

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
“Ukraine: Abducted Children and Mechanisms for Accountability”
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I would like to thank Chairman McGovern, Chairman Smith, and distinguished members of this Commission for holding this hearing on the abduction of Ukrainian children by the Russian Federation.

One would be hard-pressed to find a clearer moral issue that deserves immediate remedy. Not only has Russia abducted 20,000 Ukrainian children since 2022, but it has also indoctrinated and is in the process of militarizing another 1.6 million Ukrainian children who live in Russian-occupied Ukraine. We tend to think about Russia’s abduction of Ukrainian children as occurring in the past, but that is false. Moscow’s crimes are ongoing, which means that we can stop them, rescue children, and bring to justice those involved.

To begin, it is critical to understand the scale of the problem. As of March 2026, the Ukrainian Ministry of Justice has verified 19,915 cases of forcible transfer and illegal deportation of children by the Russian authorities.¹ Yale University’s Humanitarian Research Lab has identified 210 locations where Ukrainian children have been taken.² There, children were subjected to re-education at more than half (62.9%) of the facilities and underwent militarization in at least 18% of them. These findings point to an organized policy carried out across many locations, not isolated abuses. In other words, Russia’s actions are premeditated and planned.

The UN’s Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine recently concluded what we all know: Russia has committed crimes against humanity by deporting, forcibly transferring, and enforcing the disappearance of children.³ The

¹ До Реєстру депортованих дітей внесено 19 915 верифікованих відомостей, Ministry of Justice of Ukraine, 23 February, 2026. Available: <https://minjust.gov.ua/news/ministry/do-reestru-deportovanih-ditey-vneseno-19-915-verifikovanih-vidomostey>

² Ukraine's Stolen Children: Inside Russia's Network of Re-education and Militarization, Yale School of Public Health, Humanitarian Research Lab, 16 September, 2025. Available: <https://ysph.yale.edu/news-article/ukraines-stolen-children-inside-russias-network-of-re-education-and-militarization/>

³ “I am still looking for my daughter”: Crimes against humanity committed by Russian authorities against children from Ukraine, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 9 March 2026. Available: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session61/a-hrc-61-crp-8.pdf>

Commission also confirms its previous March 2023 finding that Russian authorities have committed war crimes by unlawfully deporting and transferring children and delaying their repatriation. The Commission has so far confirmed the deportation or transfer of 1,205 children.⁴ Four years on, 80% of those children have not been returned. The Commission confirmed that Russia has failed to establish a system facilitating their return and instead has focused on long-term placements of the children with families or in institutions in Russia.

Any returns of children are being achieved in spite of – and not because of – formal diplomatic channels. As of March 2026, the Ukrainian government, civil society, and international partners have managed to return 2,047 children to Ukraine.⁵ Here's the crucial point: the majority of the returned children have been saved due to the efforts of Ukraine's civil society and government. Only 104 children - or 5% - have been returned as a result of the mediation work of international partners. Despite multiple attempts by the Ukrainian delegation to negotiate the return of 339 children with the Russian delegation at peace talks, they resulted in zero returns.⁶ Russia has shown no will to return Ukrainian children *en masse*.

A hopeful and encouraging dialogue between the Office of the First Lady of the United States, Melania Trump, and Russian President Vladimir Putin is a promising development. Mrs. Trump is the only First Lady in the world who has a direct line with Putin. Her involvement has facilitated the return of 20 Ukrainian children. Among Mrs. Trump's returnees were three children who were abducted by Russian forces at Kherson Children's Home in 2022. When Russian forces invaded the city, the nurses at Kherson Children's Home hid the children in a local Baptist church's basement from bombing and Russian soldiers. Weeks later, their location had been revealed. At least 46 children, all under the age of five, were taken by Russian soldiers to Crimea and placed for adoption into Russian families, including a girl adopted by Sergey Mironov, a former chairman of the upper chamber of the Russian parliament and a close ally of Putin. I want to personally thank Mrs. Trump for her leadership and urge her to keep going. Thousands of

⁴ The number of cases of abductions provided by the UN is different from the one provided by the Ukraine's Ministry of Justice due to difference in verification process.

⁵ This number includes not only rescued abducted children but also children saved from occupation who were at the risk of abduction and military draft to the Russian army. Ukraine's Presidential initiative. Bring Kids Back. Available: <https://www.bringkidsback.org.ua/en>

⁶ Ukraine's Presidential initiative Bring Kids Back. 23 July, 2025. Available:

<https://www.bringkidsback.org.ua/en/news/regarding-public-statements-by-the-representative-of-the-russian-delegation-concerning-the-abducted-ukrainian-children>

Ukrainian children are counting on, Mrs. Trump, to be saved and reunited with their families. But it is up to Congress to help the First Lady in this challenging and noble mission.

We are running out of time. Putin is intensifying his efforts to strip Ukrainian children of their identity and subject them to forced Russification. With four years of Russian presence in Ukraine's newly occupied territories - and ten years of occupation of Crimea - Russia has now built infrastructure to militarize and indoctrinate not only abducted Ukrainian children, but those who live under its occupation.

We can see the Kremlin's intent in its budget numbers. Russia's expenditures on youth policy in the federal budget increased by 84% from \$513 million in 2022 to over \$1 billion in 2026.⁷ Why? Russia wants to increase the proportion of patriotic youth from 40% to 70% by 2030 by involving children in patriotic mass youth associations and movements. Using Ukrainian children is a core part of the Kremlin's push to funnel children into Russia's army. In doing so, the Kremlin is not sparing any expense. For context, the budget of one paramilitary organization - Movement of the First - is comparable to the annual income of one of Russia's poorest regions, such as Kalmykia.⁸ Almost 400,000 Ukrainian children have been enrolled in paramilitary organizations like the Movement of the First or YounArmy⁶.

As of 2024, at least 479 cadet classes were established in occupied Ukraine by Russia. Under the guise of "health" or "recreation," children are transferred to so-called "summer camps" and exposed to propaganda and military programming, and forced to do manual labor. These details are based on interviews with Ukrainian children who were taken to these camps under deception.⁹ More than 312,000 Ukrainian children were sent to such camps during the 2025 summer campaign alone.

⁷ Russia's Policy of Eradicating the Identity of Children in the TOT of Ukraine: Results for 2025, NGO Centre for Civic Education "Almenda", 23 February, 2026. Available: https://almenda.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/Zvit_politics_web_Eng.pdf

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«Движение первых» стало кормушкой для приближённых к региональным администрациям. Media publication Octagon. October 16, 2023 https://octagon.media/istorii/dvizhenie_pervyx_stalo_kormushkoj_dlya_priblizhennykh_k_regionalnym_administraciyam.html

⁹ Return Every Child, War Child UK and Save Ukraine, 7 September, 2026. Available: https://www.warchild.org/Please.uk/sites/default/files/2025-09/Return_Every_Child_Digital_WCUK.pdf

All available evidence indicates that Russia does not intend to return abducted children or scale back its deliberate policy of erasing the identity of Ukrainian children. US policy towards Russia should reflect this reality.

I had the opportunity to accompany several children rescued by the Ukrainian NGO Save Ukraine during their visits to the US. These returned children had one simple message to America: please bring other Ukrainian children home.

For 2026, Congress appropriated \$15 million to document and preserve evidence of the crime of the abduction of Ukrainian children. As an advocate, I applaud this move, but the US has more agency than just gathering evidence. Now, as Congressional committees submit their appropriations proposals, I call on Congress to expand the scope of work on the issue and allocate funds not only to document the ongoing cases of abduction, but to find, rescue, and rehabilitate children of Ukraine. This committee should know that 95% of returned children have been rescued with the help of civil society organizations and the Ukrainian government.

Mr. Chairman, Moscow prioritizes the reeducation of Ukrainian children, turning them into Russian soldiers. Our budget should reflect our commitment to the rescue of Ukrainian children. Justice can not wait. And justice now means supporting initiatives that document, search, rescue, and rehabilitate children to ensure their recovery. But there is another reason to invest in rescue: every child returned is a witness. Their testimonies are critical to establishing who is responsible for these crimes and holding them accountable.

Mr. Chairman, there are three practical ways Congress can center its Ukraine policy on the return of abducted children.

First, in addition to funding rescue efforts, we must cut off Russia's finances. Russia's immoral system of abduction, illegal adoption, forced re-education, and militarization of Ukrainian children is a state-run operation that depends on funding from the Russian government. The only way to stop it is to cut off its finances. The largest source of revenue for Russia's state budget is the oil and gas sector. Currently, there are nine bills in Congress that impose sanctions on the

Russian oil industry. Congress must move at least one of them. I urge Congress to pass the S.2904 - SHADOW Fleet Sanctions Act of 2026, as well as S.3513/H.R.7506 - the Decreasing Russian Oil Profits Act of 2025 (DROP Act), which will crack down on Russia's oil industry. Without cutting Russia's state budget, we cannot stop Russia's abduction and militarization of Ukrainian children.

Second, Ukraine's children cannot be turned into bargaining chips by Putin's regime. As President Trump continues to negotiate for an end to the war, we must ensure that the return of Ukrainian children remains non-negotiable. All of the stolen children must be returned before any peace deal with Russia is finalized. For that purpose, I urge Congress to support H.Res. 564 and its corresponding S.Res.236.

Third, I urge Congress to reconsider its engagement with the representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church, which collaborates with Russian governmental agencies to deport and host abducted Ukrainian children¹⁰ and then assist in the indoctrination and militarization of those trapped under Russian occupation.¹¹ The Russian Orthodox Church is an arm of the Kremlin, not a religious institution. Yet, members of its clergy are welcomed on Capitol Hill to talk about religious freedom, while Ukrainian children are being banned from practicing anything but Russian Orthodoxy.

Our commitment to Ukraine's abducted children has to be consistently reflected in our budget, policies, and public statements.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for your leadership on this crucial moral issue. I look forward to your questions.

¹⁰ The Role of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Forcible Deportation of Ukrainian Children, Georgetown University Collaborative on Global Children's Rights, 26 October, 2023. Available: <https://globalchildren.georgetown.edu/responses/the-role-of-the-russian-orthodox-church-in-the-forcible-deportation-of-ukrainian-children>

¹¹ Religion of War: Russian Orthodox Church as the Instrument for Militarization and Indoctrination in the Temporarily Occupied Territories, NGO Centre for Civic Education "Almenda", 5 June 2026. Available: <https://almenda.org/en/religija-vijni-rosijska-pravoslavna-cerkva-vak-instrument-militarizaciji-ta-indoktrinaciji-na-timchasovo-okupovanih-teritorijax/>