The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

How and Why Russia Snatches Ukrainian Children

By Andreas Umland

February 15, 2024



AP Photo / Michal Dyjuk

Starting in 2014 and intensifying since 2022, Moscow has implemented an outrageous policy of large-scale Russian state-enforced displacement and deportation of Ukrainian civilians including thousands of unaccompanied minors and teenagers.

One of the Russian invasion's aims since 2022 has been to capture and then russify large numbers of Ukrainian citizens in order to prop up Russia's declining population. This aim may be as important to Moscow as the annexation of Ukrainian territory. Child displacement and deportation has taken place in Ukraine's occupied Crimea and Donbas since 2014. Yet, it did not become widely known until 2022 when the numbers of such illegal transfers rose sharply.

Since Feb. 24, 2022, Russia has displaced or deported at least 19,546 unaccompanied Ukrainian children according to official figures provided by the Ukrainian government's

Children of War portal. However, this statistic includes only those children on whom information has been provided. Presumably, the real figure is considerably higher.

They include "children of war" in a broader and more literal sense, i.e. minors who have been left alone during the fighting. Unaccompanied children have been collected by Russian officials and activists from the frontline or occupied Ukrainian territories. Some children's parents or relatives have been persuaded by Russian agents (officials, activists, collaborators, etc.) to send their offspring to Russian summer camps or other recreational centers. Some of these camps in Russia are advertised as integration programs for Ukrainian children. After an agreed recreation period, many have been kept for longer and even transported elsewhere.

As many as 3,855 underage orphans and other minors living in Ukrainian children's homes had, according to the Regional Center for Human Rights (RCHR), been deported or displaced by September 2023. Some Ukrainian children have been separated from their parents in so-called filtration camps along the frontline.

Most of these illegally transferred unaccompanied Ukrainian children have close relatives or other legal guardians. Some of the latter live in the government-controlled areas of Ukraine whereas others are themselves externally displaced and live abroad. In the vast majority of cases, neither the relatives nor any Ukrainian governmental authorities have given explicit permission for Russia to permanently transfer these unaccompanied children.

Russia adopted new legislation in 2022-2023 to facilitate the Russification and assimilation of Ukrainian children. These revisions have led to a situation in which, according to a report from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, children and the legal guardians from whom they have been separated "have virtually no say in the whole process [of citizenship change]."

Receiving Russian citizenship entitles adopted children to social guarantees and access to governmental subsidies. This creates financial incentives for potential adopters. Under the Russian Family Code, adopted children are equal in status to their parents' own children, even allowing their name, surname, birth date, and birthplace to be changed. This makes it difficult to establish Russia-adopted Ukrainian children's status and their relatives in Ukraine.

Related article: Russia Is Preparing the Next Generation to Die for Their Country

A range of Russian governmental bodies participate in the deportation and adoption process, with children's rights commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova — wanted by the International Criminal Court — coordinating. Dozens of Russian federal, regional and local officials are implementing the government's displacement and russification program. They are engaged in logistic coordination; fundraising; providing supplies; managing children's camps; as well as promoting the Russification campaign within Russia and the occupied areas of Ukraine.

Ukrainian officials have made numerous appeals to Russia. In March 2023, Ukraine's Vice Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk asked Moscow to "immediately hand over the lists of all [Ukrainian] orphans and children deprived of parental care" and under Moscow's control. Since 2022, Ukrainian criticism has become increasingly targeted at international organizations tasked with preventing and reversing forcible transfers of children. Oddly,

instead of preventing and reversing forcible transfers, the Belarusian Red Cross Society, until recently a member of the International Federation of the Red Cross (ICRC) has facilitated them.

As child deportations continue until today and only very few of them have been reversed, the Ukrainian government has launched various initiatives including the Child Rights Protection Center and the Bring Kids Back UA program, advocating for or managing the return of deported children. However, only around 400 of the so far almost 20,000 officially registered displaced or deported children have been returned to government-controlled territory within Ukraine.

International public awareness of Russia's mass deportation of children has risen only slowly. On July 1, 2022, global human rights organizations called for a moratorium on inter-country adoptions of Ukrainian children in line with the Ukrainian government's approach and international law. By early March 2023, this appeal had been signed by 43 NGOs. In September 2022, the European Parliament adopted a resolution calling upon Russia and its allies to stop the forced transfers and adoption of children, repeal all legislation that facilitates this process, and "immediately" provide information about the children's whereabouts. In a February 2023 resolution, the Parliament went further and stated that transferring children from one group to another constitutes the crime of genocide.

On June 1, 2023, International Children's Day, 23 foreign diplomatic missions in Ukraine issued a joint statement on Russia's forced deportation of Ukrainian children which concluded: "We will hold Russia accountable for its illegal and barbaric actions in Ukraine!"

Despite comprehensive condemnation, thousands of unaccompanied Ukrainian minors remain in Russia or Russia-occupied territory without their legal guardians. The longer they stay away from their homes and families, the more painful, complicated, and questionable their future repatriation becomes. Until more responsible governments come to power in Russia and Belarus, huge multilateral and multidirectional action is needed to create swift and tangible change.

National and transnational actors must move from intervening with words to result-oriented action. The RCHR has suggested that, instead of merely mentioning Russia's mass deportation of children in generic humanitarian or political declarations, official documents specifically demanding the repatriation of Ukrainian children should be issued. The United Nations General Assembly, further international organizations, and as many national parliaments as possible should do so.

Related article: Russia Doesn't Care About the Fight Against Fascism

Furthermore, the RCHR has suggested that agreements between Ukraine and willing partners should be concluded on cooperation in repatriation, the list of sanctioned Russians involved in deportations should be expanded and means of influencing already sanctioned figures be extended, new arrest warrants modeled on those against President Vladimir Putin and Lvova-Belova should be issued by the ICC, new crimes should be added to those listed in the existing warrants, and frozen Russian assets should be confiscated and repurposed for the needs of children who have become victims of illegal deportation and forced displacement.

Limitations on Russian officials involved in the deportation and assimilation of Ukrainian children should become a prominent feature in EU sanctions packages. EU sanctions related to the deportation and assimilation of Ukrainian children should be extended to Russian NGOs, companies, schools, universities, professional organizations and so on participating — often openly and even demonstratively – in the deportation and russification efforts.

A complicated challenge that remains is how to alert still largely ignorant parts of the international community to the scale, gravity and tragedy of Russia's child removal policies. While many interested academics, politicians and diplomats in the West are well-informed about this scandalous situation, awareness among ordinary citizens of European and other countries remains limited. This gap needs to be closed with a particular focus on nations in the Global South where Kremlin narratives about the Russo-Ukrainian War are popular. Journalists and editors could be provided with incentives like fellowships to inform the public about what is going on.

Russia's child removal policy is important as it illustrates Moscow's plan for a demographic conquest, not just a geographical one. The Kremlin's war is a national-cultural and not only military-political project. Disclosing details of Moscow's horrendous child displacement and deportation policies in Ukraine since 2014 can help to better understand the nature of Russia's genocidal attack and why it is necessary to stop it as soon as possible.

This article summarizes the findings of the forthcoming report "Russia's Forcible Transfers of Unaccompanied Ukrainian Children" commissioned, in summer 2023, by the European Parliament's Subcommittee on Human Rights.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/02/15/how-and-why-russia-snatches-ukrainian-children-a84080