

No Justice for Children, No Peace for All

Written Testimony by Dr. Kateryna Rashevskya

Legal expert at Regional Center for Human Rights

before the Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs
Hearing: The Abduction of Ukrainian Children by the Russian Federation
December 3, 2025

Chairman Graham, distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the abduction of Ukrainian children by the Russian Federation. I ask that my full written statement be entered for the record.

If we wish to create a lasting peace we must begin with the children. It is in the fundamental interest of the United States to support the Ukrainian people's fight for the best future of our children, because while serving their best interests today we are serving the best interests of all humanity.

Globally, the Regional Center for Human Rights has spent 11 years restoring justice and hope for civilians from the occupied territories of Ukraine who have survived Russian atrocities. We have already submitted 280 individual complaints to the European Court of Human Rights and the UN Human Rights Committee related to crimes committed by Russian agents against Ukrainian civilians.¹ We are cooperating with other United Nations treaty bodies and agencies while empowering children through education about their rights because this is the first step toward preventing commission of gross violations, as well toward building a more just and safe environment for all of them. We fight for returning our children back to their homes because it is not only their right, but a passport to a better future — for the children and for Ukraine.

In March the former U.S. National Security Adviser and the U.S. Ambassador to the UN Mike Waltz said that the return of Ukrainian children illegally abducted by Russia would serve as a 'confidence building measure' for the peace negotiations.² Since that time, according to Russian authorities, they have facilitated the repatriation of only 20 Ukrainian children.³ The rest, as Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova confirmed, remain under state control in institutions or foster families.⁴ This concerns at least 780 Ukrainian children mentioned by Russia earlier.⁵ Yet in her latest annual report, Russian Ombudsperson Tatyana Moskalkova still claims 730,000 Ukrainian children in Russia.⁶

Russia insists it 'evacuated' Ukrainian kids. However, in 2015, one-year-old Katya and Ira were forcibly displaced from occupied Crimea to the Republic of Adygea through the so-called 'Train of Hope' programme and were never returned. For more than 11 years, I have been following their fate and know

¹ <https://rchr.org.ua/en/humanrights/>

² <https://www.msn.com/en-ca/news/world/returning-abducted-ukrainian-children-confidence-building-measure-waltz-says-amid-peace-talks/ar-AA1BvtjB?cvid=8788D2F207FE41D4AFF2ACE6DC25452C&ocid=FUJITSUDHP>

³ Information as of 14.02.2025: <https://t.me/malvovabelova/4797>

Information as of 25.08.2025: <https://t.me/malvovabelova/5660?single>

⁴ <https://www.pnp.ru/politics/zakharova-rossiya-vsyacheski-sodeystvuet-vossoedineniyu-ukrainskikh-detey-s-rodnyimi.html>

⁵ <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n23/115/56/pdf/n2311556.pdf>

⁶ <https://ombudsmanrf.org/storage/74a0484f-7d5a-4fe4-883d-a1b5ba1dd5f8/mediateca/doclad-2024.pdf>, p. 80

that they are raised as Russian citizens in the foster family.⁷ Can they, or 1,000 other children from occupied Crimea,⁸ be considered ‘evacuated’ under international humanitarian law? What about the thousands more who, after 2022, ended up in 57 Russian regions under similar circumstances?⁹

IHL clearly regulates evacuation of children. It requires Russia to take all feasible steps to reunite families. Russia must submit a list of evacuated children to the ICRC. Given the exceptional nature of evacuation, Russia must regularly assess the grounds for keeping children and return them immediately once the necessity ends. Russia has fulfilled none of these obligations. No list, no assessment, no voluntary repatriation. Instead: deportation, Russian citizenship, adoption, and Russification. This fact led the European Court of Human Rights, on 9 July 2025, to find Russia in violation of its international obligations.¹⁰

It is also important to note that Presidential Order No. Pr-986, signed by Putin for family reunification during the ‘special military operation,’ was issued only on 16 May 2023¹¹ — two months after ICC arrest warrants against him and Children’s Commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova.¹² The text of this Order remains unpublished. The composition, methods, and results of the intergovernmental group for family reunification are unknown. Statements by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov claiming that all Ukrainian children in Russia are known; their names and locations are not hidden¹³ are false. Otherwise, we would be aware of it.

The Regional Center for Human Rights documented 165 re-education camps where Ukrainian children are militarized and Russified. These camps exist in occupied territories, Russia, Belarus, and North Korea. 12-year-old Misha from the occupied Donetsk region and 16-year-old Liza from occupied Simferopol were sent to Songdowon camp in North Korea, 9,000 km from home. Children there were taught to ‘destroy Japanese militarists’ and met Korean veterans who, in 1968, attacked the U.S. Navy ship Pueblo, killing and wounding nine American soldiers.¹⁴

Russification and militarization cause severe trauma and violate children’s dignity. At 17, boys receive draft notices into the Russian army. The ultimate aim is clear: to make Ukrainians kill each other. In September 2025, the UN Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights recognized these actions as forced cultural assimilation.¹⁵ Children who resist Russification are labeled extremists, terrorists, or bearers of ‘destructive ideology.’ In 2024 only in the occupied Luhansk region, such 87 children were placed in so-called ‘social rehabilitation’ centers and 76 in psychiatric institutions for forced treatment.¹⁶

⁷ The Regional Human Rights Center can provide information upon request

⁸ https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/7/7/542751_1.pdf, p. 16

⁹ <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1YzILsandGTZVKvkh15-xUPt0lqtJMWf6hoa4dJlPGKM/edit?usp=sharing>

¹⁰ <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre?i=001-222889>

¹¹ https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1916716/

¹² <https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/situation-ukraine-icc-judges-issue-arrest-warrants-against-vladimir-vladimirovich-putin-and>

¹³ <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/6076214>

¹⁴ The Regional Human Rights Center can provide information upon request

¹⁵ https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4091352/files/E_C.12_RUS_CO_7-EN.pdf, p.11

¹⁶ https://deti-lnr.ru/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/%D0%94%D0%9E%D0%9A%D0%9B%D0%90%D0%94-2024_compressed.pdf

Together with political indoctrination and militarization in the education system, which Ukrainian children are obliged to undergo, Russification constitutes a violation of several provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and also contains elements of discrimination and a crime against humanity. As explained by a Venezuelan diplomat in the original United Nations Sixth Committee debates on the Genocide Convention, the forcible transfer of children to a group where they would be given an education different from that of their own group, and would have new customs, a new religion and probably a new language, was in practice tantamount to the destruction of their group, whose future depended on that generation of children.¹⁷

Although school education is mandatory in most countries, Russia, as an occupying power, must provide Ukrainian children with access to Ukrainian education. Instead, they are forbidden to speak and learn the Ukrainian language, to attend Ukrainian schools online, to preserve and manifest their Ukrainian identity. I want to emphasize that for many years, Russia has not implemented the order and the judgment of the International Court of Justice to ensure the right to education in Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar languages in Crimea.¹⁸ The weak enforcement of this decision led to the repetition of the violation in the newly occupied territories.

Chairman Graham, distinguished members of the Subcommittee, I am grateful for your every initiative countering the abduction and Russification of Ukrainian children, including sanctions and your invaluable support for the ICC investigation. I believe it has been one of the key factors behind the Office of the Prosecutor's active and high-quality work that led to the issuance of arrest warrants against President Putin and Ms. Lvova-Belova for the unlawful deportation and forcible transfer of Ukrainian children. Regarding this vital role, I sincerely hope for the adoption of the Abducted Ukrainian Children Recovery and Accountability Act as well as recognize the significant potential of Senator Graham's bill, which would designate Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism should it fail to return Ukraine's abducted children.

Recently, in Nigeria, Boko Haram abducted 300 girls and boys.¹⁹ Like Russia and North Korea, terrorists watch to see how determined world leaders will be in reuniting children with their families, holding perpetrators accountable, and preventing future abuses not only in Ukraine but in the other combat zones.

That is why amnesty for war criminals is not an option.

That is why Russia must immediately and unconditionally return all abducted children via an independent international mechanism.

That is why we cannot recognize Ukraine's occupied territories as Russian — neither *de jure* nor *de facto* — as it would undermine the international legal order, peace and security making us complicit in these crimes.

I strongly believe the United States can help bring peace to Ukrainian children. Beyond their physical and spiritual return, we must also return to our children the sense of justice.

¹⁷ <https://www.jurist.org/commentary/2022/04/laurie-blank-russia-invasion-ukraine-genocide/>

¹⁸ <https://www.icj-cij.org/case/166>

¹⁹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c3w7621xyoyo>