

## Putin is Still Stealing Ukrainian Children

By Karolina Hird

**Russian President Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine over three years ago with the intent, among other things, of stealing its children.** Putin launched his imperial conquest to first and foremost dominate the Ukrainian people, and he recognized that to deprive Ukraine of its children would be to deprive it of its multigenerational potential. When Russian troops rolled across the border into Ukraine on the night of February 24, 2022, the groundwork for the massive deportation of Ukraine’s children was already in place. Ukrainian human rights activists uncovered Kremlin documents dated February 18, 2022, which laid out plans to remove Ukrainian children from orphanages in occupied Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts and bring them to Russia under the guise of “humanitarian evacuations.” These documents revealed that Russia planned to target vulnerable Ukrainian children, especially those without parental care before the full-scale invasion had even begun. In the subsequent three years, Russia has embarked on a Kremlin-directed, deeply institutionalized project to abduct Ukrainian children and forcibly turn them into the next generation of Russians.

Ukraine has been able to verify Russia’s deportation of 19,456 children to date, although the true figure is likely to be much higher because Russia frequently targets vulnerable children without anyone to speak for them.[1] Yale’s Humanitarian Research Lab placed the number of deported children closer to 35,000 as of March 19, 2025.[2] Putin’s Children’s Rights Commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova (against whom the International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant in March 2023 for her role in abducting children alongside Putin) claimed that Russia has “accepted” 700,000 Ukrainian children between February 2022 and July 2023—a terrifying benchmark for the lengths that Russia is willing to go to rob Ukraine of its own people.[3] The true number of deported children is near-impossible to verify, but the implication remains the same—Russia has stolen tens, potentially hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian children with the explicit intent of eradicating their Ukrainian identities and turning them into Russians. International law explicitly forbids the forcible transfer of children from one group to another group for the purpose of destroying, in whole or in part, a national or ethnic group, and considers these violations as constituent acts of genocide.[4]

**Russia’s crimes against Ukrainian children have been remarkably well-documented, particularly by the perpetrators themselves.** The Russian legal system made immediate accommodations for the intended influx of stolen Ukrainian children, signaling the intentionality behind Putin’s deportation project. Putin signed a decree in May 2022 providing for a simplified procedure for the acquisition of Russian citizenship for Ukrainian “children left without parental care and incapacitated persons,” which amounted to a legalization of the process of deporting Ukrainian children and forcibly granting them Russian citizenship.[5]

With the legal framework in place before the full-scale invasion, Russian occupation administrators and occupation officials have blatantly advertised programs that take Ukrainian children from their homes in occupied Ukraine to Russia under a variety of guises, such as camps for their supposed rest, relaxation, and rehabilitation.[6] As recently as March 19, 2025, Zaporizhia Oblast occupation head Yevgeny Balitsky announced that his administration, with financial support from the Russian Ministry of Education, plans to remove 70 children from occupied Zaporizhia Oblast to a Russian government-controlled children’s camp in occupied Crimea in order to give the children an opportunity to “rest and improve their health” after living in proximity to the frontline.[7] Russia has gone to great lengths to claim that these crimes are humanitarian gestures, but the

legally-consistent humanitarian response would be to transfer Ukrainian children back to Ukrainian-controlled territory and return them to the care of their fellow Ukrainians—not deport them to the invading country.

**Russia's abduction of Ukrainian children inflicts lasting psychological impacts as children are forced to assimilate to life inside a hostile occupying power.[8]** Yale's Humanitarian Research Lab has confirmed that Russia is using at least 43 children's camps throughout Russia to house deported children, at least 32 of which are explicitly "re-education" facilities.[9] At least one of these camps in Russia's far eastern Primorsky Krai is physically closer to Alaska than it is to Ukraine. Russia uses these camps to indoctrinate Ukrainian children, punishing them for their Ukrainian identities and forcibly instilling pro-Russian sentiment through carefully curated Kremlin-approved curricula and "military-patriotic" training courses. Chechen Republic Head and close Putin ally Ramzan Kadyrov has lauded the "military-patriotic" training of abducted Ukrainian teenagers in Chechnya, for example.[10] Former Ukrainian Children's Rights Commissioner Mykola Kuleba has termed these re-education programs as "death camps for Ukrainian identity." [11]

Of the tens of thousands of children whom Russia has deported since 2022, a likely significant portion have been forcibly adopted into Russian families. Dmytro Lubinets, Ukraine's Human Rights Commissioner, stated that Ukraine has confirmed at least 400 children whom Russian families have adopted, but as with estimated number of deportations, the true number of adoptions is likely to be much higher.[12] Within the first six months of the invasion, Russia's Krasnodar Krai regional administration posted a quickly deleted advertisement claiming that there were over 1,000 orphans from occupied Mariupol alone "awaiting" adoption into Russian families. High-ranking Russian officials with close ties to Putin, such as Lvova-Belova herself and A Just Russia Duma Deputy Sergei Mironov, have adopted abducted Ukrainian children from occupied Mariupol and Kherson, respectively.[13]



*Author screenshot of the Krasnodar Krai Regional Administration page on August 23, 2022. Translation: "Kids from Mariupol are looking for new families."*

The adoption process strips Ukrainian children of their Ukrainian names and birthplaces, replacing them with Russian birth certificates and documentation intended to erase the child's Ukrainian identity and any paper trail that would allow Ukrainian authorities or family members to search for the child.[14] For teenage Ukrainian boys, their forced acceptance of Russian citizenship can result in a near immediate military summons to fight in the Russian army against their fellow Ukrainians—a completely separate but equally clear violation of

international law.[15] The Russian adoption system is swallowing Ukrainian children up into a bureaucratic black hole, premised on the administrative eradication of Ukrainian identity. For the younger children, especially those adopted in their infancy, their adoption means that an entire generation of Ukrainians are growing up in Russia, unaware that they are Ukrainian.

**There can be no true peace in Ukraine without the return of the children that Putin has stolen.** The fate of these children is inextricably tied to both the military and political outcomes of Putin's war. Negotiations and an end to the fighting without consideration for the deported children will empower Russia to continue to commit these crimes with absolute impunity. A negotiated outcome to the war on any terms but Ukraine's will result in the loss of Ukraine's children, a loss that will be impossible to reverse.

*More from Karolina Hird on Russia's illegal activities in the occupied areas of Ukraine, see:*

*[The Kremlin's Occupation Playbook:](#)*

*[Coerced Russification and Ethnic Cleansing in Occupied Ukraine](#)*

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[1] <https://childrenofwar.gov.ua/en/>

[2] <https://www.rferl.org/a/yale-ukraine-war-crimes-investigation/33351956.html>

[3] <https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/situation-ukraine-icc-judges-issue-arrest-warrants-against-vladimir-vladimirovich-putin-and>; <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-children-taken-ukraine/32527298.html>

[4] [https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocity-crimes/Doc.1\\_Convention%20on%20the%20Prevention%20and%20Punishment%20of%20the%20Crime%20of%20Genocide.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocity-crimes/Doc.1_Convention%20on%20the%20Prevention%20and%20Punishment%20of%20the%20Crime%20of%20Genocide.pdf)

[5] <https://www.ukrinform dot net/rubric-ato/3496766-putins-decree-legalizes-abduction-of-children-from-ukraine-mfa.html>

[6] [https://t.me/SALDO\\_VGA/573](https://t.me/SALDO_VGA/573)

[7] <https://t.me/BalitskyEV/4913>

[8] <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukrainian-children-abducted-by-russia-left-with-psychological-scars-campaigners-2024-06-15/>

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[9] <https://www.razomforukraine.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/UPDATED-January-2024-one-pager-Children-of-War--Russias-Forced-Deportation-of-Ukrainian-Children.pdf>

[10] [https://t.me/RKadyrov\\_95/3104](https://t.me/RKadyrov_95/3104)

[11] <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/russia-ukraine-peace-deal-children-1.7488114>

[12] <https://www.dw.com/en/how-are-ukrainian-children-faring-in-russian-adoptive-families/a-68138393>

[13] <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67488646>; <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2023/07/19/aria-lvova-belova-adopted-mariupol-boy-philip-golovnya/>

[14] <https://www.dw.com/uk/ak-zivut-ukrainski-diti-v-simah-u-rosii-i-ak-ukraina-ih-povertae/a-68070847>

[15] <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-6736831>