



United States Mission to the OSCE

The Russian Federation's Ongoing Aggression Against Ukraine

As delivered by Chargé d'Affaires Katherine Brucker
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
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Two years ago in early March, hundreds, perhaps thousands, of civilians gathered in Mariupol's main theater, seeking shelter from Russia's unrelenting attacks. The sturdy theater walls and large basement became a refuge for the city's civilians. Field kitchens sprang up to feed the hungry. The theater's set designer used white paint to inscribe the word "children" in massive Cyrillic letters on the pavement in front and back of the building, in the hopes of staving off an attack.

On March 16, Russian Federation forces bombed the theater. An Associated Press investigation estimated the attack killed nearly 600 people. As an Amnesty International report concluded, "the easily identifiable civilian activity at the theater, combined with the absence of any significant military presence, suggests that Russian forces most likely intentionally targeted the theater knowing it was a civilian object, which is a war crime."

This attack has come to epitomize Russia's unconscionable disregard for the lives and wellbeing of civilians – including children -- throughout its war.

As the May 2023 Moscow Mechanism report found, Russia has engaged in a broad effort to forcibly transfer large numbers of Ukrainians, including children, from their homes within occupied parts of Ukraine and in some cases to forcibly deport them to Russia. Since 2014, over 1,000 children reportedly have been taken from Russia-occupied Crimea alone and thousands more have been forcibly relocated from the other occupied areas of Ukraine.

Russian officials have sent many of these children to distant sites in Siberia and the Russian Far East. This is all in violation of Russia's obligations under international humanitarian law. Of the thousands of children taken from Ukraine, as of January 2024 only an estimated 517 have been able to return, according to Ukrainian Commissioner for Human Rights Dmytro Lubinets. That leaves thousands of families torn apart, thousands of children and their parents and lawful guardians traumatized.

Once Russia has these children, it systematically tries to replace their Ukrainian identity with a Russian one. As the same Moscow Mechanism report made clear, "not only has the Russian Federation manifestly violated the best interests of these children repeatedly, it has also denied their right to identity, their right to family...as well as their right to thought, conscience, and religion, right to health, and right to liberty and security."

Russia has not stopped the forcible relocations and pro-Russia re-education tactics it started after it invaded and seized Crimea in 2014. A March 11 Meduza article outlines how Russia is refining its indoctrination methods. The Kremlin has reportedly created an agency called the Federal Center for the Development of Teenage Socialization Programs, which is tasked with “erasing children’s Ukrainian past and integrating them into the Russian world.”

Russia has also reportedly developed a software system called Profilaktika, which monitors children’s online behavior to develop a supposed “risk profile” for the Russian government. Meduza reports the ultimate goal is to constantly monitor at least 85 percent of the social media accounts of children and teenagers living in the Russia-occupied parts of Ukraine. The software unmask online profiles to ensure the Kremlin knows who is searching for things like Aleksey Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation, which the software instructions describe as an “extremist organization.”

Madam Chair, the findings of the Moscow Mechanism report and Russia’s ongoing actions to “Russify” Ukraine’s children demand our response. As one part of the U.S. government’s response, I’m proud to inform the Permanent Council that on March 7th the United States joined the International Coalition for the Return of Ukrainian Children.

As part of the Coalition, we’ll collaborate with the 32 members to support the safe return of all Ukrainian children who have been unlawfully deported or forcibly transferred by Russia. We will ensure those responsible continue to face consequences and, we’ll explore all possible avenues to achieve these goals, including by engaging through OSCE structures.

Responding to Russia’s actions against Ukraine’s children is a moral imperative, including for the OSCE. We demand the Russian Federation immediately cease its forcible transfer and deportation of children and restore them to their families and lawful guardians. We encourage our OSCE colleagues to join us in exploring all avenues to hasten the return of Ukraine’s children.

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