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RELEASE BEFORE PEACE

RELEASE CANNOT WAIT FOR PEACE

Life under occupation: Ukrainian children and unlawfully detained civilians in the territories occupied by russia



VITSCHE · TERRE DES HOMMES starke Kinder – gerechte Welt · RAZOM

SUMMARY

- russian occupation is a coordinated system, not the chaos of war: ideology, executors and infrastructure work together. Ukrainian children are abducted, reeducated and militarized; civilians are unlawfully detained. Their release must not wait for a peace agreement, and must not become a bargaining chip.

20,651
children deported or forcibly transferred.

16,000+
civilians unlawfully detained. Only around 1,500 have been released so far.

85%
of detained civilians report torture or ill-treatment.

44,000
children from the occupied territories are members of the military-patriotic youth movement Yunarmiya.

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SOURCES

This paper draws in particular on:

- OSCE/ODIHR: Report on Violations and Abuses of International Humanitarian, Human Rights and Criminal Law related to Militarization and Indoctrination of Ukrainian Children by the Russian Federation. Expert mission under the Moscow Mechanism, July 2026.
- OSCE/ODIHR: Eighth Interim Report on reported violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law in Ukraine, December 2025.
- OHCHR: 43rd Periodic Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine, 1 June to 30 November 2025.
- United Nations: Statement by Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights Claudia Fuentes Julio, Arria-formula meeting of the UN Security Council, 10 August 2026.
- Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine (United Nations).
- Children of War: data on deported and returned children, as of September 2026.
- International Criminal Court: arrest warrants against Vladimir Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova, 17 March 2023.

INTRODUCTION

OCCUPATION IS A SYSTEM

Since 2014, russia has occupied Ukrainian territory and annexed Crimea. In 2022 it launched its full-scale invasion, and large parts of the east and south of the country were also occupied.

Occupation means far more than massive destruction: people are forced to take russian citizenship, their property is seized, children are militarized and thousands of civilians are detained.

Ideology	Direct impact	Executors	Infrastructure
The message that justifies the system	What happens to people	Who carries it out	What makes it scalable

PART 1 · THE ANATOMY OF OCCUPATION

CHILDREN: ABDUCTED, REEDUCATED, MILITARIZED

Ideology. The message imposed on children in occupied territory: **you are no longer a Ukrainian child; your future is in russia.**

Ukrainian curricula are replaced with russian ones, Ukrainian language and history are erased, the russian army is glorified. Deportation is called “evacuation”, assimilation “integration”. Since December 2025, russian Ministry of Education Order No. 729 has abolished teaching in Ukrainian; the weekly compulsory programme Razgovory o Vazhnom (“Conversations about Important Things”) embeds war narratives from kindergarten age.

Direct impact. A child is transferred, given a new identity and prepared for service within the occupying state’s system.

Deportation: separation from family; placement in camps, boarding schools or russian families. Ukraine’s register lists 20,651 deported or forcibly transferred children (September 2026); only 2,672 have returned.

Erasure of identity: changed documents, names and citizenship; guardianship or adoption; contact with the Ukrainian family cut off.

Militarization: weapons and drone training, cadet classes, military-patriotic camps. In occupied Crimea, cadet classes grew from 3 (2015) to 306 (2025). Yunarmiya aims to bring at least 10% of its members into the russian army. Boys as young as 16 receive pre-conscription notices; at 18 comes conscription.

Executors. Directed by russian federal and regional authorities and occupation administrations; carried out by guardianship authorities, schools, camp directors, and foster care and adoption bodies. Also involved: the Ministries of Education and Defence, Rosgvardiya, DOSAAF, the Movement of the First, Yunarmiya and the Russian Orthodox Church.

Infrastructure. Funding, transport routes, registers, secrecy and no access for international observer missions; plus camps and boarding schools, foster care networks, simplified citizenship and adoption procedures, and a nationwide network of youth and cadet organizations.

> The OSCE mission of July 2026, invoked by 41 states including Germany, describes a “system of purposeful design”: built in Crimea since 2014 and expanded to all occupied territories since 2022.

Parents who refuse to enrol their children in russian schools are threatened with loss of parental rights; teachers who refuse the russian curriculum are dismissed and detained; children who speak Ukrainian face searches and prosecution.

russian citizenship becomes **compulsory in practice: without russian documents there is no healthcare, no school, no freedom of movement.**

CIVILIANS: DETAINED, COERCED, DISAPPEARED

Ideology. Ukrainian identity is framed as dangerous. Ordinary civic engagement is branded "extremism", "espionage" or "terrorism"; repression is staged as lawful prosecution, so people appear "arrested" and "convicted" when they have been abducted and unlawfully detained.

Direct impact. Isolation without contact with the outside world, interrogation, torture, denial of medical care, threats against relatives, forced confessions. More than 16,000 civilians are estimated to be held (August 2026); the ICRC has confirmed only around 870 individually. Over 95% of prisoners of war and **85% of detained civilians report torture or ill-treatment.** The UN Commission of Inquiry considers this a crime against humanity committed under a coordinated state policy.

Executors. The typical process: **abduction → interrogation → coercion → fabricated charges → trial → penal colony**, carried out by the russian military, security services, occupation administrations, prosecutors, courts and the penal system.

Infrastructure. Unofficial detention sites, closed registers, refusal to acknowledge detention, no access for independent observers, application of russian law in the occupied territories.

THE SYSTEM REACHES GERMANY

russian intelligence services put relatives of prisoners of war under pressure to extract information or sabotage (SBU, August 2026). Norway's intelligence service confirms that refugees abroad are coerced into espionage through threatened relatives in the occupied territories. RUSI and Jamestown document the recruitment of vulnerable Ukrainian refugees in the EU, including Germany, as "disposable agents". **They are victims of exploitation, not collaborators.**

PART 2 · INTERNATIONAL LAW

HOLDING THOSE RESPONSIBLE TO ACCOUNT

russia's actions violate international humanitarian law, human rights law and international criminal law at the same time. Legal qualification must lead to political action:

- **War crimes**: unlawful deportation and transfer, unlawful confinement, torture (Fourth Geneva Convention, Arts. 49, 50, 147; Rome Statute, Art. 8).
- **Crimes against humanity**: detention, deportation, enforced disappearance and persecution as part of a systematic attack; according to the OSCE, the systematic indoctrination of children can itself be persecution.
- **Persecution** on grounds of Ukrainian nationality, identity or resistance.
- **Enforced disappearance and arbitrary detention** of civilians.
- **Unlawful transfer and adoption of children** (Fourth Geneva Convention, Art. 50; UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Arts. 8–10, 21) and genocide-related acts (Genocide Convention, Art. II(e)).

The OSCE mission's sharpest finding: conscription at 18, after citizenship coerced in childhood, can itself be a war crime, because the coercion does not end on the 18th birthday. This can also apply to "voluntary" enlistment after years of propaganda and pre-military training.

On 17 March 2023, the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants against Vladimir Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova

for the unlawful deportation and transfer of Ukrainian children. These warrants form the legal baseline for this paper.

STRUCTURAL LIMITATION

None of the monitoring bodies (OHCHR, the UN Commission of Inquiry, ODIHR, the Council of Europe) has access to the occupied territories. **Every figure cited is a verified minimum.**

PART 3 · RETURN

WHY RELEASE CANNOT WAIT

Return requires six coordinated steps: documentation, family tracing, diplomacy, mediation, sanctions and reintegration. **None of them needs to wait for a peace agreement.**

Children. Dedicated mechanisms exist: the International Coalition for the Return of Ukrainian Children relies on mediation by Qatar and the United States and was recognized by the UN General Assembly in December 2025; Bring Kids Back UA is the central Ukrainian platform. The bottleneck is documentation and family tracing.

Civilian detainees. No comparable mechanism exists. Many have been held since 2014–2015 and risk being left out of prisoner exchanges.

	PRISONERS OF WAR	CIVILIAN DETAINEES
Status	Protected under the Third Geneva Convention	No prisoner-of-war status
Return	Exchange within the conflict	Must not be exchange assets
Timing	At the end of hostilities	Risk disappearing from negotiations

THREE DOCUMENTED GAPS

1 – No unified database of deported children. Orphans and adopted children are most likely to fall through the cracks: no one advocates for them, and their identities have already been altered.

RECOMMENDATION
Germany should fund an interoperable case-management system linked to Bring Kids Back UA and the Coalition.

2 – The diplomatic track is too narrow. russia turns the return of children into a bargaining chip. But international law is clear: children must not be included in prisoner-of-war exchanges, and their release must not depend on concessions.

RECOMMENDATION
Germany should use its relations with India, Türkiye and the Gulf states to widen the circle of mediators, and commit publicly, before ceasefire talks begin, that the return of children and the release of civilians are non-negotiable.

3 – Sanctions do not go deep enough. The EU mainly sanctions senior officials. A system built to be repeatable only breaks when its operational layer is hit too.

RECOMMENDATION
Germany should push within the EU for sanctions against guardianship authorities, camp directors, transport structures, and judicial and detention staff.

PART 4 · REINTEGRATION

BUILD THE SYSTEMS NOW

Returning children and civilians bring trauma, broken family ties, changed documents and internalized propaganda. Some children believe Ukraine abandoned them. Support must cover six areas (safety, family, identity, education, mental health, community) and involve the children themselves.

Civilians need rehabilitation after torture, restored documents, family reunification, and documentation that is often the only evidence of what happened. When mass return will become possible is uncertain. **That is why the systems must be built now:**

- **Pilot standards:** teacher training and psychological support protocols, at today's small scale and ready to scale for mass return.
- **Support reform:** help complete the "Better Care" de-institutionalization reform.

- **Coordinate funding** before needs rise sharply.
- **Fund secure, victim-centred documentation** so that testimony is preserved for prosecution.

GERMANY'S ROLE

WHAT MUST HAPPEN NOW

Germany is already helping Ukrainian children reintegrate. This is a foundation to build on, and none of these recommendations needs to wait for a ceasefire.

1. **Documentation:** support research and Ukrainian civil society; fund a case-management system for deported children.

2. **Return:** strengthen the International Coalition; widen mediation through India, Türkiye and the Gulf states; publicly declare the return of children and the release of civilians non-negotiable.

3. **Reintegration:** fund pilot programmes and the "Better Care" reform; build donor coordination.

4. **Accountability:** support the ICC; prosecute crimes under universal jurisdiction (VStGB), proven in the Al-Khatib case; strengthen international compensation mechanisms; push within the EU for sanctions on the operational layer.

5. **Non-recognition and protection:** do not recognize russian documents issued under occupation; protect Ukrainians in Germany from russian coercion and intelligence activity.

THEY CANNOT WAIT FOR PEACE.

Every day of delay
makes return harder.

Scan to learn more about the campaign, and about what needs to happen now.

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