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Russia Returns 11 Children to Ukraine After Qatari Mediation

February 19, 2024



Ukrainian children at Qatar's Embassy in Moscow. **Mikhail Metzel / TASS**

Eleven Ukrainian children left Russia for Ukraine on Monday to be reunited with their families, the latest transfer between the warring sides under a Qatari-mediated scheme.

"This is the largest group of children in our family reunification activities, which we're carrying out on behalf of the Russian president," Russia's presidential commissioner for children's rights Maria Lvova-Belova wrote on the messaging app Telegram.

Kyiv has said that around 20,000 children have been forced to move to Russia since Moscow invaded in February 2022, with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky calling the transfers "a genocide."

The International Criminal Court (ICC) issued arrest warrants for both Russian President Vladimir Putin and Lvova-Belova in March 2023, accusing them of unlawfully deporting Ukrainian children.

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Lvova-Belova said the children being returned to Ukraine on Monday came from the partially occupied Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk and Luhansk regions, as well as Russian-annexed Crimea, but also the Krasnoyarsk region in Siberia.

The children, ranging in ages between two and 16, were hosted at the Qatari embassy in Moscow ahead of a long journey through Belarus, which should see them cross into northwestern Ukraine on Tuesday.

Video shared by the state news agency TASS showed Lvova-Belova and Qatar's Ambassador in Moscow, Ahmed bin Nasser bin Jassim Al Thani, greeting the children at his embassy.

Lvova-Belova credited Qatar with "participation in the negotiations, accompaniment, transportation and other expenses" in the children's return.

Qatari officials said in December that Doha's mediation came in response to requests from Moscow and Kyiv to explore potential areas of cooperation.

"As a result of this work, the number of children reunited with their families in Ukraine with our participation will grow to 59," Lvova-Belova said Monday.

AFP contributed reporting.

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