."

were not provided with proper clothing or other hygiene kits."¹⁰¹

For some, particularly those who have spent most of their lives under occupation, this environment has become their norm, making it difficult for them to envision an alternative way of life. Russia organises summer camps in Crimea, often located in the mountains, benefitting from Russia's immense resources and funding, enabling a more robust reinforcement of Russian identity. The militarisation of children in Russian-occupied territories is particularly evident within the education system, where school lessons have been weaponised as a tool of ideological indoctrination and military training. Parents who refuse to comply face severe repercussions, including the threats to remove their parental rights, illegal searches, and interrogations.

Since 2024, all Russian schools have been mandated to establish specialised youth army or cadet classes from the fifth grade onwards. This means that approximately 30 million children - across the Russian Federation and Russian Occupied Ukraine regions - are currently receiving, or have already received, formal military training in combat and lethal skills. The systematic militarisation of education began in 2017, with the deliberate goal of conditioning children for warfare. An estimated 20% of students are expected to receive advanced military training aligned with future roles in the FSB, the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), or specialised military forces. Disturbingly, the selection process for these youth army classes does not prioritise academic achievement or discipline. Instead, students with a history of aggression, bullying, and severely emotional tendencies are deliberately recruited. This suggests a long-term strategy by the Russian state to cultivate a generation of individuals predisposed to violence, creating millions of militarised youths who are trained to kill and indoctrinated with hostility towards NATO countries and the United States. 105

A school teacher inside the Russian Federation details the implementation of these policies during interview:

"The state policy is such that all schools are forced to open some kind of Yunarmia units or cadet classes. For each 5-6 classes, there is one class where they send children who have behavioural problems, problems in their upbringing, and the Yunarmia is like an indulgence for them... "I am in a patriotic unit, I can do anything".

In the latest Vladimir Medinsky World History textbook, it is written that Trump lost to Biden because of the falsifications in the US elections [2020]. On page 168 of the textbook, it says "the enemy is the collective West, NATO and in first place of course is the USA, our main enemy." 106

Around September of 2024, parents of 17- and 18-year-old boys in occupied Zaporizhzhia received letters, ordering them to submit passports, birth certificates, and medical records for conscription.¹⁰⁷ Russian controlled schools have introduced three explicit militarised propaganda lessons: "The Russian World", "Fundamentals of Homeland Security", and "Important Conversations" to fulfil the Kremlin's agenda for patriotic lessons, replacing previous courses on human life safety.¹⁰⁸ In addition, military training has become an integral part of the curriculum, instructing children in various methods of combat, including the use of firearms, grenades, and explosive devices, as well as drone operation for combat purposes. A new world history textbook, edited by Kremlin propagandist Vladimir Medinsky, was introduced in 2024, featuring 168 pages dedicated to the United States, portraying NATO countries as aggressors that must be destroyed.¹⁰⁹

The removal of school books is implemented almost immediately in occupied regions.¹¹⁰ The Russian ideology of 'pan-Russianism' propagates that there is no Ukrainian state or nation; it is actually Western Russia. According to this Kremlin

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 21.

¹⁰² Podobed-Frankivka, Olena (Executive Director of National Ukrainian Youth Association) interview with author, November 26 2024.

¹⁰³ Ibid

¹⁰⁴ Glushenko, Olena (Head of United Actions Ukraine and Child Psychologist in Kherson) interview with author, January 17 2025.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. 106 Rus

Russian School Teacher interviewed by Olena Glushenko (Head of United Actions Ukraine and Child Psychologist in Kherson) for research into Russian Federation occupied territory, footage provided to author January 28 2025.

Kremlin aide Vladimir Medinsky has authored history textbooks for 16- to 18-year-old students, presenting a heavily revised narrative of the Soviet Union's collapse, the Putin era, and the origins of the war in Ukraine. A former culture minister who led the Russian delegation in the negotiations between Russia and Ukraine, immediately after the full-scale invasion.

Ball, Tom, "How teenagers escape Kremlin brainwashing in occupied," *The Times,* October 18, 2024, accessed March 3, 2025, https://www.thetimes.com/world/russia-ukraine-war/article/how-teenagers-escape-kremlin-brainwashing-in-occupied-ukraine-sfcqt2z39

Glushenko, Olena (Head of United Actions Ukraine and Child Psychologist in Kherson) interview with author, January 17 2025.

"Fundamentals of Homeland Security' How Russia is turning schools into training grounds for future soldiers,' Meduza, April 1, 2024, accessed January 20, 2025, https://meduza.io/en/feature/2024/04/01/fundamentals-of-homeland-security

¹⁰⁹ Glushenko, Olena (Head of United Actions Ukraine and Child Psychologist in Kherson) interview with author, January 17 2025.

¹¹⁰ Ukraine Security and Cooperation Center (Kyiv) interview with author, July 29 2024.

ideology, Ukrainians are Russians who have been miseducated and manipulated by the West and by Ukrainian nationalists.¹¹¹ The Kremlin's occupying forces and federal authorities - including senior officials and the Minister of Education - have sought to suppress the Ukrainian language and curriculum, replacing them with Russian-language instruction and the Russian curriculum. It is suggested by legal experts, such measures could violate the laws of armed conflict, which prohibit an occupying power from making unnecessary changes to laws in the occupied territory - such as Ukraine's 2017 Law on Education.¹¹²

The below images were provided to this report by the Ukrainian Security and Cooperation Center (USCC) and show Russian textbooks ready for assimilation into schools in the formerly occupied territory of Kherson. Due to the rapid liberation of this are of Kherson, there was little time to distribute the recourses or destroy them:

Analysis has shown, textbooks deployed into schools and approved by the Russian Federation Ministry of Education - sometimes translated in English as the Ministry of Enlightenment - have stark differences to their prewar 2016 editions. References to Ukraine and Kyiv have been removed and the historical term "Kyivan Rus," referring to a medieval Eastern European state centred on Kyiv, has been replaced with "Rus" or simply "Old Rus." The textbooks claim the annexation of Crimea in 2014, was a mobilisation of citizens to "protect their rights" following the rise to power

of "radical nationalists... supported by the West". Current references to President Putin and his accomplishments have increased.¹¹³

Under Russian occupation, children are subjected to an alternate reality designed to sever their connection to Ukraine. They are made to believe that their lives - having been irrevocably changed - will remain with Russia and that Russia is forever. This psychological warfare on children is explicitly intentional. The greatest challenge Ukraine faces is the reintegration of children from occupied territories who have endured severe psychological abuse and indoctrination. While this generation of children has shown remarkable resilience, their emotional states vary widely. Even children in liberated areas still live in constant fear of retribution for perceived rule-breaking under occupation While reporting on the deaths in their communities at the hands of Russian forces, they do so with little visible emotion, reflecting a deep desensitisation to violence. They remain both wary and fearful of adults, bearing the scars of their experiences.¹¹⁴

When the Kharkiv region was liberated, children pleaded with Ukrainian soldiers to promise that Russia would not return. They shared fears instilled by Russian agents, who told them Russia would soon reclaim the area and that they were warned "Russia is forever." This narrative aims to erase the children's hope for a future in Ukraine and embed a sense of helplessness.¹¹⁵ In Kherson region, following liberation in 2022 a cell was discovered where children were detained and subjected to







loffe, Yulia, and Andreas Umland, "Forcible Transfer and Deportation of Ukrainian Children: Responses and Accountability Measures," European Parliament: Directorate General for External Policies of the Union (January 2024) https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2024/754442/
EXPO_STU(2024)754442_EN.pdf

¹¹² Esveld, Bill Van, Tanya Lokshina, "Education under Occupation," *Human Rights Watch,* June 20, 2024, https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/06/20/education-under-occupation/forced-russification-school-system-occupied-ukrainian

Devlin, Kayleen and Maria Korenyuk, "Ukraine war: History is rewritten for children in occupied areas," *BBC News*, August 31, 2022, accessed January 14, 2025,

https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-62577314

¹¹⁴ Ukraine Security and Cooperation Center (Kyiv) interview with author, July 29 2024.

¹¹⁵ lbi

mistreatment, and denied food. It is documented the children were not provided with water and told their parents had abandoned them. Under the control of the Russian Federation they were made to live in a constant state of fear.¹¹⁶

On 7th January 2025, The Ukrainian Governmental Center for National Resistance announced the Kremlin's plan to relocate 5000 school children from the occupied territory of Luhansk Oblast into Russia. 117 This marked the latest display of the Kremlin's state-sponsored re-education goals in a move to step up its assimilation efforts through the cross-border transfer of Ukrainian children.¹¹⁸ This initiative falls under one of the Kremlin's programs known as "Cultural Map 4+85". The programme is designed to expose the children to Russian cities, Russian language and culture, through supervised trips that offer university exchanges or so-called wellness or recreation trips.¹²⁰ Aside from the pursuit of Russification, the Center has also classified this impending forcible transfer and assimilation process as constituting an act of genocide under international law. 121

While much of the international attention has focused on children moved to camps, institutions, or adoptive families in Russia, the case of children being imprisoned by occupying forces represents a darker, parallel tactic. Though not adopted or placed in foster care, some children have been transferred across occupied territories, removed from her family, and held in a detention system designed for political control:

Yulia Sokolova lived in the occupied town of Skadovsk with her parents. Her father is a surgeon and worked at the local hospital, while her mother stayed at home to care for their younger son. In late 2023, FSB officers came to the Sokolov family's home. They took Yulia, who was only 17 years old at the time. She was accused of allegedly passing information of some kind regarding Russian military equipment to Ukraine and was sentenced in April, Yulia was sentenced to 9 years in a high-security prison. Since then, she has been held in a pre-trial detention center (SIZO) in Simferopol.

Her parents have been in a state of shock for two years and remain in the occupied territory, refusing to leave so as not to abandon their child. Meanwhile, Yulia's paternal grandparents who are in Ukraine are fighting for her release. Her grandmother, Tatiana, is overwhelmed with grief. She reports to having has tried every possible method to support Yulia from Ukraine, but Russia refuses to release or exchange "civilian hostages".

Her Grandmother reports that Yulia has been illegally detained for two years and is now facing nine more years in prison.¹²²

Reuters, "Russians Mistreated Kherson Youngsters in 'children's cell,' says Ukraine Official," December 14, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russians-mistreated-kherson-youngsters-childrens-cell-says-ukraine-official-2022-12-14/

Hrudka, Orysia, "Russia plans to relocate 5,000 Ukrainian schoolchildren from occupied Luhansk Oblast," *Euromaidan Press*, January 7, 2025, https://euromaidanpress.com/2025/01/07/russia-plans-to-relocate-5000-ukrainian-schoolchildren-from-occupied-luhansk-oblast/

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid

Case evidence provided to the author by the Emile Foundation, May 5th 2025.

Modern Resistance Under Occupation:

Our understanding of this resistance is imperative to any analysis of Russia's treatment of Ukrainian children for the intelligence and context it provides on the Kremlin's strategy. Ukraine's experience has shown that within modern warfare, the nature and objectives of resistance movements differ from traditional ones.¹²³ The involvement of residents in occupied territories in the resistance movement, their cooperation with Ukraine's Defence Forces, and their contributions to Ukrainian operations are highly significant in providing intelligence in the Kremlin's warfare against children. Activists from the 'Yellow Ribbon' resistance movement in occupied Henichesk in Kherson oblast report that so-called psychologists are being used to extract information from school children about their parents, neighbours, and wider support for Ukraine. The Russian regime has revived Soviet-style denunciations, both domestically and in occupied Ukraine, showing no hesitation in exploiting children to suppress dissent.¹²⁴ Although many children live in fear of Russian authorities, acts of quiet defiance persist, for instance, reports have emerged of school walls marked with graffiti declaring "Glory to the Armed Forces of Ukraine..¹²⁵

One child who was previously in occupied territory spoke of educational resistance in which children attend Russian controlled education during the day, and then study in the Ukrainian school at home:

"Well they don't like Americans at all and NATO bases are their favourite topic...about how they approach the borders and so on. They don't like it. The Russians directly told us that "we are going to fight back with NATO". I attended two schools online as well. Our Ukrainian school started at 2pm. And we came from the occupation school and sat in Ukrainian school until 9pm. And they already suspected that we were studying at the Ukrainian school.

In our class, two more people were still studying at the Ukrainian school, and they asked "what subject are you taking at the Ukrainian school now?" and we were all sitting in silence. They said "we have lists of people studying at the Ukrainian school". It was scary. And she said, "we will check everything, we have lists, so don't worry", it was really intimidating.

Their most important lessons were the history of Russia, the talks about importance and "Russia" - my borders" that's what they directly enforced; that Russia is everything, and that's it and there will be nothing else."126

Children attend these lessons covertly and they are often run by former teachers in occupied Ukraine or those who managed to flee. The classes, which run after school until 9pm, are a continuation of the Ukrainian curriculum. According to the Ukrainian Ministry of Education there are more than 60,000 living in occupied areas who continue to study in Ukrainian secondary education remotely.¹²⁷

It's not just students, pro-Ukrainian teachers have faced severe challenges during the war, with many forced into hiding, threatened with deportation, or sent for "re-training" in Crimea - Akin to old soviet methods. A headteacher from Melitopol, who previously led a thriving school of over 500 pupils, is now in hiding after attempting to organise online lessons following the Ukrainian curriculum. ¹²⁸ An investigation by the Reckoning Project for Ukrainy Pravda reveals that after repeated refusals

- 123 Ukraine Security and Cooperation Center (Kyiv) interview with author, July 29 2024.
 - Danylyuk, Oleksandr V. "Against the Odds: Lessons from the Ukrainian Resistance Movement," RUSI, July 4, 2023, accessed January 9, 2025, https:// www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/against-odds-lessons-ukrainian-resistance-movement
- 124 Coynash, Halya, "Russian 'psychologists' used to get kids in occupied Ukraine to report on their parents," The Information Portal of the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group, January 13, 2025, https://khpg.org/en/1608814273
- 125 Ball, Tom, "How teenagers escape Kremlin brainwashing in occupied," The Times, October 18, 2024, accessed March 3, 2025, https://www.thetimes. $\underline{\text{com/world/russia-ukraine-war/article/how-teenagers-escape-kremlin-brainwashing-in-occupied-ukraine-sfcqt2z39}$
- Child from formally occupied territory, interview video provided to author, January 28 2024.
- 127 Ball, Tom, "How teenagers escape Kremlin brainwashing in occupied," The Times, October 18, 2024, accessed March 3, 2025, https://www.thetimes. $\underline{com/world/russia-ukraine-war/article/how-teenagers-escape-kremlin-brainwashing-in-occupied-ukraine-sfcqt2z39$
- 128 Devlin, Kayleen and Maria Korenyuk, "Ukraine war: History is rewritten for children in occupied areas," BBC News, August 31, 2022, accessed January 14, 2025, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-62577314

to cooperate and threats to her family, a deputy headteacher took a drastic step. She confronted the Russian-installed principal of her former school and claimed to have a grenade in her bag. Days later, she was abducted by Russian soldiers and taken to a makeshift detention centre in Kherson, where she was tortured and subjected to electric shocks, waterboarding, and severe beatings. She was eventually released after being forced to record a video apology. The teacher later stated it was a deliberate act of resistance, driven by her refusal to accept occupation and her belief that Russian forces are in Ukraine only temporarily.¹²⁹

The resistance in occupied territory undertakes highly dangerous and selfless work, relying on special and temporary SIM cards to maintain communication with Ukraine military forces. The use of mobile networks for resistance activities has become increasingly perilous. Russia has significantly developed cellular networks in occupied areas, seeking to control all communication and override resistance capabilities - bypassing European Union import and export sanctions placed on the Russian Federation to do so. Prior to the invasion, networks in these regions were far less advanced. Now occupied territory has faced a rapid increase in telecommunications infrastructure in the regions. Russia has installed over 115 new cellular towers in Mariupol alone. A strategic move aimed at cutting off Ukranians who live under occupation from their homeland. 130

On 1 January 2025, the continued forced citizenship campaign was accelerated, and anyone refusing a Russian passport will be classified as a foreign citizen or stateless person, facing the risk of deportation, imprisonment, and loss of property rights. This also included new restrictions on SIM card purchases for foreigners and stateless persons, in Russian-occupied territories. This aimed at tightening control over the population. Under the rules, foreigners (those who do not take Russian citizenship) must provide biometric data and their device's International Mobile Station Equipment Identity (IMEI). Existing users must confirm their identity with a Russian passport by 1

July 2025. Those under occupation are told their communication can be monitored and their devices seized.¹³²

Information provided for this report by OSINT for Ukraine, an independent non-profit foundation, offered potential evidence of the forced 'passportisation' of Ukrainians in Zaporizhzhya. The data demonstrated the tension between the people and the extensive bureaucracy in the so-called 'new regions' is not as seamless as propagated by the Russian Federation. Most critically, it found evidence that those who do not take up the forced citizenship imposed on them lose access to vital services. This ranged from healthcare, housing and driving licenses. Users of Telegram report that even with their Russian passport they face problems with financial support, are being charged for medical attention, and are losing their homes.¹³³

The resistance within occupied regions operates under guarantees provided by Ukraine's National Resistance Law, signed by President Volodymry Zelenskyy in 2021, which formalised and strengthened the present and future national resistance movement. These guarantees include provisions for relocating families to safer areas.¹³⁴ The President stated that the Law on the Fundamentals of National Resistance introduces vital measures to strengthen territorial defence, develop the resistance movement, and establish a system for preparing the population for national resistance. The establishment of a national resistance system in Ukraine attempted to serve as a crucial deterrent against a repeat of the events of 2014, emphasising that the defence of Ukraine is a collective national responsibility.135

¹²⁹ Novikova_Victoria, Antipenko, Ivan, "Occupation of education. How Russia distorts the consciousness of Ukrainian children in the Kherson region,"

The Reckoning Project, September 2, 2024, accessed May 9, 2025, https://life.pravda.com.ua/society/okupaciya-osviti-yak-rosiya-spotvoryuye-svidomist-ukrajinskih-ditey-na-hersonshchini-303445/

¹³⁰ Ukraine Security and Cooperation Center (Kyiv) interview with author, July 29 2024.

Ball, Tom, "How teenagers escape Kremlin brainwashing in occupied," *The Times*, October 18, 2024, accessed March 3, 2025, https://www.thetimes.com/world/russia-ukraine-war/article/how-teenagers-escape-kremlin-brainwashing-in-occupied-ukraine-sfcqt2z39

[&]quot;New rules for buying SIM cards for foreigners in the TOT: what will change in 2025," UNN, February 22, 2025, accessed March 24, 2025, https://unn.ua/en/news/new-rules-for-buying-sim-cards-for-foreigners-in-the-tot-what-will-change-in-2025

Uljana Vlagyimirova, Eliza Niculescu, Marios T. Afrataios, and Viktoriia Bukhkalova (OSINT for Ukraine) correspondence with author, April 16 2025.

¹³⁴ Ukraine Security and Cooperation Center (Kyiv) interview with author, July 29 2024.

[&]quot;President signed laws on national resistance and increasing the number of the Armed Forces," President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy Official Website, July 29, 2021, accessed January 9, 2025, https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/glava-derzhavi-pidpisav-zakoni-pro-nacionalnij-spro-tiv-i-zbi-69809

The Repatriation of **Ukrainian Children:**

The repatriation of Ukrainian children is a crucial component of the Ukrainian Peace Formula and motivation of the Bring Kids Back UA State Plan, geared towards diplomatic partners. 136 Ukraine is actively pursuing the establishment of a unified legal framework - currently absent in International Law for the repatriation of these deported or transferred children. With support from the international community, implementing such a framework would speed up the return process and reduce the risk of violations of the rights of legal representatives. 137 Analysis provided by legal experts has indicated the Russian Federation knowingly inflates the numbers of forcibly deported and transferred children as a bargaining chip for future negotiations - knowing Ukraine will fight for the safe return of its children back into Ukrainian society as a part of President Zelenskyy's peace formula.¹³⁸ The longer these state-orchestrated displacements, assimilation processes, and indoctrination efforts persist, the more challenging repatriation becomes for both the children and their families. Many of these children will become deeply integrated into Russian society, forming attachments to their foster communities or families and absorbing Kremlin narratives and propaganda against Ukrainian sovereignty and culture. 139 As a result, legal experts have advocated to international institutions - such as the European Union and United Nations - that the actions of the Russian Federation should be considered a genocidal act.140

Kateryna Rashevska, a legal expert at the Regional Center for Human Rights offered an example of the dangerous use of these children in propaganda:

"[The deported children] are repeating Russian narratives. One boy who was rescued by the Ukrainian military after some shelling. He was transferred to Lyiv, as he survived, but then to get the mother, he returned to occupied territories, then he was transferred to Belarus for so-called rehabilitation.

To Belarusian media this boy said, "I am the victim of Ukrainian Nazis. They were trying to kill me in the Ukrainian schools, they didn't have Russian culture, Russian language... That is why I am here in Russia, and Russia is here forever."

"We see the success of the Russian propaganda education campaigns. Of course, it's really impossible not to be involved in these Russian propaganda activities, because this is inside formal education."141

Legal analysts have advocated that the Kremlin's actions toward Ukraine and its citizens have breached the Law of Occupation on multiple accounts. As a branch of international humanitarian law defined in Article 42 of the 1907 Hague Conventions, a territory is considered occupied when under the authority of a hostile army, who have the ability to exercise a sufficient amount of control over the territory, and is contingent upon the lack of consent by the host state. 142 The presence of Russian soldiers and proxies within Ukrainian

- 136 "President got acquainted with the plan of returning children illegally deported by Russia, Bring Kids Back UA, and took part in the opening of the Center for the Protection of Children's Rights," President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy Official Website, May 31, 2023, https://www.president.gov. ua/en/news/prezident-oznajomivsya-z-planom-povernennya-nezakonno-deport-83261
- 137 "Algorithm for the Return of Deported Orphans and Children Deprived of Parental Care to Ukraine," Regional Center for Human Rights, June 11, 2024. $Accessed\ July\ 29\ 2025, \underline{https://krymbezpravil.org.ua/en/analytics-en/algorithm-for-the-return-of-deported-orphans-and-children-deprived-of-parental-pa$ care-to-ukraine/
- 138 Rashevska, Kateryna (legal expert for Regional Center for Human Rights (RCHR), interview with author, August 5 2024.
- Umland, Andreas, "Russia's Forcible Transfers of Unaccompanied Ukrainian Children: Responses from Ukraine, the EU and Beyond." Policy Department for External Relations Directorate-General for External Policies of the Union (February 12, 2024): 5, https://www.researchgate.net/publica- $\underline{tion/378151527}. \underline{Russia's}. \underline{Forcible_Transfers_of_Unaccompanied_Ukrainian_Children_Responses_from_Ukraine_the_EU_and_Beyond_Ukrainian_Children_Responses_from_Ukraine_the_EU_and_Beyond_Ukrainian_Children_Responses_from_Ukraine_the_EU_and_Beyond_Ukrainian_Children_Responses_from_Ukraine_the_EU_and_Beyond_Ukrainian_Children_Responses_from_Ukraine_the_EU_and_Beyond_Ukrainian_Children_Responses_from_Ukraine_the_EU_and_Beyond_Ukrainian_Children_Responses_from_Ukraine_the_EU_and_Beyond_Ukrainian_Children_Responses_from_Ukraine_the_EU_and_Beyond_Ukrainian_Children_Responses_from_Ukraine_the_EU_and_Beyond_Ukra$
- 140 loffe, Yulia, and Andreas Umland, "Forcible Transfer and Deportation of Ukrainian Children: Responses and Accountability Measures," European Parliament: Directorate General for External Policies of the Union (January 2024), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2024/754442/ EXPO_STU(2024)754442_EN.pdf
- 141 Rashevska, Kateryna (legal expert for Regional Center for Human Rights (RCHR)), interview with author, August 5 2024.
- "The Law of Occupation," DLP Forum (blog), March 28, 2023, accessed January 7, 2025, https://www.dlpforum.org/2023/03/28/the-law-of-occupation/ 142 "Convention (IV) respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land: Regulations: Art. 42," International Committee of the Red Cross (International Humanitarian Law Databases, accessed January 7, 2025, https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/hague-conv-iv-1907/regulations-art-42?activeTab=

territories, such as the so-called "Luhansk People's Republic" and "Donetsk People's Republic", and the surge of forcible deportation of Ukrainian children since the full-scale invasion is said to have violated several stipulations within the legal framework of the Law of Occupation including, but not limited to:

- ► The occupying power must restore and maintain public order and safety. This includes ensuring food and medical supplies and upholding the laws that were in place before the occupation.¹⁴³
- According to the fourth Geneva Convention, people living under occupation are not to be deported or transferred.¹⁴⁴
- ► The occupier cannot compel civilians to serve in its armed or auxiliary forces. 145

Acting as a neutral intermediary, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has been supporting and facilitating the passage of Ukrainian children since 2023. The ICRC's focus however extends beyond returning children from Russia to Ukraine, rather approaching the issue from a crossborder perspective that enables the movement of vulnerable individuals affected by the armed conflict, in both directions, and based on familial circumstances. This includes children, elderly individuals, and adults with mobility challenges. The extent of the ICRC's operational involvement varies on a case-to-case basis depending on the family circumstances, the request of the authorities on both sides and the space granted by the parties for the ICRC to play a role, in coordination with other actors involved. To date, the ICRC has facilitated the cross-border passage of over 300 individuals from Ukraine to Russia and Russia to Ukraine - including children and other vulnerable civilians - regardless of nationality.¹⁴⁶ This strategy of neutral parties is not without its political complexities. The Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights Dmytro Lubinets, has frequently criticised the International Federation of the Red Cross for its relationship with the Russian Red Cross, and the Russian Federation. These criticisms extend to the forcible transfer and deportation of Ukrainian children, but also issues

russian-red-cross-links-to-putin-war-in-ukraine

relate to prisoners of war and presence of the Russian branch operating in occupied territory and subsequent the nature of this work.¹⁴⁷

The complexities of repatriation and working crossborder to secure the safe return of children amongst complicated diplomatic relations is evident in the perilous journey and fight parents have to undertake to retrieve their children:

At the time of the full-scale invasion, Oksana's two children, aged 16 and 11, were staying with their grandmother while she worked. They found themselves trapped in Russian-occupied territory. In desperation, Oksana applied to every official body she could think of for assistance in recovering her children but received no response. As her situation became increasingly dire, she turned to the media and pleaded for help in a televised appeal. The staff at the television channel continued to assist Oksana. With their support, she eventually got in touch with the Ukraine Ombudsman and the application process began to move forward.

Prior to the successful evacuation, a plan had been agreed with the Ukrainian Ombudsman. In November 2023. Oksana was told her mother must travel to retrieve the children and meet her in Minsk. The grandmother travelled to Skadovsk and made contact with the Donetsk human services authorities. However, upon arrival she was told she must leave the children behind and return home. She was informed the children would be sent to Moscow the following day. Both she and the children were deeply unsettled by this demand. The teenage son flatly refused. A representative from the Donetsk services reportedly became aggressive, shouting and swearing in front of the children, who pleaded for their mother to come for them, an option that was rejected.

Following this failed plan, the Ukrainian Ombudsman's office conveyed that they were informed by occupying officials that negative claims about Oksana had been made by her mother, stating she had labelled her an alcoholic and unfit. Oksana said her mother denied

147

Zimko, Oleksandra, "Ombudsman harshly criticizes Red Cross Federation for protecting Russia's interests," RBC-Ukraine, April 27, 2024, https://new-

[&]quot;The Legal Framework of Occupation in International Armed Conflict," The Law Institute, November 30, 2023, accessed January 7, 2025, https://thelaw.institute/understanding-ihl/legal-framework-occupation-armed-conflict/

¹⁴⁴ Ibid

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

Author interview with representative from the International Committee for the Red Cross, December 23rd 2024.

sukraine.rbc.ua/news/ombudsman-harshly-criticizes-red-cross-federation-1714247880.html

"Ukrainian Official Criticises Red Cross Over Prisoner-Visitation Claims," RadioFree Europe Ukrainian Service, July 21, 2024, https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-russia-prisoners-icrc-exchanges-rights/33044637.html Amran, Rachel, "Ombudsman: Red Cross 'playing along with Russian aggression," Kyiv Independent, April 28, 2024, https://kyivindependent.com/ombudsman-red-cross-playing-along-with-russian-aggression/ Walker, Shaun, "Red Cross urged to act over Russian branch's links to Kremlin war machine," The Guardian, March 12, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/12/

these accusations explicitly. Amid these pressures, she began to fear she might never see her children again, yet she remained resolute. She described the tactics used against her as designed to break her resolve and destroy her spirit. Nevertheless, she persisted and ultimately succeeded in bringing her children home.

After months of uncertainty, she succeeded in evacuating her children in December 2023. The journey to retrieve them, from the left bank of the Dnipro river in the still-occupied Kherson district, took ten days.

During her travels, she observed that anti-Ukrainian sentiment was openly and aggressively expressed by Russian occupying forces. She recounted being stopped while entering occupied territory because her mobile phone was empty, something the Russian authorities found suspicious. Though she insisted her only intention was to bring her children home, she said they made it clear she was not welcome. She waited an entire day alongside other Ukrainians as they were interrogated. The experience was, in her words, surreal and likened to a scene from a film. She spent the night frantically trying to contact anyone who could intervene. Further obstacles emerged when she tried to leave Crimea with her children. Russian officials continued to obstruct her on the basis of her previous questioning, showing resistance to her return to Ukraine.

Eventually, she was flown to Belarus and then on to Ukraine. Oksana also reported an unexpected moment that occurred in Moscow. She was instructed to visit the Qatari Embassy. There, she was met by Maria Lvova-Belova, who had said 'let me meet this woman that has woken up half of Moscow and Ukraine'. It was only after her return to Ukraine that she realised the significance of this encounter and who the Russian official was.

Throughout the process, there was little clarity or guidance. No one informed her of who would be present at the embassy or how she should conduct herself. She was left shocked by how close she had come to one of the most prominent figures involved in the deportation of Ukrainian children, and expressed relief that this ordeal had not spiralled further.¹⁴⁸

A concern raised on the repatriation process is that the Ukrainian government currently holds a monopoly over returns. Repatriation is a multilayered and highly complex undertaking. Each case is unique, and government structures can be overly formalised and ill-equipped to manage such individualised needs. Reports state there is a growing view that there should be a creation of a new, specialised body potentially a dedicated ministry - to manage child repatriation independently. Since 2022, many NGOs and grassroots actors have emerged with direct experience in this area. A selection from this network, it was suggested, could form the foundation of a more agile, responsive body.

One of the most significant challenges facing families is the government bureaucracy surrounding documentation. This is often the first and most difficult hurdle in the process of bringing children home given many are an internally displaced person (IDP) or lack formal documentation.¹⁴⁹

A 16-year-old boy, who had been placed in a hospital alongside other children under occupation, was deported to Russia and stripped of his Ukrainian documents. He independently contacted an international organisation that helped facilitate his return alongside the Ukraine Ombudsman. As one of the earliest child returns recorded in December 2022, he was supported by volunteers to give testimony to the Prosecutor's Office - something that may have been missed entirely and this highlighted shortcomings in the repatriation system at that stage.

Following his return, he was placed in a special facility for individuals returning from Russia or occupied territories. These were reported as large shelters, unsuited to the needs of a traumatised child. Eventually, he was moved to a hospital, but it was a shared ward with constant turnover of patients, including wounded soldiers. He remained there for a prolonged period of time. In the meantime, he required restoration of his passport and for the formal recognition as an internally displaced person (IDP). He had also suffered a physical injury, requiring surgery and physical rehabilitation, but the absence of documents delayed his access to care.

Eventually, he had his Ukrainian passport and was enrolled again in education. He eventually received surgery and is now receiving psychological support however the case was extensive and incredibly bureaucratic. There were state services able to assist on his individual requirements, but no overarching support or management of his case and the system is reported to have been overwhelming and difficult to navigate.¹⁵⁰

An additional case was presented that demonstrated the very unique psychological support each child requires during repatriation that must be tailored to individual cases:

When fighting began in the Kherson region, many residents, including one family, fled the area. At that time, evacuation routes were only available via Russian-controlled territory, so they sought refuge with relatives in Russia. Living conditions were extremely poor and they were surviving on little income. At one point, the mother was arrested and sentenced to 18 months in prison. Following her detention, Russian child protection services seized her child and placed him in a state-run children's home. Although the action was legally dubious, the Russian authorities refused to release the child to his Ukrainian relatives, as none of them held Russian citizenship.

The child's grandmother in Ukraine contacted the children's home directly. The director expressed willingness to release the child to her but only if she obtained a Russian passport. The grandmother instead formally appealed to the Ukrainian Ombudsman's office, which successfully negotiated the child's return without her needing to change her citizenship. She was reunited with her grandchild and provided with basic documentation for his return.

It wasn't until the Emile Foundation, which was supporting the grandmother, reviewed the child's documents that it came to light he had spent 10 months in a psychiatric hospital - receiving what were described as "heavy" medications. It is reported that Russian authorities had labelled the boy as having Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), but upon return to Ukraine, psychiatric experts noted that the medication he had been prescribed was typically used for severe psychiatric stabilisation, not ADHD. It was observed no evidence of a psychiatric disorder that would justify such treatment was determined.¹⁵¹

Compounding repatriation for Ukraine is that many children cannot go back to their original homes and

communities, which often remain under occupation. In these cases, efforts are made to ensure they can reunite with relatives and settle in a safe, stable environment. Concerns have been raised that while the reintegration of returned children presents an opportunity for some to showcase efforts publicly, there is less effort on the sustained responsibility it requires long term. It was stated that there is an urgent need for stronger partnerships with international organisations, particularly to draw on European expertise in supporting traumatised children. Those returning often face bullying and stigmatisation, and Ukraine lacks the specialised training necessary for teachers and professionals to work effectively with children affected by war. Without this, the long-term reintegration and recovery of these children remains at risk.¹⁵²

Children returning from occupied territory initially express a sense of relief and safety. Many are eager to return home, reunite with relatives, and regain a sense of normalcy in a secure environment.¹⁵³ But while children may feel safer upon returning to Ukraine, many display clear signs of trauma and are in urgent need of longterm rehabilitation. Some have additional needs, including disabilities. An example was presented to this research, that when returning a child with autism back to Ukraine - originally deported from a Kherson orphanage - he was deeply unsettled and frightened by loud noises. He was returned to his grandmother to Kherson, still near the front line, with no access to psychological support or stable housing and under constant shelling. This case was presented as a demonstration of issues with long engagement between families of returned children and government bodies. On this occasion, the Emile Foundation involved military operatives to retrieve them from said front line location and place the family in a safer region of Ukraine.¹⁵⁴ It is maintained that many working within the institutions supporting returned children are dedicated and doing exceptional work, however the overall strategy is reported to lack a long-term vision for the welfare of these families. In one case, a 12-year-old girl was returned from Germany after she was found to have experienced serious neglect and faced risk of serious exploitation, yet for three months, it is reported no support was provided. 155

Those returning from the Russian Federation or elsewhere are eligible for temporary relocation status, which carries certain entitlements. However,

¹⁵⁰ Author Interview with Investigative Journalist and volunteer in the case, Kyiv, April 23 2025.

¹⁵¹ Author Interview with a representative from the Emile Foundation, May 2 2025.

Author Interview with a representative from the Emile Foundation, May 2 2025.

¹⁵³ Ibio

¹⁵⁴ Author Interview with a representative from the Emile Foundation, May 2 2025.

Author Interview with a representative from the Emile Foundation, May 2 2025.

delays in processing and a lack of clarity around access to housing or financial support is said to often deter families from returning all together. Without guarantees of stability, families are left in limbo and uncertain on making the journey. Sometimes those who do return - especially children - can face social challenges, such as bullying for speaking Russian. Ukraine has historically not had the economic means to support low-income families, and the war has only deepened this challenge. The limited budget prioritises military needs and support for those currently displaced, and it is reported that returnees are often left outside the focus of existing policy. With so few families returning, there is little political incentive to shift that focus. Yet without targeted support, returns will remain the exception, not the norm.156

An example of the complexities of repatriation when compounded by other existing challenges - such as internal displacement and chronic illness - is demonstrated:

The last time Olga would see her son Victor before he became trapped within the full-scale invasion was on 10 February 2022. She had intended to visit him at the facility where he was living on 24 February - the very day the invasion began. It would be over a year and a half before she saw him again.

In the early weeks of the war, Olga managed to maintain contact with one of the staff at Victor's facility, who sent her several photographs. However, this communication soon ceased and she was left without updates on her son's well being or whereabouts. The repatriation journey took almost a full week and was complex and arduous, involving travel from Ukraine to Moscow, a flight to a secondary location, and finally a return via Moscow and Minsk. The logistical challenges were significant, compounded by the emotional toll of the process.

Initial assistance upon return to Ukraine included basic support in the form of food and clothing for both Victor and Olga. This was provided through a local social service that was tasked with assisting those affected by the war, but was not connected to the repatriation effort. A few clothes were sourced for Victor through the local council. Once they were resettled, she also received support for six months as an IDP, including food, things for the children, help with payments and kitchen essentials. After this sixmonth period, the assistance stopped entirely.

Olga reports that the first direct support connected specifically to Victor's return came from a representative of the Ombudsman's office, who met her at the railway station and handed her a sum of money designated for travel. As Victor had no belongings, she used part of this money to purchase clothing and other necessities. She also recalled receiving a small amount of money intended for use while in Russia.

Before the war began, Victor had required a surgical operation due to a longstanding medical condition. This operation was carried out in the occupied territory following his transfer, without Olga's knowledge or consent. The procedure took place in May 2022, and no contact was made with Olga beforehand. Upon his return to her care, she continued the necessary medical treatment. Initially on return, Victor exhibited clear signs of distress, particularly when confronted with doctors. He cried, shouted, and resisted being touched by medical personnel. Since receiving care in Ukraine, these extreme reactions have ceased. However, due to his underlying medical condition, Victor is unable to speak and could not articulate what happened to him or describe the source of his fear.

Upon return, Ukrainian doctors diagnosed Victor with a significant developmental delay. He is not meeting the developmental milestones expected of children his age, struggling with tasks as basic as identifying shapes. He has been prescribed specialist support, which requires regular, almost daily, intervention. However, the family now lives in a village where such services are inaccessible. Travel to the city is not feasible on a daily basis, and the infrastructure and resources required to provide Victor with the support he needs are simply not in place. Olga has received no additional assistance in securing this vital care, and Victor remains without the specialised developmental support necessary for his recovery and progress.¹⁵⁷

Additionally, many families continue to live along the front lines, and there are numerous examples of the struggles they face in trying to retrieve their children - and the emotional toll it takes when their efforts are met with silence:

Lubov's daughter had temporarily placed her two children in a children's home in Kherson while resolving personal matters. She retained full parental rights. She explained that following the occupation, Russian authorities transferred

the children to Crimea. An effort was made to facilitate the mother's travel to retrieve them, but Lubov reports Ukrainian authorities denied her permission to leave the country due to an outstanding loan. Since then, Russia has refused to allow her a second attempt to reach them.

The children's grandmother has since taken on responsibility as their representative. She has not spoken with or seen the children since before the full-scale invasion. She remains willing to travel to retrieve the children, but no formal assistance or contact has been provided.

She continues to struggle to make sense of the situation and describes losing the children as losing a piece of her heart. Lubov is increasingly worried they will not remember their mother or her. She lovingly described the children. Her grandson was still very young the last time she saw them, largely sleeping and eating. Her granddaughter loved water - whether in puddles, washing up water or baths - and took joy in making splashes. She remembered how the children would be with her in the garden while she planted berries. She described teaching her grandson how to eat with a spoon and how her granddaughter was confident and brave. Her understanding is that the children remain in Crimea, and she does not believe they could be legally adopted in Russia given that their mother retains parental rights.

She has received no further information from Ukrainian authorities since her daughter was blocked from travelling, and she fears the children – if returned - may be returned to their original district in Kherson, an area now under heavy shelling. Her area has sustained significant damage, but she has no alternative place to go. When the children were taken, the boy was 18 months old, and the girl was three.

According to the Emile Foundation, this pattern - of families left in the dark - has become increasingly common.¹⁵⁸

There also exists scenarios in which guardians are fighting for the return of multiple children amidst an incredibly bureaucratic system forced upon them by the Russian Federation, in addition to contending with war.

Tatiana is the legal guardian of three children currently under Russian occupation, either inside Russia or Russian controlled territory. She has expressed readiness to return to Russian controlled territory to retrieve them, despite having endured an extremely distressing experience recovering her biological son who was transferred to a camp in Crimea, in 2023.

In 2024 Tatiana, a foster mother in Ukraine was granted quardianship of three children who were without parental care, one of whom she was previously known to, having studied alongside her biological son. His mother had been formally deprived of her parental rights, and although the boy's grandmother initially had responsibility, she was ultimately unable to cope due to his behavioural challenges. The boy had entered foster care under occupation and was later transferred to Crimea. Tatiana had longstanding involvement with him and provided informal care prior to his removal. Tatiana reports that Ukrainian authorities later informed her that the Russian side had not granted permission for his return. Tatiana inferred from this that he may have been adopted while in Russian occupation.

Her 2023 journey to collect her biological son was by her own account, both psychologically and physically punishing. Upon arrival, she was not permitted to touch him or take his hand. Russian officials treated her with suspicion, accused her of acting on behalf of Ukrainian intelligence, and subjected her to arrest and several days of intense questioning under polygraph by Russian agents. Though she was eventually allowed access to her son, the psychological toll of the experience was significant. Her son, under visible stress, initially reacted with anger when they were reunited because of the long delay; however she reports that they eventually hugged and were both incredibly relieved to be reunited.

He had reportedly managed to send secret messages asking for help. Tatiana noticed visible injuries, his arm and leg had both previously been broken. She was told these were sports-related accidents, but she felt the injuries did not align with such claims. He refused to discuss the details of his time at the camp but had experienced ongoing conflicts with those in charge, which she interpreted as an effort to wear him down. Tatiana said he was subjected to isolation as punishment for acts of defiance, including tearing down a Russian flag. She provided one example of when he had been beaten with the handle machine gun and reports he has permanent hearing loss in one ear after a blow to the head.

Despite the ordeal, Tatiana remains determined not to abandon the other children has guardianship of. Her past experience has only deepened her concern for them and their experience in Russian-controlled areas. She maintains that the Ukrainian government has failed to provide adequate assistance. Tatayna added that one of the children under her guardianship has a grandmother, now aged 96, who has expressed a willingness to spend any amount of money and do anything to see the child again. Tatiana is willing to return to Russian-held territory to retrieve the children, even after the traumatic experience she endured.

She shared a photograph of her biological son wearing protective gear in Crimea. While deeply concerned for his safety and emotional over his ordeal, she expressed pride in the fact that he had not succumbed to pressure or collaborated with occupying forces for financial gain. In her view, it is impossible to judge children on how they act under such duress but she admired his resilience and his refusal to abandon his principles. She is exceptionally proud of her child.¹⁵⁹

Investigations and identification:

Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) refers to intelligence generated by collecting and analysing publicly available information. The raw data is not the intelligence alone - once critically examined and given meaningful context the data is able to tell a story, offer evidence for an investigation and answer specific research questions and provide actionable insights.¹⁶⁰ It can be employed to investigate hidden services, cyber crime and threat detection from state and non-state actors.¹⁶¹ Events occurring within the digital realm demand solutions leveraging cyberspace resources, including advanced investigative tools and access to vast amounts of publicly available data. 162 Paliscope is a Swedish intelligence technology firm that supports law enforcement and intelligence agencies with tools for investigating complex cases. These cases involve human trafficking, national security threats, organised crime and hostile foreign intelligence actors. Working with their NGO partners, the team - with experience in law enforcement, military intelligence and Al research - use their tools and software to process, analyse, and document investigative data, to locate stolen and missing Ukrainian children. Paliscope's contribution to war crimes investigations in Ukraine demonstrates the transformative potential of OSINT in humanitarian crises.163

At the start of the full-scale invasion, and recognising the inevitability of civilian casualties and war crimes, they directed their efforts towards supporting Ukrainian agencies with their war crimes investigations. Initially, their focus was on monitoring the activities of the Wagner Mercenary Force, but expanded to address the alarming issue of missing children.¹⁶⁴ Their face recognition technology, which operates offline for data security, analyses the facial profiles of missing children provided by Ukrainian authorities and generates alerts when matches are detected. While the technology does not guarantee absolute certainty, it provides intelligence assessments indicating whether a match is possible, probable, or likely.¹⁶⁵ Unlike cloud-based solutions, their software is installed directly on local computers, ensuring that agencies maintain complete control over the data. The initial phase of the investigation involved gathering facial data, creating face-matching rules, and setting up alert systems. This was followed by identifying potential locations where missing children might be held in Russia, Belarus and Russian controlled occupied territories. The company's face recognition technology, now utilised by Ukrainian agencies, has proven instrumental in identifying missing children and licenses are now provided to the Ukrainian Ministry of the Interior's Directorate for Missing Persons to support their investigations. The system groups matches based on conditions, allowing agencies to efficiently identify likely matches, even when significant age gaps or progressions are present in the datasets.166

The investigation began first and foremost with Maria Lvova-Belova, Russian politician, Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights and a central figure in the child abductions, listed alongside the Russian President in the arrest warrants issued

Gill, Rity, "What Is Open-Source Intelligence?" SANS Institute, February 23, 2023, accessed January 16, 2025. https://www.sans.org/blog/what-is-opensource-intelligence/

¹⁶¹ Borges, Esteban, "What Is Open Source Intelligence (OSINT)?" Recorded Institute, June 24, 2024, accessed January 16, 2025, https://www.recordedfuture.com/blog/open-source-intelligence-definition

[&]quot;Utilising OSINT to Combat Money Laundering." Paliscope, October 4, 2023, accessed January 16, 2025, https://www.paliscope.com/2023/10/04/ utilizing-osint-to-combat-money-laundering/

¹⁶³ Jones, Joseph (Palascope) interview with author, January 15 2025.

[&]quot;Wagner Group: Facts, Leader, Rebellion, & Russia-Ukraine War," Britannica, last modified February 19, 2025. https://www.britannica.com/topic/Wag-164

Wagner Group, Russian mercenary group that has conducted military operations around the world on behalf of the Russian government. Although private military companies are illegal in Russia, extensive ties between Wagner and Russian military and intelligence structures have long been assumed. In June 2023 these links were confirmed by Russian Pres. Vladimir Putin when he stated that "maintenance of the entire Wagner Group was fully provided for by the state."

¹⁶⁵ Jones, Joseph (Palascope) interview with author, January 15 2025.

¹⁶⁶

by the ICC under Article 25(3)(a) of the Rome Statute. 167 Using publicly available data from online platforms such as VKontakte, Russian social media, investigators collected her photos, videos, connections, and the groups and communities she followed and engaged with. 168 These provided critical leads for understanding her network and activities. This process allowed investigators to map Lvova-Belova's inner circle, which included her sister, Sophia Lvova-Belova, and others associated with government activities. This identified patterns in the online activity of key individuals, provided insights into their roles and potential locations of missing children.¹⁶⁹

Through the extensive data scraping and monitoring of Russian media, and online platforms including Telegram, Palascrope has reportedly identified the network of summer camps set up by Maria Lvova-Belova. Its reported that these camps were found to play a role in the abduction of children from orphanages, schools, and even families in the occupied territories that were deemed "too Ukrainian" by Russian agents. This information, including photos and videos, is integrated into Palascrope's system using a red, amber, and green classification process. The process offers a basic visual assessment to identify possible matches. A green match suggests a general likeness, though the image quality is poor. Amber indicates several matches with some discrepancies, such as changes in hair color or scarring, raising doubts about identity. Red signals a strong match, with high facial similarity and consistent appearances in the same orphanage or camp. However, this can be unreliable, as children are frequently relocated. Image metadata, like EXIF data, helps verify timelines by showing creation and upload dates.¹⁷⁰ A more disturbing aspect of the investigation involves the scraping of Russia's publicly available adoption databases. Investigators were able to determine that some children listed as missing in Ukraine are now featured on these

platforms in which the forcibly deported children are advertised online, oten having had their personal information - such as name and date of birth changed, making facial recognition even more critical. While the Al operates offline, ensuring data security, it has demonstrated remarkable accuracy, even as the children age.

While Palascrope's work focuses on scraping open source data from public websites and sources, the dark web remains a significant challenge in these cases. Reports indicate that some trafficked children have surfaced on dark web platforms, beyond the reach of current operations. Given Russia's longstanding issues with child sexual abuse and the distribution of related materials, addressing these dark web activities requires the involvement of international law enforcement bodies such as Interpol and Europol.¹⁷¹ Palascrope emphasises a targeted and ethical approach to their methods of data collection, but highlighted the urgent need for further coordinated efforts in this space. Instead of conducting blanket scrapes of social media, they focus on individuals directly linked to the crime, collecting publicly available content from these sources and related websites.¹⁷²

A report by the Yale Humanitarian Research Lab (HRL), published in December 2024 into Russia's systematic deportation and adoption of Ukrainian children, has not only sparked allegations of crimes against humanity, but concludes with overwhelming confidence that the Russian Federation has engaged and intentionally orchestrated the forced adoption and fostering of Ukrainian children.¹⁷³ The Conflict Observatory is an independent initiative in partnership with Yale University's Humanitarian Research Lab, the Smithsonian Cultural Rescue Initiative, PlanetScape AI, and others that leverages geospatial technologies to document atrocities in Ukraine. The project seeks to identify, track, and document potential atrocities committed in Ukraine by Russia and its affiliated forces, using open source

International Criminal Court, "Situation in Ukraine: ICC Judges Issue Arrest Warrants against Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin and Maria Alekseyevna 167 $Lvova-Belova, "March 17, 2023, \\ \underline{https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/situation-ukraine-icc-judges-issue-arrest-warrants-against-vladimir-vlad$

¹⁶⁸ VK (short for its original name VKontakte; Russian: ВКонтакте, meaning InContact) is a Russian online social media and social networking service based in Saint Petersburg.

¹⁶⁹ Jones, Joseph (Palascope) interview with author, January 15 2025.

¹⁷⁰

¹⁷¹ Rowland, Jacky, "Russia is 'major child porn source," BBC News, December 4, 2002, accessed January 18, 2025, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/ europe/2543717.stm

U.S. Department of State, "2024 Trafficking in Persons Report: Russia," accessed January 18, 2025, https://www.state.gov/reports/2024-trafficking-in-persons-report/russia/

[&]quot;Child Abuse in Russia is Routine," The Moscow Times, December 25, 2021, accessed January 18, 2025, https://www.themoscowtimes. $\underline{com/2012/12/25/child\text{-}abuse\text{-}in\text{-}russia\text{-}is\text{-}routine\text{-}a20452}$

Russian Sexual Violence Awareness Week: Russia is failing to meet international standards on combatting sexual violence," Equality Now, April 15, $2021, accessed \ January\ 18,\ 2025, \ \underline{https://equalitynow.org/news_and_insights/russian_sexual_violence_awareness_week/2021, accessed \ \underline{https://equalitynow.org/news_and_insights/russian_week/2021, accessed \ \underline{https://equalitynow.org/news_and_insights/russian_week/2021, accessed \ \underline{https://equalitynow.org/news_and_insights/russian_week/20$ Jones, Joseph (Palascope) interview with author, January 15 2025.

¹⁷² Khoshnood, Kaveh et al., "Russia's Systematic Program for the Re-education and Adoption of Ukraine's Children," Humanitarian Research Lab at Yale 173 $School of Public Health, February 14 \ 2023, \\ \underline{https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/humanitarian-research-lab-yale-school-public-health-russias-systemat-lab-yale$ ic-program-re-education-adoption-ukraines-children-enruuk

intelligence.¹⁷⁴ As part of its foreign aid freeze, the US State Department has ended funding for the Ukraine Conflict Observatory.¹⁷⁵ President Trump has pledged to work with Ukraine and Russia on child returns, but Yale's Humanitarian Research Lab director called the move a catastrophic blow that aids those trying to hide the truth and avoid accountability.¹⁷⁶

This investigation relied on publicly accessible data and commercially available satellite imagery, including very high-resolution (VHR) satellite imagery. Analysts aggregated, and verified opensource media, Russian government documents and communications, and social media to identify Ukrainian children placed in Russia's programme. The investigation also examined Russian legislation and corporate records to uncover the entities facilitating these efforts. 177 HRL identified 314 children, including 148 listed in Russia's child placement databases and 166 placed directly with Russian citizens. The programme, led by President Vladimir Putin and Children's Rights Commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova, involves a network of federal and occupation officials and aims to "Russify" Ukrainian children.¹⁷⁸ The scope of the research focuses on the fostering and adoption of children primarily from Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. Of the 314 children placed into Russia's adoption and foster care system since February 2022, some were transported by Russia's Aerospace Forces - a division of the Ministry of Defence - before being handed over to Russian families. At least 67 of these children have since been provided Russian citizenship. Most were taken from parts of Donetsk and Luhansk that have been under Russian occupation since 2014, illegally annexed by Russia in September 2022. One confirmed case included within Yale's research involves a child taken from Mariupol during Russia's attack on the city in early 2022.179

International law enforcement bodies and investigative journalists - including the BBC, The New York Times, and the Financial Times - have

conducted in-depth investigations into Russia's transfer and adoption of Ukrainian children, employing tools such as facial recognition technology and OSINT. Drawing on image analysis, public documents, and interviews with Ukrainian officials and family members, the Financial Times traced four missing Ukrainian children featured on a Russian government-affiliated adoption website. By comparing photographs from Ukraine's national database of missing children with images from the Russian site, the FT identified matches later confirmed by the children's families through official Ukrainian channels. The children were found to have been relocated to regions near Moscow, the Kazakh border, and Russian-occupied Crimea. In coordination with The New York Times, a further 17 children from an orphanage were also identified.¹⁸⁰

Similarly, a BBC investigation revealed the successful tracing of eight Ukrainian children believed to have been abducted during Russia's invasion. The operation involved over 60 investigators from 23 countries, working collaboratively at Europol's headquarters in The Hague. Using advanced open-source intelligence and facial recognition technology, the team identified recent images of the children online, many of which appeared in Russian propaganda materials. Due to restricted access to Russia and Belarus, geolocation experts relied on analysing photos and videos, using satellite data to determine the locations where they were taken. Network data analysis further helped to identify locations where multiple children were being held together.¹⁸¹ This multinational and cross-sector effort demonstrates the vital role of advanced technology and international collaboration in war crimes investigations.

The use of OSINT in criminal and legal contexts has gained significant traction, particularly with recent international investigations attracting global media attention. Its decentralised nature makes it a promising and compelling tool for accountability in future war crimes investigations and reporting.

¹⁷⁴ Christensen, Natasha, Susan Wolfinbarger, Jason Lapadula, "The Conflict Observatory: leveraging geospatial technologies to document atrocities in Ukraine," State Magazine, accessed March 24, 2025, https://statemag.state.gov/2022/10/1022feat06/#:":text=The%20Conflict%20Observatory/%2C%20in%20line,and%20atrocities%20committed%20in%20Ukraine

[&]quot;Did US Delete Data On Kidnapped Ukraine Children? What State Department Said," NDTV World News, March 20, 2025, accessed March 24, 2025, https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/us-government-denies-deleting-data-on-program-tracking-kidnapped-ukraine-children-7965011

Furlong, Ray, "A Catastrophic Blow As US Shuts Down Unit Investigating War Crimes in Ukraine," *Radio Free Europe, March* 19, 2025, accessed March 24, 2025, https://www.rferl.org/a/yale-ukraine-war-crimes-investigation/33351956.html

¹⁷⁷ Khoshnood, Kaveh et al., "Russia's Systematic Program for the Re-education and Adoption of Ukraine's Children," Humanitarian Research Lab at Yale School of Public Health, February 14 2023, https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/humanitarian-research-lab-yale-school-public-health-russias-systemat-ic-program-re-education-adoption-ukraines-children-enruuk

¹⁷⁸ Ibid

¹⁷⁹ Ibio

Killing, Alison and Christopher Miller, 'FT investigation finds Ukrainian children on Russian adoption sites,' Financial Times, June 12, 2024, https://www.ft.com/content/2d0013d2-a407-449f-b1e2-3d14fe65188f

Holligan, Anna and Diana Kuryshko, 'Ukraine's missing children tracked down in Russia by digital sleuths,' *BBC News*, February 9, 024, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-68249102

However, this very decentralisation also presents challenges when using the data as evidence in court as there are some criticisms related to verification and credibility. It is a rapidly developing tool of investigation that lacks a uniform conceptual framework, with different disciplines and institutions adopting varying definitions and methodologies. The first challenge is the lack of standardisation, which complicates the application of evidentiary standards. The second challenge concerns expert testimony, which is essential for explaining both the OSINT process and the collection of open-source evidence. Intelligence communities have yet to establish OSINT as a distinct discipline with clearly defined boundaries. The absence of a central regulatory or accreditation body, standardised definitions, and consistent guidelines presents challenges for its future in the courtroom. This has led to a failure to incorporate legal accountability considerations during the data collection, so there is rarely access to sources who can verify its authenticity. The institutionalisation of OSINT would offer a potential pathway to addressing these challenges and assist in the development of legitimisation of these tools. 182

The Russian Federation's Weaponizing of **Children Conclusion:**

The forcible deportation, transfer, and assimilation of Ukrainian children by the Russian Federation represents one of the most egregious violations of international humanitarian law in 21st century Europe. Since the start of the full-scale invasion in 2022 - and building on precedents established in Crimea and Donbas since 2014 - Russia has escalated a systematic campaign of removing children from occupied Ukrainian territories, placing them into Russian custody, and militarising them under Kremlin ideology. Children have been forcibly adopted into Russian families, placed in camps, or transferred into institutional care far from their homeland. Ukrainian identity, language, and heritage are being actively erased, while legal guardianship is stripped away under the guise of protection or humanitarian intervention. As of May 2024, Ukrainian authorities confirmed over 19,500 documented cases of forced child transfer or deportation - with countless others likely unrecorded.

What emerges from this report is a picture of targeted demographic warfare: a state-sponsored attempt not only to undermine Ukraine militarily, but to fragment its society, sever generational ties, and condition a cohort of young people to reject the very idea of Ukrainian sovereignty. Beyond adoption, these children are frequently enrolled in ideological and military indoctrination programmes, including cadet schools and the Russian Youth Army. In occupied territories, schools have been stripped of Ukrainian curricula, replaced with distorted histories and propaganda portraying Ukraine and the West as existential threats. Through both formal education and informal youth organisations, children are exposed to training that prepares them for future mobilisation against their country of origin. These practices - maintained by many to

constitute war crimes - have drawn condemnation from international legal bodies, including the International Criminal Court, which issued arrest warrants for President Vladimir Putin and Children's Commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova in March 2023.

The consequences of this campaign extend far beyond Russia's borders. The report documents how displaced Ukrainian families are trapped in bureaucratic limbo, unable to retrieve children held in occupied territories or the Russian Federation. Cases featured include parents and guardians forced to navigate dangerous, long journeys, facing surveillance, intimidation, and even arrest when attempting to recover their children. The story of Margarita, renamed and re-registered in Russia after being taken from Kherson, demonstrates how identity alteration and adoption are weaponised to sever ties with Ukraine. The experiences of children with disabilities, especially those from institutions such as the Oleshky Specialised Boarding School, are particularly harrowing. Many children - in addition to those who remain unaccounted for were subjected to psychiatric institutions, or held in conditions amounting to de facto imprisonment.

This is not only a humanitarian crisis but also a test case for the future of the international legal order. Russia's use of children as instruments of hybrid warfare, including deportation, re-education, militarisation, and propaganda, raises serious concerns about the enforceability of international law in the face of deliberate state obstruction. The long-term effects on Ukraine's reconstruction, societal cohesion, and psychological recovery are profound. Unless repatriation is treated as an urgent wartime priority rather than a post-war aspiration, Ukraine risks losing an entire generation

not just to violence, but to erasure. The return and reintegration of these children is a geopolitical, legal, and moral imperative. One that demands far greater coordination, political will, and international accountability than we have seen to date. The use of OSINT to uncover networks of professional adoptive parents - operating through online platforms to facilitate illegal adoptions - highlights that modern deployments of propaganda and crime demand equally modern investigative solutions.

Human Trafficking of Ukrainian Refugees:

Human trafficking is a human rights violation that exploits people for profit, affecting individuals of all genders, ages, and backgrounds in every region of the world. Traffickers use ranging tactics including violence, deception, coercion, and false promises of education or employment to manipulate their victims. 183 Trafficking in conflict zones has drawn growing international attention, with the UN Security Council addressing the issue in Resolution 2388 in November 2017, expressing deep concern over its persistence in conflict-affected areas. The UN also underscored that certain offences associated with trafficking in persons in the context of armed conflict may constitute war crimes.¹⁸⁴ Armed conflicts heighten the risk of trafficking by amplifying social and economic vulnerabilities and eroding the rule of law. The collapse of state institutions and widespread impunity create an environment where these actors can flourish.¹⁸⁵ Globally, trafficking for sexual exploitation is the most commonly detected form.¹⁸⁶ Trafficking for sexual exploitation has also been reported as part of the widespread sexual and gender-based violence prevalent in conflict zones.¹⁸⁷ Article 8 of the Rome Statute places 'enforced prostitution' as a form of sexual and gender-based violence, therefore if perpetrated in the context of armed conflict, it is a war crime. 188

Since the 1990s, Ukraine has been a source, transit and destination country for human trafficking,

across all categories, including forced labour and sexual exploitation.¹⁸⁹ Conflict disproportionately impacts women, girls, and marginalised groups. As the economic and societal upheaval of war exacerbates existing inequalities, many are forced into unprotected, informal economic sectors, increasing their vulnerability to Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV), Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and trafficking.¹⁹⁰ Depending on where they flee to, refugees often lack regular immigration status and uncertainty on their rights in their host country.¹⁹¹ As such, they can unknowingly fall prey to nefarious actors, exploiting their needs, making them particularly vulnerable to trafficking and serious crimes. The 2014 conflict in Ukraine led to a fourfold increase in the number of Ukrainian victims identified in Western Europe by 2016.192 However, the sharp increase in transnational trafficking of Ukrainian refugees that was widely anticipated during the 2022 crisis has not yet been officially recorded. This comes despite trafficking cases across Europe reaching a ten-year high that same year - a trend that has continued, with two-thirds of identified victims in 2023 being women and girls.¹⁹³

Research has produced extensive evidence of severe levels of exploitation during this time. In Lublin, Poland, a local human rights organisation, Homo Faber, has reported various instances of men stalking refugee shelter points, claiming to offer

- 183 "Human Trafficking FAQs: what is Human Trafficking," United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, //www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/faqs.
- 184 "Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2018, Booklet 2: Trafficking in persons in the context of armed conflict," United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2018): 5, accessed January 1, 2025, https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2018/GloTIP2018_BOOKLET_2_Conflict.pdf
- 185
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Global Report on Trafficking in Persons, all editions. 186
- "Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2018, Booklet 2: Trafficking in persons in the context of armed conflict," United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2018): 9-10, accessed January 1, 2025, https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2018/GloTIP2018_BOOKLET_2_Conflict.pdf
- 188 Ochodnicanová, Eva Veldhuizen, and Alicia Hevs. "New War. Same Battle? Conflict-Related Human Trafficking in the Context of the War in Ukraine." Journal of Illicit Economies and Development, vol 6, no. 2 (2024): 34, https://doi.org/10.31389/ jied.235
- 189 U.S. Agency for International Development. "Trafficking in Persons I Ukraine," June 12, 2023. https://www.usaid.gov/ukraine/fact-sheet/dec-16-2022trafficking-persons
- 190 UN Women, "Rapid Gender Analysis of Ukraine," May 4 2022, https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2022/05/rapid-gender-analy-
- 191 United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, "International Migration Report 2017: Highlights" accessed 23 August 2024 (ST/ESA/SER.A/404), https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/publications/migrationreport/docs/MigrationReport2017_ Highlights.pdf
- 192 "Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2022," United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2022, https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2022/GLOTiP_2022_web.pdf
- 193 "Trafficking in human beings statistics," Eurostat, date accessed May 20th 2025. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Trafficking_in_human_beings_statistics

free accommodation and work to unaccompanied Ukrainian women.¹⁹⁴ In Romania, Ukrainian mothers and their children were approached by individuals posing as volunteers, asking about their transport and accommodation plans. When local law enforcement intervened, they discovered that these men, pretending to be genuine volunteers, were attempting to exploit and potentially traffick the women and children.¹⁹⁵ One woman who arrived in the UK, was offered accommodation online under the 'Homes for Ukraine Scheme' and upon inspection by a volunteer organisation, it was deemed this offer had been set up for sexual exploitation. It was reported that the volunteer found a lock on the outside of the room door and cameras on the inside. 196

Official data on human trafficking is often unreliable due to the significant challenges in studying and reporting these crimes, particularly given the hidden, transient, and vulnerable nature of the affected populations. This can include those in sex work, refugees, undocumented migrants, and victims who are forced into criminal behaviours. These groups are often classified as "hidden populations", lacking a definable sampling frame. Individuals in such groups are frequently involved in illegal or stigmatised activities. This can result in them being unwilling or apprehensive to cooperate with law enforcement or have a fear of reporting altogether.¹⁹⁷ Similarly, the grooming tactics used by traffickers often mean that victims are not fully aware of their exploitation and, while lacking their own established local support network, remain hidden and isolated from view.¹⁹⁸ These trafficking networks often operate across multiple countries, exploiting differences in law enforcement capabilities, and border controls. 199 This transnational nature requires coordinated international efforts, which can be complicated by varying legal systems, lack of cooperation, and jurisdictional challenges. Unlike

domestic laws, international law lacks a centralised authority to enforce its rules.²⁰⁰ While there are international courts and organisations like the International Court of Justice or the International Criminal Court, their ability to enforce decisions is limited.²⁰¹

Since the full-scale invasion, potential or confirmed trafficking victims from Ukraine have been identified across Europe, including in Albania, Germany, Italy, Poland, Romania, the UK, as well as in Panama, Argentina, and Israel. The Office of the Ukraine Ombudsman has identified this as a persistent issue, particularly given the displacement of millions of Ukrainian citizens worldwide following the fullscale invasion. They report that many refugees are unaware they have been trafficked or that they are a victim of trafficking. Factors such as their unfamiliarity with local labour laws, fears of their own criminal liability and their right to remain in host-nations means victims are left terrified to come forward and seek assistance. In many cases, they are simply trying to survive. The Office of the Ukrainian Ombudsman has also noted cases in which Ukrainian citizens have been arrested for crimes committed as a direct consequence of being trafficked. The situation is further complicated by a lack of information sharing among European law enforcement agencies, which hinders Ukraine's ability to provide assistance in such cases.²⁰² This was also highlighted by the Counter Trafficking Network, who shared concerns that across Europe there is a lack of proactive investigations on exploitation when investigating crimes and as a result victims can be missed.²⁰³ As the fullscale invasion continues into its third year and the possibility of mass-returns emerges, available evidence of severe trafficking and exploitation must be investigated.

¹⁹⁴ Shoaib, Alia, "Pimps' Are Stalking Poland's Railway Stations and Border Crossings Targeting Vulnerable Women and Children Refugees Fleeing Ukraine, Charity Groups Warn," Business Insider, March 26, 2022, https://www.businessinsider.com/ukraine-women-and-children-refugees-targeted-by-predatory-traffickers-2022-3

¹⁹⁵ Harding, Nick, "How Traffickers Are Targeting Ukrainian Refugees For The Flesh Trade," The Ethicalist, May 18, 2022, https://theethicalist.com/sextrade-preying-on-ukrainian-refugees/

Taylor, Diane, "Ukrainian refugees at risk of homelessness and exploitation in UK, report finds," The Guardian, July 16, 2024, "https://www.theguardian. 196 $\underline{com/uk-news/article/2024/jul/16/ukrainian-refugees-risk-of-homelessness-and-exploitation-uk}$

Tyldum, Guri, and Anette Brunovskis, "Describing the Unobserved: Methodological Challenges in Empirical Studies on Human Trafficking," Internation-197 al Migration 43, no. 1–2 (January 2005): 17–34, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0020-7985.2005.00310.x.

¹⁹⁸ "They don't know they're victims': She was trafficked at 17, but didn't recognize the signs," CBC Radio, last modified March 21, 2018, https://www. cbc.ca/radio/thecurrent/the-current-for-march-19-2018-1.4582208/they-don-t-know-they-re-victims-she-was-trafficked-at-17-but-didn-t-recognize-thesigns-1.4582210

[&]quot;Understanding human trafficking," United Nations, Peace and Security, 05.01.25, https://www.un.org/en/peace-and-security/understanding-hu-199 man-trafficking

²⁰⁰ Suter, Keith, "The Successes and Limitations of International Law and the International Court of Justice," Medicine, Conflict and Survival 20, no. 4 (2004): 345, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27017609

²⁰¹ Belfencha, Ismail, and Manal Hamdani, "The Legitimacy Trap: Balancing Enforcement and International Cooperation within the International Criminal Court," Yale Journal of International Affairs, December 11, 2024, https://www.yalejournal.org/publications/the-legitimacy-trap-balancing-enforce- $\underline{\text{ment-and-international-cooperation-within-the-international-criminal-court}}$

²⁰² Special Representatives of the Ukrainian Parliamentary Commissioner for Human Rights (Kyiv), interview with author, July 25, 2024.

²⁰³ Counter Trafficking Network, interview with author, March 12, 2025.

Ukraine Trafficking Statistics:

To be understood as a trafficked person in Ukraine the victim must establish status, adding further complexity to the reporting and data associated with human trafficking. In accordance with the current national legislation, the decision to establish - or refuse to establish - the status of a person who has suffered from human trafficking is made by the National Social Service of Ukraine (National Social Service).²⁰⁴ These figures do not capture the full scope of the refugee crisis but highlight a sharp increase in incidents occurring within Ukraine possibly resulting from the crisis.

According to the National Social Service of Ukraine, in 2022, 47 statuses of victims of human trafficking were established, including: 19 for women, 25 for men, and 3 for children (2 boys and 1 girl). The most common forms of exploitation were labour (14 persons), involvement in criminal activity (11 persons), use in armed conflicts (12 persons), begging (8 persons), and sexual exploitation (2 persons). This number is made up of 30 people who suffered from internal trafficking and 17 from cross-border trafficking. The countries of destination (exploitation) included Ukraine (29 persons), France (10 persons), the Russian Federation (5 persons), Poland (2 persons), and China (1 person).

In 2023, 118 statuses of victims of human trafficking were established, including: 47 for women, 53 for men, 18 for children (9 boys and 9 girls). The most common forms of exploitation were labour (22 persons), involvement in criminal activity (17 persons), use in armed conflicts (55 persons), begging (1 person), sexual exploitation (11 persons), sale of a child (2 persons) and other types (10 persons).

89 of these people were from internal trafficking and 29 from cross-border trafficking. The countries of destination (exploitation) included Ukraine (89 persons), the Russian Federation (12 persons), France (5 persons), Germany (4

persons), Poland (3 persons), Turkey (2 persons), Romania (2 persons), and Egypt (1 person).

As of the 12th of November 2024 when this data was communicated there were 175 statuses of victims of human trafficking established, including: 66 - women, 99 - men, 10 - children (5 boys and 5 girls). The most common forms of exploitation were mixed (117 persons), labour (14 persons), involvement in criminal activity (4 persons), use in armed conflicts (19 persons), begging (7 persons), sexual exploitation (13 persons), and sale of a child (1 person).

In 2023, 103 people suffered from internal trafficking, 69 from cross-border trafficking, and 3 from mixed trafficking. The countries of destination (exploitation) included Ukraine (103 persons), the Russian Federation (66 persons), Poland (3 persons), the Republic of Belarus (2 persons), and Italy (1 person).²⁰⁵

From 2022 to 2024, there has been a steady rise in the number of Ukrainian citizens identified as victims of human trafficking. In 2022, 47 individuals were recognized as victims, and this number grew significantly to 118 in 2023. As of November 12, 2024, 175 individuals had been officially identified, reflecting an ongoing increase in cases. Across all years, men consistently represent a higher number of victims than women. However, the proportion of women has also increased over time, particularly in 2024, where they make up 66 of the identified victims - almost identical to data across Europe. Labour trafficking remains one of the most common forms of exploitation throughout the reporting period, with 14 cases in 2022, 22 in 2023, and 14 again in 2024. This form of exploitation has seen the most dramatic increase, rising from 12 cases in 2022 to 55 in 2023. before dropping to 19 in 2024. The surge in 2023 likely reflects the intensification of conflict-related vulnerabilities amid the ongoing war.

²⁰⁴ Figures provided to the author of the report report by the Deputy Head of Unit for Prevention of domestic violence and human trafficking (of the Department for monitoring of equal rights and freedoms, rights of national minorities, political and religious beliefs of the Secretariat of the Commissioner of the Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights), December 2nd 2024.

The Russian Federation consistently appears as a key destination for cross-border trafficking, with 5 victims in 2022, 12 in 2023, and a sharp increase to 66 in 2024. The dramatic rise in victims trafficked to the Russian Federation in 2024 warrants deeper analysis, as it may indicate escalated activities by organised crime networks exploiting refugees fleeing the conflict. Other destinations such as France, Poland, and Germany are mentioned across the years, though in smaller numbers. New locations, such as Turkey, Romania, and Egypt in 2023 and Belarus and Italy in 2024, highlight an expanding geographical reach of trafficking networks.

Ukraine is reportedly one of the leading countries of origin for individuals subjected to forced labour in Europe. This problem has been exacerbated by ongoing economic challenges and political instability.²⁰⁶ In 2023 the United States Trafficking in Persons Report classified Ukraine as Tier 2, a position they have remained. The Government of Ukraine has not yet fully achieved the minimum standards for combating human trafficking but has made notable progress in addressing the issue.²⁰⁷ Compared to the previous reporting period, The US State Department report determined the country's overall efforts have increased, allowing Ukraine to maintain its Tier 2 status.²⁰⁸ These efforts include enhanced collaboration with European partners on anti-trafficking investigations, despite facing significant resource and capacity challenges due to Russia's full-scale invasion. Additionally, for the second consecutive year, the government allocated increased funding in its national budget for antitrafficking initiatives. It also expanded awareness campaigns, particularly targeting displaced Ukrainians, and intensified efforts to identify potential trafficking victims among vulnerable groups.²⁰⁹ Due to the refugee crisis in 2022, centralised reporting of Ukrainian trafficked victims is made increasingly complicated as a result of information sharing failures and complexities with victims coming forward.

According to Ukraine's Commissioner for Missing Persons, the Unified Register of Persons Missing Under Special Circumstances currently records approximately 70,000 individuals whose whereabouts remain unknown. This figure encompasses not only Ukrainian military personnel and civilians, but also foreign nationals and stateless individuals. These cases fall under the legal category of "special circumstances," which is defined under Ukrainian legislation to include those affected by armed conflict, military operations, the temporary occupation of Ukrainian territory, and large-scale emergencies - whether natural or manmade.²¹⁰ Importantly, individuals who have left voluntarily as a refugee and subsequently disappeared, are not automatically included within this legal classification unless their disappearance can be directly linked to the conditions outlined above. While authorities do not currently possess verified evidence that children designated as missing under special circumstances - whether forcibly deported or transferred - have fallen victim to human trafficking, they acknowledge that such a possibility cannot be categorically dismissed.²¹¹ This demonstrates a significant gap in the data being collected on refugees and missing persons - something that not only hampers effective policy responses but also leaves vulnerable populations, particularly women and children, at heightened risk of exploitation, including trafficking.

[&]quot;Global Organised Crime Index: Ukraine," Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, 2021, https://ocindex.net/assets/downloads/2021/english/ocindex_profile_ukraine_2021.pdf

U.S. Department of State, "2024 Trafficking in Persons Report: Ukraine," accessed December 12 2024, https://www.state.gov/reports/2024-trafficking-in-persons-report/ukraine/

^{208 &}quot;What is the Trafficking in Persons Report?" Agape International Missions, July 9, 2024, accessed January 19, 2025, https://aimfree.org/trafficking-in-persons-report/#:":text=Tier%201%3A%20fully%20compliant%20with,compliant%20with%20the%20minimum%20standards
Tier 1: fully compliant with the minimum standards for elimination of severe forms of trafficking in persons.
Tier 2: not fully compliant, but making "significant efforts" to be compliant with the minimum standards.

U.S. Department of State, "2024 Trafficking in Persons Report: Ukraine," accessed December 12 2024, https://www.state.gov/reports/2024-trafficking-in-persons-report/ukraine/

Ukraine Commissioner for Missing Persons, interview with author, May 13, 2025.

²¹¹ Ibio

2022 Refugee Crisis -At the Border:

The situation in Ukraine appeared to create conditions conducive to a trafficking crisis, with the presence of established trafficking networks, widespread population displacement, and many women and children traveling unaccompanied. However, this anticipated rise in transnational Ukrainian refugees has not yet been officially observed. Outside of the official case numbers previously, many official reports that there is no clear evidence of a widespread or significant increase in trafficking cases, nor in the number of related investigations or prosecutions.²¹² But, during the initial stages of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the presence of anti-trafficking organisations on the ground was limited. Most humanitarian efforts were focused on providing refugees with immediate relief, including food, clothing, and shelter. Consequently, trafficking risks were initially under-addressed. Even the largest anti-trafficking organisation in the region are reported to have operated with a team of only four staff members.²¹³

The acute risks of human trafficking at refugee transit hubs was often overlooked. Recognising these sites as critical points of vulnerability, Hope for Justice identified them as trafficking hotspots. To address this, they, in collaboration with Intel and World Vision, established communication containers at key transit ports in Ukraine. These containers served as both information hubs and safe spaces for potential victims. Their reports from the ground indicated a wide spectrum of exploitation risks, ranging from incidents described as "low-level," such as taxi drivers charging refugees disproportionately high fares, to severe cases of trafficking and exploitation. They assert that the low reports of confirmed numbers of trafficking victims from this refugee crisis do not align with the observed and intercepted exploitation attempts on the ground. A significant challenge in addressing these in the peak of the crisis was the difficulty in identifying victims.²¹⁴

When a counter trafficking team - escorted by UN representatives and local police force - entered the border to Moldova via the Odessa route, they immediately identified six women being trafficked within just ten minutes. This was documented on video, including evidence of a 'shepherdess' or escort accompanying the women. When approached, the female refugees explained that they were travelling to Germany for unspecified job opportunities. They had been assured that their travel and accommodation would be free and that they would be met and guided across each border. Despite clear warning signs, no police officers intervened, and there was little interest from authorities. The structural challenge at the border further exacerbated the risk, as the refugee centre was located one kilometre away, with a car park directly at the border filled with minibuses and cars offering transport to vulnerable refugees, with little to no oversight.²¹⁵

While visiting a refugee centre at the border designated for the Ukrainian Roma community a particularly disenfranchised group - the team noticed job advertisements on the walls. The positions listed included roles in plumbing, banking, and housekeeping, promising high salaries with no visa requirements. The flyer claimed to be from an HR company which, upon preliminary online research, appeared to be a legitimate US-based business. During the investigation, the team visited the local address listed on the job advertisement. The location turned out to be an abandoned office block. Further open-source intelligence was gathered on the phone number provided, leading to the discovery of a linked Facebook account. This account had mirrored the content of the physical flyer, promoting in-person job opportunities in Canada for Ukrainian refugees following the fullscale invasion. Further analysis of the account revealed earlier Facebook posts predating the invasion. These advertisements, however, did not target Ukrainians but instead focused on recruiting

Komenda, Heather, "Human trafficking in times of conflict: the case of Ukraine," United Nations International Organisation for Migration, Regional $Of fice \ for \ Europe \ and \ Central \ Asia, \ November \ 13, \ 2023, \ \underline{https://eca.iom.int/news/human-trafficking-times-conflict-case-ukraine}$

²¹³ Nelson, Tim (CEO of Hope for Justice), interview with author, December 11, 2024.

²¹⁴

²¹⁵ Counter Trafficking Network, interview with author, March 12, 2025

Romanians and Moldovans. This was an established human trafficking network that swiftly adapted when the war in Ukraine created new opportunities for exploitation.216

In 2022, A group made up of ex-special forces technical and intelligence operatives - with a century of military experience between them were present on multiple border locations offering specialist humanitarian assistance. This ranged from logistical support, delivering aid and gathering and deploying intelligence for both refugees and law enforcement. The team reported that while support for refugees was in abundance, these volunteer tents were predominantly individual non-affiliated citizens, offering clothing, food and urgent aid, and, that there was limited presence of well-known international organisations or any formal processing outside of the immediate crossing. Most critically for this investigation, they made similar claims to Hope for Justice, that there was a severe lack of consistent trafficking prevention. They added that those crossing the border were severely physically and mentally exhausted, vulnerable and overwhelmed. With very limited possessions on their persons, generous volunteers were on the ground to provide essential clothing, toiletries, and food. But in the steady flow of humanitarian assistance they witnessed and intercepted first hand, nefarious actors who exploited the crises and preyed on those fleeing war. 217

The team, initially based in Przemyśl, immediately identified critical issues in the processing of refugees outside of regular border immigration. In the first instance they purchased laptops, monitors and technological equipment from a local supplier to supply a networking system for refugees. This quick turnaround provided a service where those crossing could receive travel information, make contact with family and friends and access services across Europe.²¹⁸ In this time they identified risks ranging from opportunistic and predatory men approaching women's refuge to blatant trafficking attempts.²¹⁹ In the first week of the refugee crisis, it could take more than 24 hours to cross the border between Ukraine and Poland. Those crossing were surviving on little to no sleep or food, after days of travelling

in freezing temperatures.²²⁰ As an example of the lack of organisation and inadequate rapid response to the crisis, they highlighted a tragic incident in which a baby froze to death in its mother's arms on a freezing night. In response, the team decided to distribute blankets and food over the following nights, working tirelessly along the border to prevent further loss of life. 221 They added that this lack of coordinated and accelerated security allowed potential predators to exploit the ongoing crisis.²²²





²¹⁶ Counter Trafficking Network, interview with author, March 12, 2025.

²¹⁷ Border Intelligence (London) interview with author, July 18, 2024.

²¹⁸ Border Intelligence (London) interview with author, December 20, 2024.

²¹⁹

²²⁰ Pikulicka-Wilczewska, Agnieszka, "'It was hell': Long lines of Ukrainian refugees at Poland border," Al Jazeera, February 27, 2022, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/27/ukraine-poland-border-refugees-medyka-russia-invasion

²²¹ Border Intelligence (London) interview with author, December 20, 2024.

²²²

²²³ Images provided by Intelligence Group, January 18th 2025.

Photo on the left: showing the uncoordinated aid, predominantly from regular volunteer citizens. Where there were global NGOs, these groups focused on immediate food and humanitarian relief.

Photo on the right: showing a group set up of an information hub.

The team reported similarly to previous statements and identified what they defined as "spotters". Those individuals would identify Ukrainian women and children as they crossed the border, and a counterpart in Poland would then approach, offering a range of assistance consisting of travel and hospitality. They noted that groups of this nature operated for two distinct purposes: either to exploit women and children, or, by contrast, to target men entering Ukraine. In these cases, the perpetrators were believed to be Russian intelligence operatives or members of paramilitary groups like the Wagner Group, likely tasked with identifying individuals suspected of joining the armed resistance or enlisting as soldiers.²²⁴ They noted that in these instances local Police forces were effective in intercepting and placing them under arrest but by contrast showed little response to predators looking to exploit women and children. By taking a covert look at one of the 'spotters' phones they found they had received dozens of photographs of what they indicated to be crossing Ukrainian families. The group reported that in just 15 minutes they were able to identify eight different instances of potential traffickers.²²⁵ With extensive experience in this field, they detailed that younger mothers with accompanying children were commonly targeted by gangs and that in trafficking a Ukrainian woman in her 20s, predators could receive up to £145,000.²²⁶



227

On a particular night while they were delivering blankets to refugees waiting at the border, two women with accompanying minors were approached by a man attempting to coerce them into his car. The women, visibly distressed, repeatedly told him to leave. The translator with the intelligence team confirmed what was taking place and the volunteers intervened. They physically removed the man and handed him over to law enforcement. However, despite pressure from onlookers - including a local firefighter who condemned their inaction - the man was eventually moved on but was neither arrested nor properly reprimanded. He returned to the area shortly afterwards.²²⁸ In another recount, they detailed that one evening they were approached by a car of men waiting outside a refugee centre. After inquiring as to why they were in the area, one of the passengers of the car replied "we are here for the girls". This is further corroborated by other NGOs who experienced similar situations at the centres they were present at. The team also recounted an instance of intercepting a man convicted in the United Kingdom of serious sexual crimes against children, travelling to the border posing as humanitarian assistance, adding to the concerns that during the crisis nefarious actors exploited the need for assistance.²²⁹

Despite their efforts, the sheer volume of refugees made it impossible for them to engage with everyone at risk. One of the team described the experience: "You pass through immigration and passport control, you walk down no man's land and enter Poland through a narrow fence. Beyond that, there's a 200-300 metre pathway leading to the road where the buses were. Along this stretch, there were various tents set up by random people offering food and clothing. But there were no proper checks. You could get there without anyone verifying who you were. While there were police around, they'd occasionally ask what you were doing, but there was no real oversight. The first person you met in Poland could easily be a human trafficker." Some of the events this team prevented and witnessed were so harrowing in nature, that when they returned home - despite decades of conflict experience between - them they were extremely affected by what they described as "the sheer level of evil and it was just allowed to happen" it took considerable time to offset what they had seen.

^{224 &}quot;Wagner Group: Facts, Leader, Rebellion, & Russia-Ukraine War," *Britannica*, last modified February 19, 2025. https://www.britannica.com/topic/Wagner-Group

Border Intelligence (London) interview with author, December 20, 2024.

Border Intelligence (London) interview with author, July 18, 2024.

²²⁷ Image provided by Intelligence Group (refugees huddled at the border, conditions reported to have been -10 degrees celsius), received January 18 2025

Border Intelligence (London) interview with author, December 20, 2024.

Border Intelligence (London) interview with author, December 20, 2024.



230

When asked if there felt like a presence of accelerated response or delivery of international non-governmental organisations to prevent trafficking at the border the intelligence group said, no. In addition, one interviewee added that any report on low instances of trafficking was categorically not possible given just how many instances they alone intercepted and prevented.²³¹ The group's expertise led them to raise concerns with the link between this refugee crisis and the steep rise in demand for Ukrainian women in pornography. Corroborating this, is the Vienna OSCE Office of the Special Representative and Co-ordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings reporting a major rise in online searches for sexual content related to Ukrainian women and girls. Searches for terms such as "escort," "porn," or "rape" alongside "Ukrainian" increased by up to 600%, and "Ukraine refugee porn" became a popular search trend. In Sweden, where buying sexual services is illegal and client data is recorded, 30 out of 38 men detained in March had specifically searched for Ukrainian women during the initial weeks of Russia's invasion.²³² Cases reported to the National Human Trafficking Hotline indicate that pornography was the third most common form of sex trafficking, following escort services and illicit massage businesses.²³³

In a report published in August of the same year, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) - a leading organisation within the United Nations included from two interviews that "The expectations of people who work in the anti-trafficking sector are quite different from the expectations of nonspecialized actors. For us, it was very clear that traffickers would not go to the border and take people at the border, as all newspapers initially reported. This is not their modus operandi; they work with subtle tools, instruments and methods. Usually, they wait until they know the person, exploit their vulnerabilities, and then they act. Our expectation is that the numbers will increase from now on in the neighbouring countries." adding further criticism of global news organisations for highlighting risks stating it scared refugees travelling, who then believed through circulating news on social media platforms that there were traffickers waiting for them.²³⁴ But this specialist team working on human trafficking during the crisis reported that the threat was more severe than widely recognised and noted a lack of meaningful presence by global organisations on the ground. As a result, they relied on media and digital communication to raise awareness among refugees.235

Owing to the limited resources and complexities in offering assistance during the influx of refugees the intelligence team utilised their own expertise and software and deployed Solv, an Advertising Intelligence Platform. Alongside their partners on the border - some in Moldova, another transit route for Ukrainian refugees - they deployed the platform to send alerts directly to refugees reaching border crossings. Using the technology, the team on the ground had the capability to communicate directly with refugees in small targeted areas of interest. This tool has the capacity to target mobile phones with the specificity of an individual postcode area. Advertisement Intelligence acts as a technological 'leaflet drop' and is capable of two-way anonymous messaging. This advanced technology gave targeted digital mass-media and provided constant updates via smartphones.²³⁶A modern concept, akin to airborne communications deployed in WWII in which the British Royal Air Force dropped leaflets into German occupied areas, this tool leverages

²³⁰ Image provided by Intelligence group (showing volunteer tents and lack of significant presence combating trafficking) received January 18 2025.

²³¹ Border Intelligence (London) interview with author, December 20, 2024.

²³² Leistner, Alexandra, ""Ukraine refugee porn' raises risks for women fleeing the war," Euronews, January 17, 2023, https://www.euronews. $\underline{com/2023/01/17/ukraine\text{-}refugee\text{-}porn\text{-}raises\text{-}risks\text{-}for\text{-}women\text{-}fleeing\text{-}the\text{-}war}$

²³³ How Pornography Can Fuel Sex Trafficking," Yada, accessed March 3, 2025, https://www.yadauk.org/Groups/410166/How_Pornography_Can.aspx 234 Sharapov, Kiril, Heather Komenda and Mirona Gheorghiu, "Vulnerability to Trafficking in Persons in the Context of the War in Ukraine," Regional Refugee Response for the Ukraine Situation (August 2024): 26, Accessed 13 March 2025. https://eca.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl2626/files/docu- $\underline{\text{ments/2024-09/vulnerability-to-tip_war-in-ukraine_poland-and-romania_august-2024.pdf}$

²³⁵ Border Intelligence (London) interview with author, July 18, 2024.

²³⁶ Border Intelligence (London) interview with author, July 18, 2024.

mobile devices to distribute leaflets, enabling direct communication with targeted individuals.²³⁷

It provided real-time updates on emerging threats, detailed information on available assistance and programs, and alerts about imminent dangers. It is designed for time critical circumstances, and in this instance offered early warnings on human trafficking threats in high risk locations. As well as offering two way messaging, the deployed browser advertisements offered links to partnered NGO websites with service and contact information. It does not require the use of social media platforms or for user applications. The Solv platform can allow a counter human trafficking team the ability to communicate directly with refugees, providing updates on specific threats in real time. ²³⁸ A Third of the UK Law Enforcement Agencies have at least one account - including the Metropolitan Police - it is an unrivalled intelligence tool that would benefit the humanitarian sector immensely. The team on the ground witnessed real time prevention and successful interactions aiding the protection of vulnerable refugees.

The following images are examples of the deployed messages:







ДІЯННЯ ТОРГОВЦІВ ЛЮДЬМИ



British Chamber of Commerce Moldova

НЕ приймайте пропозиції транспортування, проживання чи роботи від не офіційних представників.

Натисніть, щоб дізнатися

Reports of **Trafficking Cases** and Severe **Exploitation:**

In a first-hand account, Ukrainian investigative journalist and refugee Olena Kozii described the acute vulnerabilities faced by displaced women during the early stages of the full-scale Russian invasion. Having fled to Germany with her teenage daughter, she was targeted and harassed at a hostel. On arrival to the recommended shelter it immediately appeared unsafe, and exclusively occupied by men. Despite calling the police for protection after multiple attempted forced entries into her room, there was no ongoing support. The experience forced her to leave Germany and prompted her to begin gathering testimonies from other Ukrainian women facing similar threats to their safety. Shortly after the war began, she and many other displaced Ukrainian women began receiving unsolicited messages from agencies encouraging them to join a well-known adult content platform. She reported that these agencies, which proliferated rapidly in the wake of the invasion, often portrayed themselves as supportive intermediaries offering promotional services. In reality, they exercised coercive control. They retained control of the women's platform accounts, preventing them shutting it down, and taking as much as 70-80% of their earnings for explicit content.²³⁹

The long-term consequences, Olena warned, include severe mental health deterioration among women who would never have considered such work under normal circumstances. Recruitment efforts were found to be heavily conducted openly via platforms like Instagram and Telegram. Many of the women targeted by these agencies were fleeing with children, often while their partners served on the front lines. With few employment opportunities and urgent financial needs -including the desire to support their families and donate to their husbands defence efforts - many felt they had no alternative. Reporting on the work of investigators who went undercover to contact these platforms, Olena reported that psychological manipulation was used heavily towards Ukrainian women to create a veneer of safety and voluntariness. But in practice, the system closely resembled "online slavery" and women were being heavily controlled and exploited.240

In the initial stages of the Ukraine refugee crisis in 2022, the UK Government introduced the "Homes for Ukraine" scheme. The scheme allowed individuals in the UK to register their interest in hosting people fleeing Ukraine. To participate, hosts had to be over 18, have no criminal record, and offer a spare room or home for at least six months. Hosts received £350 per month for the first 12 months and £500 per month thereafter during their guest's visa permission stay.²⁴¹ While designed to provide essential support, the scheme has faced significant criticism for its vulnerability to exploitation and the insufficient safeguards present. One of the most prominent issues with the scheme was the lack of a regulated matching process. Hosts and refugees were required to connect independently, often through unregulated social media platforms. This lack of oversight exposed refugees, particularly women and children, to significant risks. Reports have indicated high levels of predatory males

²³⁹ Author Interview with Olena Kozii. Ukrainian Refugee and Investigative Journalist. May 12th 2025.

²⁴⁰

²⁴¹ "Homes for Ukraine: Record Your Interest," GOV.UK, accessed December 12, 2024, https://www.gov.uk/register-interest-homes-ukraine

exploited their vulnerability. A whistleblower connected to the official scheme informed the BBC that, in certain local authorities, up to 30% of registered would-be sponsors are single men over 40, most of whom are offering to host single women in their 20s and 30s. The UK government at the time, stated that it did not recognise these figures.²⁴²

Alarming behaviours emerged, including predatory messages sent to young women by some hosts. These messages included inquiries about their relationship status, offers of refuge contingent on sexual favours, and misleading claims about accommodation conditions, such as falsely stating the availability of a spare bed. An undercover investigation revealed instances where hosts explicitly stated they would not sponsor women unwilling to have sex.²⁴³ And similarly - in a case covered previously - one room was found to have a lock on the outside of the room and cameras on the inside.²⁴⁴ The UK Modern Slavery Act 2015 states Human Trafficking is considered when a person arranges or facilitates the victims travel with a view to the victim being exploited if the perpetrator intends to exploit the victim (in any part of the world) during or after the travel. A person who is a UK national commits this offence under this section regardless of location the arrangements or facilitating took place.²⁴⁵

Research uncovered significant concerns about the scheme. One local authority worker revealed that a host in the Homes for Ukraine scheme had a trafficking conviction. A service provider reported instances where families and individuals vanished after arriving in the UK, it was impossible to determine if they were safe or at risk of exploitation, including labour or criminal abuse. Additionally, instances were documented in which refugees

were compelled to perform labour for their hosts. These cases included farmers in Northern Ireland reportedly using the scheme to get people to the UK to work for them, but then also charging them rent.²⁴⁶ Owing to their limited awareness of local labour laws and the specific requirements of the scheme, compounded by language barriers and extreme vulnerability, refugees were frequently subjected to forms of exploitation that, under UK law, could fit the criteria of trafficking.

The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) raised serious concerns about the scheme's safeguards. It highlighted the risks posed by hosts who could be a threat to vulnerable refugees and criticised the six-month minimum hosting requirement.²⁴⁷ A letter from 16 refugee and anti-trafficking organisations to the UK government warned that the scheme posed risks to Ukrainian refugees. The letter's signatories reported early evidence of traffickers and rogue landlords attempting to exploit Ukrainian women and children.²⁴⁸ Refugee Action, a UKbased charity, also flagged concerns about the reliability of local authority checks. While councils were instructed to conduct in-person inspections of host properties before a refugee's arrival to ensure suitable accommodation, reports indicated that some councils resorted to virtual checks or "desktop audits" as an alternative. This approach left potential gaps in ensuring the safety of refugees.²⁴⁹ The UK Government defended the scheme, stating that all hosts underwent background checks, including Police National Computer and Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks.²⁵⁰ However, a DBS check would not identify sexual predators, without a prior criminal conviction, leaving refugees vulnerable to exploitation in the absence of proper checks. Following initial criticisms, a government-backed matching service run by the Reset charity was

Crawford, Angus and Tony Smith, "Homes for Ukraine: Housing scheme called danger to refugees," *BBC News*, May 4, 2022, accessed December 12, 2024, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-61311046

Bakht, Shayma and Billy Kenber, "Single British men offer beds to female refugees," *The Times*, April 9, 2022, accessed December 12, 2024, https://www.thetimes.com/article/single-british-men-offer-beds-to-female-refugees-d369hl6r7

Syal, Rajeev, "Stop matching lone female Ukraine refugees with single men, UK told," *The Guardian*, April 13, 2022, accessed December 12, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/13/stop-matching-lone-female-ukraine-refugees-with-single-men-uk-told

Taylor, Diane "Ukrainian refugees at risk of homelessness and exploitation in UK, report finds," *The Guardian*, July 16, 2024, accessed January 13, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/article/2024/jul/16/ukrainian-refugees-risk-of-homelessness-and-exploitation-uk

^{245 &#}x27;Modern Slavery Act 2015,' UK Public General acts, Section 2, https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2015/30/section/2

Bancroft, Holly "Ukrainian granted sanctuary in Britain sent to live with suspected gangsters," *The Independent*, April 13, 2024, accessed December 12, 2024,

https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/ukrainian-refugees-uk-homes-ukraine-crime-b2523166.html

Syal, Rajeev, "Stop matching lone female Ukraine refugees with single men, UK told," *The Guardian*, April 13, 2022, accessed December 12, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/13/stop-matching-lone-female-ukraine-refugees-with-single-men-uk-told

Townsend, Mark "UK's Homes for Ukraine scheme risks operating as 'Tinder for sex traffickers,' says charities," *The Guardian*, March 26, 2022, accessed December 12, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/mar/26/uk-homes-for-ukraine-scheme-risks-operating-as-tinder-for-sex-traffickers-say-charities

Bakht, Shayma and Billy Kenber, "Single British men offer beds to female refugees," *The Times*, April 9, 2022, accessed December 12, 2024, https://www.thetimes.com/article/single-british-men-offer-beds-to-female-refugees-d369hl6r7

Townsend, Mark "UK's Homes for Ukraine scheme risks operating as 'Tinder for sex traffickers,' says charities," *The Guardian*, March 26, 2022, accessed December 12, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/mar/26/uk-homes-for-ukraine-scheme-risks-operating-as-tinder-for-sex-traffickers-say-charities

later introduced but only became operational after significant issues had already surfaced.²⁵¹

While Serbia has not seen widespread human trafficking of Ukrainian refugees, isolated cases have drawn attention to the significant risks faced by displaced individuals. According to a local NGO, two Ukrainian women have been officially identified as victims of human trafficking in Serbia, each case revealing different but equally troubling dimensions of exploitation. One case involves a victim trafficked into Serbia and coerced into criminal activities, linked to an organised crime network. This situation has culminated in a major court hearing, highlighting the dangerous overlap between trafficking operations and organised crime that could be preventing victims from coming forward.²⁵² The second case reportedly concerned a young woman subjected to sexual exploitation. Her trafficking ordeal was tied to efforts to secure an exit visa from Ukraine, demonstrating how bureaucratic hurdles and migration pressures can become critical vulnerabilities for refugees. When asked whether these cases were a direct consequence of the victims' refugee status, the NGO pointed to the precarious conditions faced by displaced individuals. "They were in this hard position, which put them into exploitation". Refugees' instability, lack of resources, and desperation often leave them susceptible to traffickers who exploit their limited options and uncertain circumstances. In cases where they have access to work permits, refugees can face continued exploitation from employers, work with contracts on low wages and find the costof-living extremely high.²⁵³

The Serbian Commissariat for Refugees reports that between February 24, 2022, and February 24, 2023, approximately 148,000 Ukrainian citizens arrived in Serbia, with around 26,000 receiving temporary residency permits.²⁵⁴ As a neighboring country to the European Union, Serbia has been a traditional transit route for human trafficking, people smugglers are easily sourced and there is a high

prevalence of existing crime networks.²⁵⁵ These cases underscore the urgent need for coordinated international action to mitigate the risks faced by refugees, particularly women and children. Strengthening protections, enhancing awareness, and addressing the systemic vulnerabilities that lead to exploitation must remain central to global efforts in responding to the refugee crisis.

As of July 2024, 958,000 Ukrainian refugees were recorded in Poland, receiving the most amount of refugees coming second only to Germany.²⁵⁶ The Polish Ministry of the Interior and Administration's Human Trafficking Report 2022 highlighted that "increased migration entails the risk of human trafficking crime." According to the report, police identified 31 suspected trafficking victims in 2022, including 9 Ukrainian nationals. The Border Guard identified 110 potential victims, including 1 Ukrainian. The National Public Prosecutor's Office reported 277 trafficking victims, with 17 adults from Ukraine among them. Additionally, the National Intervention and Consultation Centre assisted 254 individuals, including 14 Ukrainians.²⁵⁷ The report does not clarify whether these figures represent unique individuals or if there is overlap between agencies, making it impossible to combine the data without risking duplication. Additionally, the lack of information sharing between agencies is a hindrance to national policies, and is reflective of the concerns from the Office of the Ukraine Ombudsman that cross border information sharing on Ukrainian citizens is not adequate.258

An aid worker at the Medyka border crossing in Poland reported a concerning incident in which two men were intercepted by the Polish military with women concealed in the back of their van. While the military rescued the women and handed the men over to the police, the men allegedly bribed the officers and were released without charges or documentation. This account was corroborated by multiple members of charitable organisations operating in the area.²⁵⁹ Similarly, a Ukrainian

²⁵¹ Bulman, May "Homes for Ukraine: Official 'matching service' launched to link hosts wit refugees," The Independent, April 1, 2022, accessed December 12, 2024, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/ukraine-refugees-hosts-sponsorship-homes-matching-uk-b2048850.html

²⁵² Human Trafficking NGO (Belgrade, Serbia) interview with author, November 30, 2024.

²⁵³ Human Trafficking NGO (Belgrade, Serbia) interview with author, November 30, 2024.

[&]quot;2022 Update AIDA Country Report: Serbia," European Council on Refugees and Exiles, May 12, 2023, accessed December 12, 2024, 254 https://ecre.org/2022-update-aida-country-report-serbia/#: ``text=According % 20 to % 20 the % 20 Serbian % 20 Commissariat, some % 20 form % 20 of % 20 the % 20 Serbian % 20 Commissariat, some % 20 form % 20 of % 20 the % 20 Serbian % 20 Commissariat, some % 20 form % 20 ftemporary%20residency.

²⁵⁵ Human Trafficking NGO (Belgrade, Serbia) interview with author, November 30, 2024.

Cuibus, Mihnea, Peter William Walsh, and Madeleine Sumption, "Ukrainian migration to the UK," The Migration Observatory (University of Oxford),13, 256 December 3, 2024, accessed January 20, 2025. https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/ukrainian-migration-to-the-uk/#:"text=Around%204%25%20of%20Ukrainian%20refugees,%2C%20and%20Czechia%20(347%2C000)

²⁵⁷ Sharapov, Kiril, Heather Komenda and Mirona Gheorghiu, "Vulnerability to Trafficking in Persons in the Context of the War in Ukraine," Regional Refugee Response for the Ukraine Situation (August 2024): 15, accessed January 20, 2025, https://eca.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl2626/files/docu- $\underline{\text{ments/2024-09/vulnerability-to-tip_war-in-ukraine_poland-and-romania_august-2024.pdf}$

²⁵⁸ Special Representatives of the Ukrainian Parliamentary Commissioner for Human Rights (Kyiv), interview with author, July 2, 2024.

²⁵⁹ "Inside The Human Trafficking Tragedy Unfolding On Ukraine's Border - Human Trafficking Search." 2022. Accessed May 24, 2024. https://humantraffickingsearch.org/resource/inside-the-human-trafficking-tragedy-unfolding-on-ukraines-border/

refugee, recounted a harrowing encounter in Romania. After crossing the border with her children, she was approached by individuals posing as volunteers who offered relocation to Switzerland. Their behavior raised suspicions, and when she requested identification, they became hostile. Fearing for her children's safety, she fled. These individuals were later identified as traffickers targeting vulnerable women and children.²⁶⁰

In 2024, The Council of the EU approved extending temporary protection for Ukrainian refugees, including access to housing and employment, until March 2026. As of May 2024, Eurostat reported 4.2 million displaced Ukrainians, primarily in Germany and Poland. Data from Germany's Federal Statistical Office shows that 70% of these refugees are women, but only 14% are employed. German media and NGOs have raised concerns about young Ukrainian women being exploited by human traffickers, often ending up in prostitution rings due to insufficient housing and employment opportunities. Warnings about the rise of sexual exploitation networks involving Ukrainian refugees, including via online platforms, were first raised in November 2022.261

On the 3rd anniversary of the full scale invasion of Ukraine, Europol convened a multi-country operational action at its headquarters in The Hague. Timed to coincide with the third anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The operation utilised analytical, OSINT, and investigative experts from 12 countries, including Ukraine. The focus was on identifying and disrupting trafficking networks operating online, particularly those exploiting Ukrainian nationals for sexual purposes. It resulted in the identification of 690 entities (such as users, locations, phone numbers and platforms) crosschecked, 21 suspected traffickers identified and 41 potential victims detected.²⁶² The action underscores the critical role of coordinated, cross-border intelligence sharing in disrupting the exploitation of vulnerable individuals displaced by war.

Harding, Nick. "How Traffickers Are Targeting Ukrainian Refugees For The Flesh Trade," *The Ethicalist*, May 18, 2022. https://theethicalist.com/sextrade-preying-on-ukrainian-refugees/.

Androuët, Mathilde, 'Parliamentary Question E-001766/2024 - Alleged Sharp Rise in Ukrainian Refugee Women Falling Victim to Prostitution Rings,' European Parliament, November 19, 2024, accessed January 20, 2025, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-10-2024-001766_EN.html

^{262 &}quot;Digital sprint to disrupt sexual exploitation of Ukrainian nationals," Europol, date, May 20th 2025. https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/news-room/news/digital-sprint-to-disrupt-sexual-exploitation-of-ukrainian-nationals

Future for Ukrainian Refugees:

Across Europe, the main host-continent, countries that once provided strong support for Ukrainian refugees are now rolling back key protections. This will have severe implications on refugees. When claims are made that Ukrainians have not experienced large-scale trafficking over the past three years, this is often attributed to the protective measures implemented by host countries.. While this position is heavily disputed in this report, it is clear a reduction in support for refugees would only serve to make them more vulnerable and susceptible to exploitation.²⁶³ As covered in more details prior, language barriers, insufficient government outreach, and lack of awareness and a support system in a new country leave many struggling to access assistance. As a result, thousands face heightened risks of homelessness, financial hardship, and

The United Kingdom has significantly scaled back protections for Ukrainian refugees, introducing stricter eligibility requirements and bureaucratic hurdles that leave many in increasingly precarious situations. The Homes for Ukraine programme, a key pillar of the UK's refugee response, had its scope narrowed in February 2024 under the previous Conservative government.²⁶⁴ While the current Labour government lifted certain visa restrictions embedded in the Homes for Ukraine scheme on 31 January 2025, uncertainty remains for thousands of refugees in the UK.²⁶⁵ The Ukraine Permission Extension Scheme, which opened for applications on 4 February 2025, offers an 18 month extension to those with current temporary residency.²⁶⁶

This measure appears as increased government support, yet, the caveat lies within the uncertain processing timeline. The Home Office has stated that applications will "usually" be processed within eight weeks, raising concerns that many Ukrainians, particularly those who arrived in March 2022 on three-year visas, face imminent expiration of their legal status before receiving a decision.²⁶⁷ Similarly, Ireland has introduced new restrictions aimed at potentially discouraging secondary migration of Ukrainian refugees from other European countries.²⁶⁸ As of April 2024, free accommodation is now limited to 90 days, 269 highlighting the increased conditionalities tied to these protection measures. Similar to other countries, Ireland also reduced financial support for refugees, where the previous weekly payment of €232, the highest in the EU, was cut down to just €39 a week.²⁷⁰

Poland has been one of the main receiving countries for Ukrainian refugees since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion, hosting just shy of one million displaced Ukrainians as of January 2025.²⁷¹ Despite its central role in the humanitarian response, the nation has begun to gradually roll back key support measures. A major policy shift came in January 2024, when the UNHCR Cash Programme, which provided assistance to families with children, pregnant women, persons with disabilities, and economically vulnerable refugees, was terminated.²⁷² While Poland continues to provide free accommodation to Ukrainian refugees, access is now time-restricted and status-based, placing many at risk of housing

Counter Trafficking Network, interview with author, March 12, 2025.

264 Ibid.

265

266 Crowther, Zoe, "Ukrainian Refugees Face Uncertainty With UK Visa Extension Scheme," PoliticsHome, December 29, 2025, accessed February 20, 2025, https://www.politicshome.com/news/article/ukrainian-refugees-remain-transient-population-uk

267 268

"European countries are cutting housing support for refugees, leaving vulnerable groups at risk," People In Need, April 29, 2024, accessed February $20, 2025, \underline{https://www.peopleinneed.net/european-countries-are-cutting-housing-support-for-refugees-leaving-vulnerable-groups-at-risk-11432gp. \\$

269 lhid

271 UNHCR, "Ukraine Refugee Situation," Operational Data Portal, last modified February 19, 2025, accessed February 20, 2025 https://data.unhcr.org/en/ situations/ukraine

272 Sharapov, Kiril, Heather Komenda and Mirona Gheorghiu, "Vulnerability to Trafficking in Persons in the Context of the War in Ukraine," Regional Refugee Response for the Ukraine Situation (August 2024): 19, accessed February 20, 2025, https://eca.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl2626/files/documents/2024-09/vulnerability-to-tip_war-in-ukraine_poland-and-romania_august2024.pdf

instability.²⁷³ Romania, another key destination for Ukrainian refugees fleeing the war, has significantly restructured its housing and subsistence assistance. In May 2023, the government replaced the widely used "50/20 Programme". This programme provided direct financial aid to Romanians hosting refugees, granting 50 RON per person per day for accommodation and 20 RON per person per day for food.²⁷⁴ Similarly to Poland, Romania has now made its support for refugees increasingly conditional and time-restricted.

As of December 2024, approximately 6.15% or 390 000 of recorded Ukrainian refugees across Europe were located in the Czech Republic.²⁷⁵ Shortly before that, in the autumn of 2024, the Czech Republic ended exemptions that previously granted support to vulnerable groups, including children, students under 26 years old, seniors over 65 years old, single parents with young children, individuals with disabilities and their caregivers. 276 Slovakia has also taken steps to scale back support, despite being a refuge to approximately 2.09%, or 132 810, of recorded Ukrainian refugees across Europe as of 16 February 2025.277 In April 2024, the state halved short term accommodation in non-residential premises, cutting assistance from €12 to €6 per person per night, regardless of age. Three months later, further restrictions were introduced that limited financial support for accommodation providers to a maximum of 120 days after a resident is granted temporary protection.²⁷⁸

While the European Union initially provided swift and robust protection measures following Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, many of these safeguards are now being scaled back.²⁷⁹ Across several countries, stricter eligibility requirements to access remaining benefits, the phasing out of humanitarian aid programs, and reductions in state financial assistance are making it increasingly difficult for refugees to maintain their support system.²⁸⁰ In neighboring countries like Poland and Romania, barriers such as language difficulties, high costs, and multistage referral processes further restrict

access to healthcare and other vital services.²⁸¹ These policy shifts place increasing strain on the refugees themselves, many of whom remain in precarious situations with limited pathways to stability, and are left more vulnerable to exploitation, abuse and trafficking.²⁸²As the war enters its third year and peace discussions take place on behalf of Ukraine's citizens, key support mechanisms are gradually being reduced or phased out across many host nations. It is increasingly clear that Europe is not adequately prepared for a potential mass return of refugees. There is no current mechanism to track returning refugees or document cases of potential trafficking and exploitation experienced during displacement. This gap leaves survivors particularly women and children - without a formal avenue to report abuse once they re-enter the country, and undermines efforts to identify patterns of transnational trafficking.

²⁷³ Ibid

²⁷⁴ Ibio

UNHCR, "Ukraine Refugee Situation," Operational Data Portal, last modified February 19, 2025, accessed February 20, 2025 https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine

 [&]quot;European countries are cutting housing support for refugees, leaving vulnerable groups at risk," People In Need, April 29, 2024, accessed February 20, 2025, https://www.peopleinneed.net/european-countries-are-cutting-housing-support-for-refugees-leaving-vulnerable-groups-at-risk-11432gp
 UNHCR, "Ukraine Refugee Situation," Operational Data Portal, last modified February 19, 2025, accessed February 20, 2025 https://data.unhcr.org/en/

situations/ukraine
278 "European countries are cutting housing support for refugees, leaving vulnerable groups at risk," People In Need, April 29, 2024, accessed February 20, 2025, https://www.peopleinneed.net/european-countries-are-cutting-housing-support-for-refugees-leaving-vulnerable-groups-at-risk-11432gp

^{20, 2025, &}lt;a href="https://www.peopleinneed.net/european-countries-are-cutting-housing-support-for-refugees-leaving-vulnerable-groups-at-risk-11432gp">https://www.peopleinneed.net/european-countries-are-cutting-housing-support-for-refugees-leaving-vulnerable-groups-at-risk-11432gp
Sharapov, Kiril, Heather Komenda and Mirona Gheorghiu, "Vulnerability to Trafficking in Persons in the Context of the War in Ukraine," Regional Refugee Response for the Ukraine Situation (August 2024): 22, accessed February 20, 2025, https://eca.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl2626/files/documents/2024-09/vulnerability-to-tip_war-in-ukraine_poland-and-romania_august2024.pdf

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ Ibid, 27.

²⁸² Ibid, 27.

Report Conclusion:

Russia's systematic weaponization of Ukrainian children —both those forcibly deported and those raised under occupation - represents one of the most insidious elements of its hybrid war strategy. The forced transfer, adoption, and indoctrination of these children are not tragic side effects of war; they are deliberate tools of cultural erasure. Within occupied territories, children face systematic reeducation, the imposition of Russian citizenship, and military indoctrination designed to sever them from their Ukrainian identity. Those adopted into Russian families are often renamed, naturalised, and psychologically reprogrammed to erase all ties to their homeland. This is not merely a humanitarian crisis, it is a long-term demographic assault. Despite the scale and severity of these violations, the international community has failed to mount a proportionate response. Legal mechanisms remain toothless, repatriation processes are slow and politicised, and Russia continues to operate with near-total impunity. Unless reversed, this sets a dangerous precedent: that child abduction, identity erasure, and cultural reprogramming can be deployed as acceptable instruments of war.

At the same time, as the conflict drags into its third year, the infrastructure of protection for refugees across Europe is eroding. While early interventions may have mitigated some of the most visible trafficking threats, this report demonstrates that exploitation remains pervasive and was wholly misunderstood. The rollback of safeguards and support services risks creating worsening conditions for widespread trafficking, labour exploitation, and abuse to take place undetected. Where protections once existed, they may have masked - not prevented - the true scale of the problem. Refugee vulnerability, CRSV and human trafficking exist in the same continuum of state collapse and legal ambiguity.

These are not incidental side effects of war; they are integral to Russia's campaign to fracture Ukraine and destabilise Europe. This strategy does not end on the battlefield, it unfolds in classrooms, orphanages, refugee shelters, and social service systems across the continent. While technological innovations such as OSINT and AI have proven essential in documenting these abuses, they cannot substitute for political will. The sector remains dangerously under-regulated, and frontline actors still lack the tools and legal mandates needed to identify victims

and bring perpetrators to justice. The same pattern holds at the geopolitical level: for every delay in Ukraine's NATO membership, for every transactional peace overture, it is not just Ukraine's sovereignty at stake, but the safety Europe's most defenceless citizens.

The international architecture today is strong enough to name crimes, but too fractured to prevent them. If the international community is serious about justice, reconstruction, and the future of Ukraine, it must begin by reclaiming its lost generation, the children deported, radicalised, and abused to serve Russia's strategic objectives. Any postwar settlement that fails to centre their return and reintegration risks cementing erasure as the cost of compromise.

Policy Proposals

The Repatriation of Ukrainian Children:

The repatriation of Ukrainian children is a cornerstone of the Ukrainian Peace Formula and a central pillar of the Bring Kids Back UA State Plan. Ukrainian leadership has made it unequivocally clear: there can be no lasting peace with Russia until every unlawfully deported Ukrainian child is returned home. Since 2014, Thousands of Ukrainian children have been forcibly deported to Russia or Russian-occupied territories, severed from their families, their culture, and their national identity. This campaign constitutes a clear violation of international humanitarian law, including the Geneva Conventions and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and signals an orchestrated attempt to erase Ukrainian heritage through the manipulation of its most vulnerable generation.

Efforts to document and counter these crimes have relied heavily on technological innovation and open-source intelligence. On the ground in Ukraine, the Office for Missing Persons plays a crucial coordinating role in locating and recovering deported children. Yet despite its importance, the office is under-resourced, under-connected, and under-equipped. It lacks access to the data-sharing infrastructure and embedded analytical expertise needed to operate at scale. While private-sector partners such as Paliscrope have provided bespoke tools and systems development pro bono, these are stopgap measures that must now be scaled with meaningful international support.

The following policy proposals outline urgent, achievable interventions that can accelerate the recovery of Ukrainian children, enhance Ukraine's legal and technological capabilities, and help build a long-term framework for justice:

Child Returns and Family Reunification

- Expand and institutionalise repatriation and reintegration programmes, with coordinated oversight across ministries, including education, health, justice, and social policy.
- Assign dedicated case managers to each repatriated child to oversee health, education, legal identity restoration, and family reunification.

- Establish a national centre for child recovery and reintegration, serving as a hub for psychological evaluation, temporary housing, and family tracing.
- Offer targeted mental health support for parents, quardians, and kinship carers, many of whom are themselves trauma-affected or navigating legal complexity to reclaim custody.
- Provide safe and legal avenues for families in occupied territories to return, including streamlined exit procedures and legal protections.

Education and Educator Accountability

- Implement a fair and transparent vetting process for teachers and administrators in formerly occupied regions to distinguish between coerced compliance and active collaboration with Russian occupation authorities.
- Offer conditional amnesties and retraining for educators who taught the Russian curriculum under duress, recognising the widespread use of threats, intimidation, and salary withholding by occupation authorities.
- Reintroduce Ukrainian civic education and democratic history in formerly occupied schools, with age-appropriate material to help students recontextualise their experience under occupation.

Support Services for Students, Educators, and Communities

- Establish school-based trauma support units to provide long-term psychological care, counselling, and peer support for children returning from deportation or occupation.
- Train educators and school staff in traumainformed practices, enabling them to identify distress, manage complex behaviour, and support recovery without re-traumatisation.
- Ensure Russian-speaking or previously assimilated children are not marginalised.

Promote community-led healing initiatives, including youth dialogue forums, arts and culture programmes, and intergenerational storytelling, drawing on models from postconflict education in the Balkans.

Additional Strategic Measures

- ► Form an international working group on child repatriation, including legal experts, child welfare practitioners, and OSINT investigators, to coordinate cross-border casework and ensure accountability.
- Develop further legal mechanisms for identity restoration, enabling children who were renamed, re-registered, or adopted in Russia to regain their Ukrainian citizenship and legal identity.

War Crimes Investigations: Safeguarding Evidence, Enabling **Justice**

Documenting possible violations is not just a moral imperative, it is essential to securing future prosecutions and our understanding of contemporary hybrid warfare. However, many of the investigative mechanisms currently in place are underfunded, fragmented, and over-reliant on temporary contributions from private and civil society actors. The war in Ukraine has demonstrated the value of open-source intelligence (OSINT), Al, and satellite imagery in documenting atrocities in real time. Yet the withdrawal of US funding in 2024 significantly impacted access to critical geospatial and analytical resources. Meanwhile, Ukraine's Office for Missing Persons (OMP) lacks the embedded technical personnel, secure systems infrastructure, and cross-border legal support required to operate at the scale the crisis demands. The international community must step up, not just with condemnation, but with funding, personnel, and political will. These proposals will help transform fragmented investigations into a coordinated, longterm accountability framework.

Intelligence and Tracking Mechanisms

- Develop a centralised, secure database of missing children, built in collaboration with international law enforcement bodies such as INTERPOL, EUROPOL, and the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP).
- Leverage AI and digital tracking technologies, including facial recognition, metadata analysis, and social media monitoring, to identify and

- verify abducted or illegally adopted children. Scale-up requires urgent funding.
- Fund embedded technical experts, such as OSINT analysts, data scientists, and digital forensics professionals, within the Office for Missing Persons to accelerate investigations and cross-check leads.
- Provide access to international and privatesector datasets, including adoption registries, residency permits, and border transit records, to aid in tracing children's movements and identities.
- Support the development of tailored casetracking systems for the OMP, including secure storage, chain-of-custody logs, and field access for mobile teams.
- Establish a standing coordination mechanism between Ukrainian authorities, trusted NGOs, international donors, and tech providers to streamline intelligence efforts and reduce duplication.

International Coordination and Resourcing

- Establish an International Funding Consortium composed of the UK, EU, Canada, Nordic states, and other democratic allies to jointly finance independent war crimes investigations. This will ensure continuity in the face of fluctuating US support and protect the independence of investigative bodies.
- Develop a secure data-sharing framework that facilitates real-time collaboration between Ukrainian government agencies, private satellite providers, and investigative teams. Special attention should be paid to maintaining access to high-resolution geospatial data, particularly for occupied or hard-to-reach areas.
- Enhance UK and European leadership in war crimes monitoring, by expanding support for OSINT-based documentation initiatives (e.g. Centre for Information Resilience, Bellingcat, OSINT for Ukraine), and integrating their findings into legal and diplomatic channels.
- Establish an international expert advisory group on child-specific war crimes, to support Ukrainian prosecutors, child protection officers, and human rights lawyers in framing cases involving deportation,

- forced assimilation, and re-education under international law.
- Create a long-term archive of evidence and testimonies, modelled on precedents from post-genocide Rwanda or the Balkans, ensuring that documentation collected now is admissible in future legal processes, even if prosecutions take years or decades to materialise.

Institutionalising OSINT in Legal Accountability

The growing reliance on open-source evidence in criminal investigations, combined with outdated legal frameworks and the proliferation of disinformation, underscores the urgent need to institutionalise OSINT as a formal legal tool. While OSINT has proven critical in tracking child deportations and exposing war crimes in Ukraine, the legal community has yet to fully embrace it as an admissible, standardised form of evidence.

- ▶ Legal accreditation and recognition remain inconsistent. In Ukraine, for instance, legal experts must be certified via the Register of Certified Experts, whereas "specialists" must independently prove their credibility in court. Many OSINT practitioners, particularly international experts, are excluded from legal processes due to the absence of formal certification pathways.
- The ICC currently mandates minimum qualifications for expert witnesses, but no such framework yet exists for OSINT professionals - despite their crucial contributions in real-time evidence gathering.
- Ongoing collaboration between investigators, legal professionals, and policymakers is essential to update legal frameworks and ensure OSINT evidence is ethically sourced, verifiable, and admissible in court.

Deniz M. Dirisu, international OSINT consultant and co-founder of *OSINT for Ukraine*, argues that the time has come to establish a unifying global body to standardise and certify OSINT methodologies. He and *OSINT for Ukraine* advocate for the creation of an International Association of Open-Source Investigators (IA-OSI), which could:

 Develop globally recognised certification and training standards;

- Approve methodologies for data collection and verification:
- ► Enhance legal admissibility of OSINT across jurisdictions;
- ► Foster international cooperation and knowledge-sharing through conferences, online platforms, and joint investigations.

Strengthening Trafficking Prevention and Protection Measures:

The mass displacement of Ukrainians following the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022 created an unprecedented humanitarian emergency. While the peak emergency phase may now be considered historic, the threat of trafficking and exploitation remains ongoing, particularly for those who were already victimised or remain in precarious living and employment conditions. Trafficking is not merely a wartime by-product but a long-term structural risk, which will intensify again in the event of renewed escalation or political instability. This report finds that preparedness for future displacement remains dangerously inadequate, and that there is currently no systematic screening for trafficked persons returning to Ukraine. This absence of early identification mechanisms and survivor support services risks leaving thousands of exploited individuals without protection, legal redress, or recovery pathways.

1. Prevention and Early-Warning Mechanisms

- Establish cross-border early-warning systems for trafficking risks in the event of renewed mass displacement. These systems should integrate migration monitoring, conflict tracking, and predictive modelling tools to identify at-risk populations in real time.
- ▶ Enhance bilateral and multilateral cooperation between Ukraine, EU member states, and international organisations (e.g. IOM, UNHCR, Frontex) to coordinate trafficking prevention, share intelligence, and disrupt known networks.
- Map trafficking hotspots and routes used during early phases of displacement, updating them regularly to inform border policy and emergency response protocols.

2. Expanding Victim Identification and Support

- ► Introduce structured screening procedures for returning Ukrainian refugees to identify survivors of trafficking, forced labour, and CRSV. These must be trauma-informed. confidential, and integrated with local support services.
- ▶ Broaden the definition of trafficking to reflect its evolving nature, incorporating online harms and exploitation.
- ► Establish a centralised refugee and returnee registry, which monitors individuals' needs, movement patterns, and legal statuses, helping to flag trafficking risks and gaps in service delivery.

3. Building Long-Term Resilience and **Institutional Capacity**

- ► Integrate anti-trafficking strategies into Ukraine's national recovery and reconstruction plan, recognising exploitation as a core security and governance challenge.
- Develop mobile legal aid and support units, especially in rural or recently de-occupied regions where survivors may return without institutional support.
- Create reintegration pathways for trafficking survivors, including individualised case management, access to safe housing, employment assistance, and family tracing where necessary.

Notes

