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Saudi Arabia, Turkey Mediate Talks to Return Ukrainian Children – FT

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Children from the breakaway territories of eastern Ukraine seen in Moscow. **Sergei Vedyashkin / Moskva News Agency**

Saudi Arabia and Turkey are hoping to broker a deal to return Ukrainian children taken to Russia since Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, the Financial Times reported Tuesday, citing several anonymous sources familiar with the matter.

Russia and Ukraine have refused to engage directly on the issue — over which the International Criminal Court indicted President Vladimir Putin and his children's rights commissioner — because of its contentious nature.

"It is not a question of exchange of prisoners of war, these are civilians, these are children," said the Ukrainian children's rights commissioner, Daria Herasymchuk.

Russian oligarch Roman Abramovich, who has previously mediated negotiations as Putin's unofficial emissary to Ukraine, is also reportedly involved in the talks.

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Discussions have been ongoing for several months as Kyiv and Moscow are compiling lists of children held by Russia in the absence of centralized records, according to FT.

“This is too sensitive, no one trusts anyone,” an unnamed person involved in the talks was quoted as saying. “They need an independent body that will have the data of all the children and will be accepted by both countries.”

Kyiv accuses Russia of arranging the abductions of up to 20,000 Ukrainian children since launching its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Many are believed to have been placed in foster homes and adopted families.

Russia, which denies committing war crimes in the forced displacement despite a UN investigative finding, has returned 371 children as of June 2023.

A group of activists called Kidmapping has identified nearly 1,400 locations inside Russia where Ukrainian children were likely transferred.

Saudi Arabia raised the issue of displaced children at a G20 meeting in June, according to FT’s report.

“The goal is to count all the children to understand how many there are and then find the best solution for each child,” a diplomat involved in the mediation discussions was quoted as saying.

The talks have been further complicated by the different ways and circumstances in which Ukrainian children have arrived in Russia, with some facing forced deportation while others were taken by pro-Russian relatives.

Neither the governments of Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Ukraine, Russia or Abramovich responded to FT’s requests for comment.

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