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# STOLEN FUTURES

*How Europe can ensure justice and  
the return of Ukraine's abducted children*

*Revised Edition June 2026*

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## EDITORS' FOREWORD

The war in Ukraine has many faces. While daily news cycles focus on frontline and geopolitical developments, the war has a quieter but equally devastating side that strikes at the heart of Ukrainian families, communities, and future.

This Stockholm Free World Forum and Nordic Ukraine Forum paper outlines the methods, purpose, and scale of Russia's forced deportations and abductions of Ukrainian children. In showing how Russia weaponizes demographics and erases identities, policy makers can better implement mechanisms that can facilitate the return of all Ukrainian children, ensure a just peace, and hold Russia accountable for its crimes against humanity.

Sweden and other European countries are in a position to act decisively to support Ukraine's European future. The safe return of stolen Ukrainian children – those who will build this future – must be seen as a key task in this support.

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Слава Україні!

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## Introduction

More than four years into the full-scale invasion, Russia continues to commit war crimes and crimes against humanity in Ukraine on a massive and systematic scale. The crimes against children are especially grave not only in their extent, but in their deliberate nature. Millions of children have had their lives shattered by war and attacks on civilian infrastructure, stripping them of safety, education, and a peaceful childhood.

At the heart of these crimes is the forcible deportation and abduction of Ukrainian children from the temporarily occupied territories. Tens of thousands have been transferred into Russia or within Russian-occupied territories, in direct violation of international law. As of June 2026, official Ukrainian records document 20,610 known cases of forcibly deported or transferred children, but the true number is far higher and dangerously unknown.<sup>1</sup>

The mass abduction of civilians, including children, is a central element of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. Far from isolated abuses, these actions are part of a systematic, state-sponsored campaign aimed at erasing the national identity of Ukrainian children while simultaneously addressing Russia's own demographic decline. Russian claims of "evacuation" and "rehabilitation" are in reality instruments of war that meet the criteria for genocide under Article 2 of the Genocide Convention.

Separated from parents in filtration zones. Left unregistered or given false documents to prevent reunification. Forcibly adopted into Russian families. Subjected to patriotic reeducation and military training. Indoctrinated and russified with Kremlin propaganda. Stripped of their Ukrainian identities. These are just some of the systematic elements of Russia's state-run abduction and forced assimilation program.

With each passing day, the return of these stolen children becomes more difficult. Ukraine and the international community face challenges in building effective mechanisms for repatriation. Recoveries are largely conducted on a



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1. [Children of War](#), February 2022 - June 2026

case-by-case basis, often driven by civil society organizations operating at great personal risk, with little support from state institutions. To date, only a small fraction of abducted children have been successfully returned home.

The estimated 1.6 million Ukrainian children still living in the temporarily occupied territories remain at risk of forced deportation.<sup>2</sup> While the International Criminal Court has issued arrest warrants or Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Commissioner for Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova in 2023,<sup>3</sup> with Lvova-Belova personally implicated in an illegal adoption, Russia continues to commit these crimes against humanity with near impunity. The issue of child deportations and abductions remains one of the most underreported aspects of the war.

The return of Ukrainian children is central to a just peace and requires a sustained international response with accountability at its core.

## The scope of Russia's forced deportations

Russia's practice of forced deportations is not new; it is a legacy of Soviet-era policies under which generations of non-ethnic Russians were forcibly relocated across the USSR, russified, and stripped of their language, culture, and identity.<sup>4</sup> Ukrainians, Balts, Crimean Tatars, and other minority groups share this painful historical memory. For many, return from exile took decades, if it happened at all, and entire generations were born and raised far from their homelands.<sup>5</sup>

The Soviet Union was never held accountable for the decades of its forced deportations and cultural erasure. This legacy of impunity has contributed to the conditions that today enable Russia's ongoing violations in Ukraine.

In 2014, the so-called humanitarian initiative Trains of Hope: Crimea facilitated unlawful transfers of children from occupied Crimea to Russia for adoption—an early instance of state-sponsored deportations carried out under the guise of humanitarian aid in Russia's war against Ukraine.<sup>6</sup> In 2019, Russia simplified the legal process for adopting children from other temporarily occupied Ukrainian territories. Children who were six years old at the time have now completed their education entirely within the Russian school system, with a curriculum designed to erase their Ukrainian identity.

At the outset of the full-scale invasion in 2022, Russia did not allow Ukraine to establish a humanitarian corridor to evacuate children from areas under attack, and instead began the systematic abduction of children in areas under its military control. In direct violation of the Geneva Conventions, Russian authorities also failed to establish any registry to safeguard the identity of these children to enable family reunification. Instead, many children's names and birth certificates were altered before they were placed into Russian institutions or families, cutting them off from their homes and effectively erasing their Ukrainian identity.<sup>7</sup>

2. Jennie Olmsted and Karolina Hird, ISW Press, [Russian Occupation Update](#), April 28, 2025

3. International Criminal Court, [Situation in Ukraine: ICC judges issue arrest warrants against Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin and Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova](#), March 2023.

4. Ukrainer, [A century of deportations. How Russia has been destroying nations](#). June 2023.

5. Vladyslav Havrylov, [Mass deportation of Ukrainians: from the USSR "Forge of National Unity" to current Russian war crimes](#), March 2023.

6. Hanna Chabaraï Ukrainian Week, [Crimean Orphans. Without the Right to Self-Determination](#), December 2017.

7. Mari Saito, Maria Tsvetkova, Polina Nikolskaya, Anton Zverev, Reuters, [How Russian officials and their collaborators spirit away Ukraine's children](#), January 2024.

The infrastructure for systematic child abduction was in place well before the full-scale invasion, practiced in occupied Ukrainian territories since 2014, and across Russia, Belarus, and Chechnya. Today, that machinery has been weaponized at scale. Due to the ongoing war and occupation, the true number of abducted children is impossible to determine with certainty, but available estimates indicate the scope of the crime is extensive and sustained.

According to the Bring Kids Back UA initiative, 20,610 cases of unlawful deportation and forced transfer of children have been officially documented.<sup>7</sup>

This figure reflects only those cases with verified evidence. Ukraine's Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights and Child Rehabilitation, Daria Herasymchuk, estimates the real number to be between 200,000 and 300,000.<sup>8</sup>

Russian authorities claim to have deported 744,000 Ukrainian children under the pretext of evacuation. However, no verifiable data has been provided, and the figures are difficult to independently confirm. Ukraine's Commissioner for Children's Rights considers this number to be exaggerated for political purposes,<sup>9</sup> and a European Parliament report suggests that inflated figures are being used to "obfuscate the nature, scale, and intentions of Russian human rights violations."<sup>10</sup> Approximately 1.6 million children currently live in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine.<sup>11</sup> Meaning that one in five Ukrainian children remains at risk of abduction.

The full extent of these crimes will only become clear after the liberation of the occupied territories. Yet behind every figure is a child whose identity has been erased, a family left in anguish, and a part of Ukraine's future put at risk.

The long-term consequences are difficult to predict, but history makes clear that the failure to act now risks repeating mistakes of the past.

## How Russia deports and russifies Ukrainian children

Russia employs multiple methods to deport or transfer Ukrainian children from occupied territories, but the underlying motive is consistent: a demographic strategy aimed at addressing its own population decline—particularly within its Slavic core—by forcibly incorporating children from Ukraine.<sup>12</sup> These actions, while varied in execution, constitute a coordinated policy that systematically violates international law.

One common method involves the forced transfer of children from state-run institutions and orphanages under the pretext of "evacuation." In other cases, children are abducted directly from their families or taken after their parents have been killed in Russian attacks. These orphaned children are then unlawfully transferred to Russia or Belarus.

Children are also separated from their families during so-called "filtration" procedures, in which parents are detained or imprisoned while their children are taken away. In some instances, children have been given false medical diagnoses as a pretext for their forcible transfer.

A particularly widespread method involves creating unlivable conditions in Russian occupied areas. Parents are persuaded to send their children to camps in Russia or occupied Crimea under the guise of "rest and rehabilitation," but they are never returned. The camps in occupied

8. [Radio Svoboda](#), October 2024.

9. [Radio Svoboda](#), May 2023.

10. Andreas Umland, [Russia's forcible transfers of unaccompanied Ukrainian children: responses from Ukraine, the EU and beyond](#), January 2024.

11. Anastasiia Vorobiova, Almenda, [The Russian Federation's Policy on the Eradication of Children's Identity in the Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine: 2024 Overview](#), March 2025.

12. Ivan Krastev, Stephen Holmes, Foreign Policy, [The Battle for Ukraine Is a War of Demography](#), December 2024.

Crimea frequently serve as initial entry points in the broader machinery of ideological re-education and forced assimilation.<sup>13</sup>

All of these practices constitute clear violations of international humanitarian and human rights law.<sup>14</sup>

What begins as a crime of forced deportation is quickly followed by a coordinated system of identity erasure. According to the Yale Humanitarian Research Lab, Russia has established a systematic program of coerced adoption and fostering. These practices, in violation of international law, are actively promoted by Russian authorities and incentivized through financial benefits and expedited legal procedures. Yale has documented at least 300 Ukrainian children who have been adopted or placed for adoption across 21 regions of Russia, from Murmansk to Novosibirsk.<sup>15</sup>

Russia has also established military-style reeducation programs targeting Ukrainian children, including the expansion of existing organizations such as *Yunarmiya* (“Young Army”). These programs serve a dual purpose: The systematic russification of children and the provision of military training aimed at preparing them for future service in the Russian Armed Forces.<sup>16</sup> Such practices violate international humanitarian and human rights law and appear

designed to cultivate a generation of indoctrinated youth for future mobilization.<sup>17</sup>

To sustain the system of indoctrination, reeducation, and assimilation, the Russian government increased its federal youth policy budget by a staggering 66% in 2022, an upward trend that has continued through 2025.<sup>18</sup> This expanded funding supports ideological programming, militarized education, and broader efforts to erase Ukrainian identity. Russian energy companies Gazprom and Rosneft have also been proven to sponsor the transport and indoctrination of Ukrainian children.<sup>19</sup>

The Belarusian regime also plays a significant enabling role by providing organizational and logistical support. Between October 2021 and June 2024, more than 2,000 Ukrainian children were forcibly deported to Belarus. Many were placed in facilities under the pretext of receiving “medical treatment,” often based on falsified diagnoses.<sup>20</sup>

As an active facilitator of Russian aggression and complicit in war crimes, Belarus cannot be considered a neutral third party. The regime echoes and implements Kremlin policies aimed at erasing Ukrainian identity and must be treated accordingly by accountability mechanisms and international responses.

13. Anna Yanko and Valeria Cerna, Suspline Media, [Propaganda, detention centers, Russian passports: how Russia kidnaps Ukrainian children](#), February 2024.

14. Pravda, [Ukraine's Presidential Commissioner names 6 Russian scenarios for abduction of Ukrainian children](#), February 2024.

15. Raymond, Nathaniel A., Oona A. Hathaway, Caitlin N. Howarth, and Kaveh Khoshnood et al., Humanitarian Research Lab at Yale School of Public Health: New Haven, [“Intentional, Systematic, & Widespread: Russia’s Program of Coerced Adoption and Fostering of Ukraine’s Children.”](#) December 2024.

16. Vladyslav Havrylov, [Deportations as Mass Repressions against Humanity from History to the Present. Historical and Socio-Anthropological Aspects](#), Where Are Our People.

17. Alisa Sinkievich, United24media, [Kidnap, Brainwash, Militarize—the Playbook of Russia’s War on Ukrainian Children](#), May 2024

18. Anastasiia Vorobiova, Almenda, [The Youth Policy of the Russian Federation as a Tool for Eradicating Identity in the Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine](#), December 2024.

19. Bogardus, Nathaniel, Paige Farrenkopf, Caitlin N. Howarth, and Nathaniel A. Raymond et al., Humanitarian Research Lab at Yale School of Public Health: New Haven, [Willing Accomplices: Gazprom and Rosneft’s Role in the Transport and Indoctrination of Ukraine’s Children](#) March 2026

20. Freedom House, [Stolen Childhood: How the Belarusian Regime is Erasing Ukrainian Children’s Identity through Displacement, Re-education, and Militarization](#), October 2024.

## The road home: Ukraine's fight to bring children back

Evidence collection is one of the most urgent tasks in protecting and ensuring justice for Ukrainian children. Documentation of war crimes is actively being conducted by Ukraine, including through platforms such as Children of War, and contributing to international investigations and tribunal efforts. However, the scale of Russia's violations, numbering in the hundreds of thousands, far exceeds the capacity of Ukraine's national judicial system and requires coordinated support from international investigators and institutions.

According to data from the Bring Kids Back UA initiative, only 2,274 of the nearly 20,610 identified abducted children have been returned as of June 2026.<sup>21</sup>

In the absence of institutional mechanisms for repatriation, each return becomes an individual rescue effort. Civil society organizations are playing a vital role in supporting families and guardians in locating and retrieving their children, but the process is often lengthy, complex, and carries significant personal risk.<sup>22</sup>

To prevent further abductions and death, Ukraine has implemented emergency evacuations from high-risk areas near the frontline. Identifying children once in Russian control is challenging due to systematic human rights and legal abuses, but also because child protection standards prohibit direct contact between volunteers and the children, limiting the tools available to safely confirm identities.

Time is of the essence. The urgency of returning Ukraine's abducted children cannot be overstated. With each

passing day, the challenge becomes more difficult, as children remaining in Russian hands become forcibly assimilated into the aggressor's society and disappear.

Ukraine is therefore calling on the international community to act decisively, not only by supporting legal and diplomatic efforts and imposing targeted sanctions on those involved in these crimes, but also by helping to establish effective mechanisms for the safe return of children, strengthening civil society initiatives, and addressing the legal and institutional gaps that currently allow such violations to continue with impunity.<sup>23</sup>

## International responsibility

Many international organizations have supported Ukraine's efforts to return abducted children and hold Russia accountable. However, in some cases, the actions or inaction of international NGOs have undermined these efforts. Funding cuts under the Trump administration have also weakened global capacity for evidence collection and long-term accountability.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) holds the most extensive international mandate to assist in the return of abducted children. Under the Fourth Geneva Convention, the ICRC is explicitly tasked with facilitating family reunification and supporting children who are orphaned or separated during conflict. Ukraine has formally submitted a list of identified abducted children to the ICRC. However, to date, no substantial action has been taken in response.<sup>24</sup>

21. [Children of war](#)

22. Dmitry Mikhailov and Anna Matviyishina, Suspline Media, [Ukraine seeks opportunities to return children from Russia — Prosecutor General's Office](#), April 2023.

23. Ukraine Forum, [The Verkhovna Rada Commissioner for Human Rights, Dmytro Lubinets, called on UN member states to make efforts to return Ukrainian children abducted by Russia](#), May 2025.

24. Radio Svoboda, [Ukraine has handed over to the ICRC a list with the names of 19,000 Ukrainian children abducted by Russia — Mezentsev](#), April 2023.

In addition to institutional inaction, there have been credible reports of direct complicity by national Red Cross societies. The Belarusian Red Cross has reportedly participated in the relocation of children from Russian-occupied territories to Belarus—an action publicly condemned by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC).<sup>25</sup> Simultaneously, the Russian Red Cross has been involved in activities linked to the *Artek* children's camp in occupied Crimea, a facility associated with the "patriotic re-education" of Ukrainian children.<sup>26</sup>

These actions by humanitarian organizations risk legitimizing Russia's violations and highlight the need for a swift, coordinated international response. The Red Cross and other humanitarian actors must uphold their mandates by actively supporting the safe return of abducted children and ensuring accountability for those responsible. This includes enforcing strict measures against entities complicit in violations.

Addressing mass child abductions and preventing their recurrence is a matter for international law enforcement. While the International Criminal Court has issued arrest warrants and a limited number of countries have imposed targeted sanctions, these steps remain insufficient.

The U.S. State Department played a key role in supporting efforts to investigate and document Russia's forced deportations and adoptions of Ukrainian children. Through its funding of the Yale University Humanitarian Research Lab, the State Department contributed to the collection of

critical evidence used in international war crimes investigations, including the ICC's indictments of Russian officials. However, in March 2025, the Trump Administration terminated this funding, jeopardizing access to large metadata sets.<sup>27</sup> Public and political pressure later led to a temporary restoration of funding, allowing for the transfer of data to EUROPOL.<sup>28</sup>

In parallel, the U.S. has withdrawn its participation from the International Centre for the Prosecution of the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine and the Atrocity Crimes Advisory Group — both key mechanisms for investigating war crimes, including child abductions.<sup>29</sup> While some advocacy and research efforts continue, direct U.S. operational support for these investigations has been significantly reduced, hampering Ukrainian and European efforts.

The European Union and its member states have supported Ukraine's efforts to identify and recover abducted children by providing DNA identification toolkits,<sup>30</sup> imposing sanctions on individuals involved in the deportations,<sup>31</sup> and funding both the International Criminal Court and Ukraine's Prosecutor General's Office for the documentation and prosecution of war crimes.

The Nordic and Baltic countries have also played leading roles providing humanitarian and military aid. Some abducted children have received rehabilitation in the Baltic states. However, the issue of forced deportations and child abductions remains underrepresented.

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25. Tetiana Lozovenko, Pravda, [International Red Cross investigates abduction of children from Ukraine by Belarusian Red Cross](#), July 2023.

26. Shaun Walker, The Guardian, [Red Cross urged to act over Russian branch's links to Kremlin war machine](#), March 2024.

27. John Hudson, Washington Post, [Trump terminates program tracking mass abductions of Ukrainian children](#), March 2025.

28. TVP World, [US temporarily restores funding for project tracking abducted Ukrainian children](#), March 2025.

29. Martin Forusek, Kyiv Independent, [US to withdraw from group investigating Russian leadership for crimes against Ukraine](#), March 2025.

30. Diana Kuryshko, BBC Ukraine, ["My mother was killed. I was kidnapped." What Ukrainian children told in The Hague](#), September 2023.

31. EU Neighbours East, [Investment in humanity: Russia must be held accountable for deportations of Ukrainian children, says EU](#), March 2024.

Given the scale and complexity of the challenge, Ukraine requires significantly greater international assistance to develop and implement effective mechanisms for the return of its children. Countries that have not yet publicly condemned these crimes, or called for the unconditional return of abducted Ukrainian children, must be urged to do so. As discussions about future negotiations intensify, the fate of these children—held as hostages by the Russian state—must be a central element of any framework for a just peace.

## What can Europe do?

European states and EU institutions are well positioned to play a strategic and impactful role in supporting the return of abducted Ukrainian children, preventing further deportations, and ensuring accountability. With a strong international voice and a longstanding commitment to human rights, diplomacy, and multilateral cooperation, Europe can take the following actions:

### 1. Ensure sustainable funding for return operations and evidence collection

The EU should allocate targeted funding to both governmental and civil society actors engaged in identifying, recovering, and reintegrating abducted Ukrainian children. Support to NGOs is particularly critical, as they often lead return operations and promote transparency in the process.

### 2. Support justice and accountability efforts

The EU should expand sanctions to include individuals and entities involved in the forced deportation of Ukrainian children—both Russian and Belarusian. These measures would reinforce Europe's commitment to accountability and justice under international law. All EU

member states should accelerate the phase-out of Russian energy imports, expand sanctions against Gazprom and Rosneft, and support accountability for the deportation and indoctrination of Ukrainian children.

### 3. Assist the rehabilitation and reintegration of victims and families

Building on proven models such as Latvia's rehabilitation programs for returned children, Europe can establish similar initiatives to provide psychological, medical, and educational support to children and families affected by deportation.

### 4. Conduct diplomacy and advocacy to mobilize international pressure

The EU can lead diplomatic efforts to place the return of Ukrainian children on the global agenda. This includes advocating for the use of frozen Russian assets to support recovery and reintegration efforts. Emphasizing the protection of children as a universal obligation may also resonate in the Global South, where Russian influence has expanded. The protection of children in conflict zones is a global issue.

### 5. Maintain security and defence support to Ukraine

The forced deportation of children is inseparable from Ukraine's ability to defend its territory and population. Continued European military and security assistance contributes to preventing further abductions and upholds international law.

## KEY UKRAINIAN ORGANIZATIONS

The following is a non-exhaustive list of Ukrainian and international organizations working to return deported Ukrainian children, protect their rights, and hold perpetrators accountable. Together, they form a critical ecosystem of response and resilience in the face of Russia's systematic abduction and deportation of Ukrainian children.

**[Bring Kids Back UA](#)** - An initiative of the President of Ukraine, this comprehensive action plan unites government agencies, partner countries, and international organizations to return abducted Ukrainian children and ensure global child safety.

**[Office of the Ombudsman of Ukraine](#)** - Also known as the Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights, this institution plays a central role in protecting children's rights, advocating for their return, and monitoring violations.

**[Save Ukraine](#)** - A charitable fund and Ukraine's largest humanitarian organization focused on rescuing abducted children. Since 2014, it has helped return over 1387 children.

**[Ukrainian Child's Rights Network](#)** - A coalition of civil society organizations working to coordinate efforts to reunite children with their families and improve advocacy and response mechanisms.

**[Helping to Leave](#)** - Focused on humanitarian evacuation, this initiative helps people flee from occupied territories, active combat zones, and even Russian regions where Ukrainians, including children, have been forcibly deported.

**[Voices of Children](#)** - This charitable foundation supports child victims through advocacy, psychological aid, and rehabilitation centers, helping children and families heal from trauma.

**[SOS Children's Villages](#)** - Founded in 2003 and operating in nine regions of Ukraine, this NGO runs comprehensive programs for vulnerable children, supporting family reunification and long-term care.

**[Charity Foundation "East SOS"](#)** - A comprehensive assistance to victims of armed conflict and internally displaced persons, while promoting democratic transformation and human rights values in Ukraine.

**[Gen.Ukrainian](#)** - An NGO specializing in issues of childhood during the war and mental rehabilitation of children and adolescents who have experienced psychological trauma as a result of war, such as loss of parents, captivity, or forced displacement.

**[Regional Center for Human Rights](#)** - Founded in Sevastopol in 2013, this organization works to hold Russia accountable for war crimes, particularly the forcible deportation of children.

**[Ukraine 5 AM Coalition](#)** - A network of human rights organizations documenting war crimes and crimes against humanity, including child abductions and deportations.

**[Ukrainian Helsinki Union for Human Rights](#)** - An association of human rights organizations in Ukraine, engaged in documenting war crimes, advocating for justice, and supporting victims.

**[PR Army](#)** - A Ukrainian non-profit working with international media by providing access to Ukrainian experts and eyewitnesses. PR Army exposes forced deportations of Ukrainians and continues to advocate for the rights of deportees and unlawful detentions through the "Where are our people?" project.

**[Human Rights Center ZMINA](#)** - Provides research and analysis on human rights abuses, and conducts national and international advocacy on behalf of forcibly deported children and other victims.

**[Molfar](#)** - An OSINT (Open-Source Intelligence) organization investigating Russian war crimes through digital forensics, including evidence of child deportations.

**[Kids of Ukraine](#)** - support children and families affected by the war.