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Ukrainian Teen Taken From Mariupol Returned Home

By AFP

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A Ukrainian orphan taken from Mariupol after Russian forces captured the Ukrainian city in the first weeks of its invasion has returned home, Kyiv said Sunday.

The case of Bohdan Yermokhin, who turned 18 on Sunday, made international headlines after Russia issued him a draft summons to report for mandatory military conscription ahead of his 18th birthday.

Kyiv said he had made it back to Ukraine after a series of negotiations involving officials in Moscow, Kyiv and Belarus.

"Our team managed to bring home Bohdan Yermokhin, a Ukrainian boy who was taken by Russia from occupied Mariupol to the Moscow region," said Andriy Yermak, President Volodymyr Zelensky's chief of staff, on Sunday.

The Kremlin has been accused of illegally transferring thousands of Ukrainian children to Russia, and the International Criminal Court (ICC) has issued an arrest warrant for President Vladimir Putin over the alleged deportations.

Related article: 700K Ukrainian Children Transferred to Russia Since Invasion – Official

Yermokhin's return was brokered by Qatar and the UN children's agency UNICEF, Ukraine's human rights ombudsman Dmytro Lubinets said in a social media post.

He also published a photo of Yermokhin holding a Ukrainian flag at the border.

"It was a thorny path. Bohdan went through a lot while in Russia, but despite everything he wanted to be home! Today his wish has come true," Lubinets said.

Yermokhin — who was previously caught by Russia trying to escape back to Ukraine via Belarus — had appealed to Zelensky for help.

Russia's children's commissioner, Maria Lvova Belova — also wanted by the ICC — had said several times this year that Yermokhin wanted to stay in Russia, but was being pressured by Ukraine to return home.

She later said he had "changed his mind."

On Sunday she also confirmed that Yermokhin had been transferred to Ukraine via Belarus.

Kyiv says it has identified 20,000 Ukrainian children who were forcibly taken to Russia after its forces invaded last February.

Around 400 have since been returned.

Qatar is hoping to play a key role in facilitating more children being returned.

Last month it brokered the return of four Ukrainian children, including a two-year-old boy.

"Our team is continuing to work," Ukraine's Lubinets said Sunday. "The task is to bring all Ukrainians home."

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