

**TESTIMONY BEFORE THE UNITED STATES SENATE COMMITTEE ON
APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE ON STATE, FOREIGN OPERATIONS, AND
RELATED PROGRAMS**

Hearing:

“The Abduction of Ukrainian Children by the Russian Federation”

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Submitted by:

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Subject:

Written Testimony for the Record

It is an honor to appear before you on behalf of the Bring Kids Back UA initiative of the President of Ukraine. Bring Kids Back UA is the national programme that unites Ukrainian state institutions, civil society, and international partners to locate, return, and reintegrate every Ukrainian child unlawfully taken or subjected to coercive assimilation by the Russian Federation. Because our work spans tracing, verification, returns, reintegration, and accountability, we have a comprehensive view of how Russia's policy toward Ukrainian children operates across all temporarily occupied regions and in Russia itself.

The issue before us is not only humanitarian. It is strategic. Child abductions and identity erasure are central to Russia's attempt to remake Ukraine's demography and political future. Any sustainable peace, any future security architecture in Europe, and any just political settlement will depend on reversing these policies and ensuring every child's return. Allowing Russia to entrench these practices would harden occupation lines for generations and undermine the foundations of international security.

Evidence collected by Ukrainian authorities, civil society organizations, and international partners demonstrates that Russia's policy toward Ukrainian children includes a systematic effort to destroy identity in place. In temporarily occupied territories, children who remain in their homes are nonetheless subjected to coercive assimilation, narrative manipulation, and the suppression of their language, culture, and sense of belonging.

The removal, reprogramming, and coercive assimilation of Ukrainian children, whether through forcible transfers or identity erasure inside temporarily occupied territories, constitute one of the most consequential elements of Russia's war against Ukraine. These actions have generational implications for Ukraine's future and undermine fundamental norms of international law.

This testimony draws on documented evidence, verified accounts from returned children and their families, patterns observed across multiple regions, and findings confirmed by international bodies, including the July 2025 judgment of the European Court of Human Rights.

Russia's identity erasure policy inside the occupied territories

Evidence collected from temporarily occupied territories shows that Russia's policies toward Ukrainian children extend beyond physical removal. In many areas, identity erasure takes place within the occupied environment itself.

Verified testimonies from families and returned children show that Ukrainian language instruction is suppressed, replaced entirely with Russian curricula. Ukrainian history, literature, civic education, and cultural references are removed

from classrooms. Children are taught narratives that deny Ukrainian statehood, delegitimize Ukrainian identity, and portray Ukraine as hostile or artificial.

Information isolation is a documented pattern. Ukrainian media is blocked, communications with relatives in government-controlled Ukraine are restricted or monitored, and children are exposed exclusively to Russian state media and propaganda content.

Over time, these measures reshape a child's understanding of self and belonging. Children may continue to live physically in their home communities, yet their identity is gradually reoriented toward Russia. This form of coercive assimilation mirrors the objectives pursued through deportation. Both aim to weaken Ukrainian identity, restructure the social fabric, and exert long-term control over the next generation. Ultimately, identity erasure is designed to create a future population in the occupied territories that is politically aligned with Russia and disconnected from Ukraine.

Russia's strategic objectives behind child abductions

Russia's removal of Ukrainian children serves deliberate strategic objectives, not incidental or humanitarian purposes. These objectives are political, ideological, and demographic.

First, Russia targets the resilience of communities. Child removal destabilizes families and weakens the social fabric. When children disappear, resistance to occupation diminishes.

Second, Russia seeks to break generational continuity. Evidence from returned children and testimonies from families in occupied areas show efforts to sever the transmission of language, culture, and memory from parents to children. The intent is clear: erasing a generation's identity weakens the nation's future.

Third, forced assimilation is a documented state policy. Independent investigations confirm that children transferred into Russia or held in occupation structures undergo systematic russification: changes of name, citizenship, personal documents, and environment. Children's vulnerability is exploited to create "new Russians."

Fourth, abducted children are instrumentalized to justify territorial claims. Russian state media regularly features adoption ceremonies and "integration" narratives to argue that Ukrainian regions are inherently Russian. These children are used as "evidence" to legitimize unlawful annexation.

Finally, these actions support a broader strategy of demographic engineering. Russia's deportations, population transfers, inward settlement of Russian citizens, and displacement of Ukrainians reflect a consistent pattern aimed at reshaping the

population to distort future political outcomes. Children are central because altering the next generation reshapes the future electorate.

Identity erasure as state policy

Russia's identity erasure practices do not end at the border. They intensify once children are under Russian control, whether in occupied territories, state institutions, or Russian families.

Language suppression is systematic. Verified reports from returned children show that they were forbidden to speak Ukrainian in schools and punished for doing so. Ukrainian cultural expressions – songs, holidays, symbols – are prohibited.

Document alteration is another consistent pattern. Evidence from de-occupied areas confirms that children are issued new birth certificates, assigned Russian citizenship, and provided new personal identifiers. These changes create administrative separation from their Ukrainian identity and complicate family reunification.

Information isolation and psychological pressure are used to weaken emotional attachment. Returned children testify that they were prevented from contacting their families or were told their parents had abandoned them. Such manipulation erodes trust and reshapes loyalties.

Indoctrination and militarized upbringing are widespread. Independent investigations document more than 210 sites where children are exposed to ideological training, military-style programs, and narratives glorifying the Russian military. The European Court of Human Rights confirmed that such indoctrination is a deliberate and long-standing state policy.

Children's age and dependence make them the ideal targets. A child whose identity is destabilized today becomes an adult aligned with the occupying power tomorrow.

The political machinery: propaganda, lawfare, and narrative manipulation

Russia sustains its actions through an integrated system of propaganda and administrative coercion designed to obscure intent and complicate efforts to secure children's return.

Propaganda portrays forced transfers as humanitarian evacuations and depicts the Russian state as a benevolent protector. Media monitoring organizations consistently observe narratives framing Ukraine as incapable of caring for its children. This is not simply about restricting information. It is about reshaping loyalties. Children who are isolated from Ukrainian sources of identity and exposed exclusively to Russian narratives are more likely to internalize an imposed identity and view Russia as their

natural home. This loyalty engineering is central to Russia's long-term political strategy in occupied territories.

Administrative lawfare entrenches these crimes. Documented evidence shows that Russia imposes legal obstacles such as forced passportization, movement restrictions, and requirements for Russian biometric passports that prevent children from leaving Russian or temporarily occupied territory, even once they reach adulthood.

Fabricated guardianship decisions and identity reassignments complete the process. Publicized adoption ceremonies – often featuring high-ranking Russian officials – serve to crystallize a fabricated identity and bolster the narrative that these children “now belong” in Russia.

These tools demonstrate a coordinated state strategy, not isolated or spontaneous actions.

Demographic engineering

Evidence from multiple occupied regions shows that Russia's actions fit a historical pattern of demographic manipulation. Deportations, coerced transfers, settlement of Russian citizens, and displacement of Ukrainians are used to reshape the demographic composition of territories under Russian control.

Children are central to this process. By altering their identities and loyalties, Russia seeks to engineer a population aligned with its political objectives. This mirrors earlier Soviet and imperial practices, including the deportation of Crimean Tatars and russification in the Baltic States.

Children are the most durable and influential vector of this strategy because reshaping their identities today produces a population that will legitimize Russia's claims tomorrow.

Bring Kids Back UA as Ukraine's national counter-strategy

Bring Kids Back UA was launched by President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, on May 31, 2023, as Ukraine's coordinated national response to this threat. It unites Ukrainian state institutions, civil society organizations, and international partners around a single mission: to secure the return of all Ukrainian children taken by Russia and to protect every Ukrainian child subjected to identity erasure under occupation.

The initiative functions as a national coordination hub, setting unified strategy, eliminating duplication, and synchronizing all operational, diplomatic, legal, and

advocacy efforts. Its work is grounded in a strictly child-centered approach prioritizing safety, dignity, voluntary participation, and the best interests of each child.

Bring Kids Back UA coordinates the International Coalition for the Return of Ukrainian Children, which includes 42 partner states, including the United States of America, as well as the European Union, the Council of Europe, and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. Coordinated diplomatic pressure from this coalition has been essential in facilitating returns and preventing normalization of these crimes.

Under this framework, 1,859 children have been returned to date. Each return represents the reversal of deliberate harm and the restoration of identity.

Our work spans five integrated tracks:

1. *Data Management*: Unified systems identify children affected by deportation, forced transfer, disappearance, or systematic russification. Evidence is verified to ensure accuracy.
2. *Returns*: All return pathways – third-party mediation, supported self-returns, and complex individualized operations – are coordinated with Ukrainian authorities, civil society partners, and trusted international actors.
3. *Reintegration and Rehabilitation*: Returned children receive long-term psychological care, healthcare, education, and family-based placement. Reintegration restores identity after prolonged coercion or isolation.
4. *Accountability and Justice*: Bring Kids Back UA documents crimes and submits evidence to national courts, the ICC, and the European Court of Human Rights.
5. *International Advocacy*: We lead diplomatic engagement and global public communication to maintain pressure on Russia and mobilize sustained support for tracing, protecting, and returning Ukrainian children.

Bring Kids Back UA is Ukraine's strategic response to a systemic attempt to erase a generation, whether through deportation or coercive assimilation inside occupied territories. Our task is not only to bring children back physically, but to ensure they can return to themselves.

Why international pressure is essential

Evidence throughout this conflict consistently demonstrates that Russia does not return Ukrainian children voluntarily. Children come home only when sustained political pressure, active diplomacy, and international scrutiny are applied together. Without this engagement, Russia will continue to entrench its administrative barriers, expand propaganda narratives, and normalize the permanent separation of Ukrainian children from their families and country.

To prevent Russia from consolidating its control and to secure the return of every child, several urgent steps are necessary.

First, continued pressure on Russia to disclose the full list of children under its control. Russia must provide verified information on the identities, whereabouts, and legal status of all Ukrainian children it has taken, and allow access for international organizations. Without transparency and access, patterns of abuse cannot be interrupted and individual cases cannot be resolved.

Second, insistence on the unconditional return of children. Children cannot be exchanged for territorial concessions, political negotiations, or infrastructure arrangements. Conditioning returns on geopolitical tradeoffs would legitimize an unlawful policy and incentivize future abductions.

Third, support for Ukraine's efforts under the Bring Kids Back UA Initiative. Ukraine needs sustained assistance for the full chain of work that brings a child home and restores their future. This includes support for tracing and locating children, facilitating return pathways, providing reintegration and psychological recovery programs for children who endured coercion or prolonged occupation, and strengthening accountability measures that document and prosecute these crimes. Backing the Bring Kids Back UA framework ensures that every part of this process is coordinated, child-centered, and effective.

Returning Ukrainian children is not only a humanitarian responsibility. It is essential to any just and durable peace. A settlement that leaves Ukrainian children under Russian control, whether physically or through prolonged identity erasure, is not just. It is the ratification of a crime and a violation of the international norms that protect children everywhere.

If the world does not intervene decisively, Russia will manufacture a generation of new Russians out of Ukrainian children whose identities have been taken from them. This is a crime with generational consequences that targets Ukraine's future and undermines the rules that safeguard children globally. Allowing Russia to get away with this would set a dangerous precedent, signaling to authoritarian states that children can be weaponized to alter borders, identities, and political outcomes without consequence.

Thank you for your leadership and for your commitment to ensuring that Ukrainian children return home, recover fully, and reclaim their future.