REINTEGRATION OF CHILDREN AFFECTED BY DEPORTATION AND FORCIBLE TRANSFERS:

International Standards and Best Practices for Ukraine

Presented by the Bring Kids Back UA
Task Force

24 October 2024

BACKGROUND

The "Bring Kids Back UA" Task Force was established by the Office of the President of Ukraine to address two critical objectives:

1. Investigate and implement human rights-based mechanisms for the voluntary return of unlawfully deported and forcibly displaced children to Ukraine.

2. Develop recommendations to strengthen the international legal framework, with a focus on preventing similar violations of children's rights in armed conflicts, using Ukraine as a case study.

The Task Force is composed of experts in political, legal, and diplomatic fields, as well as recognised experts on the protection of children's rights in the context of armed conflict, all serving in their personal capacities.

The Task Force is co-chaired by Andriy Yermak, Head of the Office of the President, and Lady Helena Kennedy LT KC, Director of the International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute.

The work of the Task Force is guided by the guiding principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, in particular the fundamental principle of the best interests of the child.

FOREWORD

The forcible transfer and deportation of Ukrainian children by Russian forces during the war is not only a heinous crime but also a direct assault on Ukraine's future. Thousands of children have been torn from their families and subjected to a deliberate campaign of cultural erasure designed to strip them of their Ukrainian identity. The trauma they have endured is profound, and the long-term consequences for their well-being are devastating. Research in developmental psychology has shown that early separation from family and familiar surroundings can severely hinder emotional, cognitive, and social development, leaving scars that last long into adulthood.'

In addition to the urgent need to return these children to their homes, mitigating the traumatic impact of their harrowing experiences is equally crucial. Reintegrating these children into Ukrainian society requires a response that is both swift and sensitive to their unique needs. Protecting children from further harm during investigations into the crimes they have endured is paramount. It is then vital that efforts prioritize placing children in family-based settings, where the healing process can begin within the comfort of a stable and loving environment. It is within the stability of family and community that children can regain a sense of normalcy, identity, and belonging. This is a key step to ensuring that they grow into healthy and resilient adults.

This paper, authored by Sharanjeet Parmar and Anthony Triolo, with contributions from various experts, aims to outline a high-level strategy for Ukraine's reintegration efforts. It provides a framework for action, as each section represents only the beginning of deeper exploration needed in specific areas, such as the types of psychological support required for children and the structuring of Ukraine's large-scale social care system reform. Further studies must be carried out to develop detailed action plans that will fully address the complexities of reintegrating displaced children, ensuring Ukraine's efforts align with international standards and best practices.

What is clear is that rebuilding Ukraine starts with ensuring the wellbeing and safe development of its most valuable resource: its youth. In this regard, the international community has a critical role to play. There is a need for sustained investment in programs that ensure children's long-term psychological, emotional, and social recovery. Contributions from Western nations will be crucial to provide socio-economic support for Ukraine's transition to family-centred forms of childcare. This is not just about rebuilding infrastructures, but about nurturing a generation that has endured the horrors of war. By safeguarding the rights of these children, we lay the foundation for a stronger, more resilient Ukraine, where its future generations can thrive. The time to act is now, and we call on all international partners to stand with Ukraine in this vital endeavour.

Signed,
Andriy Yermak
Head of the Office of the President of Ukraine
Co-Chair of the Bring Kids Back UA Task Force

Signed,
Lady Helena Kennedy LT KC
Director of International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute (IBAHRI)
Co-Chair of the Bring Kids Back UA Task Force

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CAAC	Children and Armed Conflict
CSO	Civil society organisation
IHL	International humanitarian law
MHPSS	Mental health and psychosocial support
OPG	Office of the Prosecutor General
PTSD	Post-traumatic stress disorder
SRSG CAAC	Special Representative of the Secretary General on Children and Armed Conflict
TOT	Temporarily occupied territory
UN	United Nations
UNSC	United Nations Security Council

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The forcible transfer and deportation of Ukrainian children by Russian forces during the war is a grave violation of international law and a direct assault on Ukraine's future. Thousands of children have been taken from their families, sent to Russia, Belarus, and Russian-controlled territories in Ukraine, and placed into institutions, foster systems or adopted by Russian families, in a deliberate effort to erase their Ukrainian identity. Ukraine has launched multiple efforts to find and return forcibly transferred and deported children, whose experiences and needs demand a highly specialised response.

Reintegrating forcibly transferred and deported children into Ukrainian society is a critical and complex challenge for Ukraine. This White Paper, *"Reintegration of Children Affected by Deportation and Forcible Transferred: International Standards and Best Practices for Ukraine",* authored by experts from the Bring Kids Back UA Task Force, outlines ongoing efforts to reintegrate children who have been forcibly transferred or deported from Ukraine, or who were at risk of deportation while living in temporarily occupied territories. It also highlights ways to further strengthen these initiatives. This document serves as the strategic foundation for the President of Ukraine's Bring Kids Back UA initiative, which coordinates the efforts of government authorities, civil society organisations, and international partners to ensure the return and reintegration of every child. Additionally, this White Paper provides a foundation for deeper exploration of reintegration-related issues, many of which require dedicated studies and further action plans to facilitate future progress in this area.

Effective reintegration of children is a continuous process. It begins with efforts to identify and locate children who have been subjected to deportation and forced displacement, to verify their current whereabouts and status, and to organise their return, support caregivers and communities upon their return. The process includes measures for the maximum care and protection of children after their return, through a comprehensive approach providing both immediate and long-term support. A key part of reintegration also involves the state's efforts to achieve justice, to hold perpetrators accountable, preserve evidence related to potential crimes, and promote healing and a sense of justice for survivors and their families.

This White Paper focuses on the reintegration of children following their return to Ukraine, analysing the challenges related to deportation and forced displacement within temporarily occupied territories. It also explores successful reintegration practices from other countries, which can assist Ukraine in developing policies in accordance with international human rights standards and child protection principles and practice.

Methodology

This paper is based on key informant interviews with leading Ukrainian practitioners and policymakers working on the reintegration of forcibly transferred and deported children. It also relies on a comprehensive review of sources relevant to the context and challenges in Ukraine. The topic of reintegration is a broad one; the paper thus focuses on key issues that practitioners and stakeholders currently identify as top priorities. It thus provides a high-level road map of topics for future engagement, whilst specifying immediate action on urgent areas of service delivery. To guide this process, international standards and useful comparative practices are highlighted. The paper draws on reintegration-related experiences in countries such as Argentina, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Sierra Leone.

Institutional Coordination

The starting point for the effective reintegration of returned children is strong coordination among state institutions, local communities, families, civil society organisations(including child protection organisations), and international actors. The Ukrainian government demonstrates its commitment to child protection through various initiatives to address the forced displacement and deportation of children, including having adopted over 20 legal instruments related to the safety and protection of children during martial law. The implementation of the Bring Kids Back UA initiative, which unites multi-

ple international and national stakeholders, aims to enhance coordination at every stage of responding to this crime: retracing, identification, return, reintegration, and guarantees of non-recurrence. At the same time, there remains room for improvement in the current coordination system, including the collection and processing of information about the individual needs of the child and their family, their location, and in the provision of social protection and psychological support services within communities. In this regard, it remains crucial to ensure clarity around the maintenance of a centralised database and data protection of current cases. Additionally, there is a need to enhance current case management systems, which can ensure an effective response tailored to the individual needs of affected children.

Promoting a holistic approach to justice

The Office of the Prosecutor General of Ukraine (OPG) is responsible for investigating thousands of cases related to serious wartime violations. However, its teams are severely understaffed and lack specialised training to address the psychological trauma of children who have been forcibly transferred and deported and their families. Additional training is required to equip law enforcement and investigative teams with the skills to handle the trauma children have endured. Training in trauma-informed and resilience-oriented approaches for law enforcement should be expanded, including judicial actors and other investigative bodies. Law enforcement agencies should also adopt child-centred policies to prevent traumatisation during investigations. Countries like Argentina, after its military dictatorship, are useful for organising the investigation of abduction cases under a cohesive strategy.

A child-sensitive system ensures that processes incorporate child welfare principles and engage qualified, competent professionals to screen and interview children, assess their needs and familial relationships, and determine their best interests. Child welfare authorities should have a leading role in screening and any decisions related to the reception, care, and protection of returned children.

The Barnahus (child house) model, originating in Iceland and adopted throughout the Nordic countries, offers a one-stop approach to multi-sectoral coordination and integrated services for newly arrived unaccompanied children. It provides a child-friendly environment where one joint interview is conducted by a child specialist to assess needs, minimising the stress and potential retraumatization of multiple interviews by different service providers.

The Prosecutor General's Office has also adopted a policy entitled "Standards for Prosecutors in Cases Involving Children," approved on 19 April 2024. These standards are based on a child-friendly approach to justice and the protection of the best interests of children in criminal proceedings.

A key foundation for ensuring both non-recurrence and the reintegration of survivors is the development of nationally-led approaches to transitional justice. A holistic approach to transitional justice can extend to issues such as judicial accountability for crimes against and affecting children, the documentation of such crimes, compensation for victims, as well as promoting truth-telling, healing and alternative forms of accountability of these crimes.

In regards to public information campaigns, the use of children for testimonials in public forums and journalistic materials in the media should be limited. Securing the informed and voluntary consent of the child and their parents or guardians is a necessary but insufficient condition for determining a child's participation. Ethical integration of such testimony requires clear protocols, fully adequate support services,accessible referral pathways, safeguards for the child's physical security, and provision of psychological support before, during, and after the child provides testimony.

Extending socio-economic support to affected families

Ukraine is responsible for coordinating efforts for the reintegration of children who have been subjected to forcible transfer and deportation, and those who remain at risk of deportation while living in temporarily occupied territories. It is important to note that returned children deprived of parental care and orphans are placed in family-based care arrangements, in accordance with the procedures set out in Ukrainian legislation. The Coordination Center for Family Upbringing and Child Care Development, which is a temporary consultative and advisory body of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine,

is responsible for ensuring the effective coordination of the actions of the relevant authorities in order to guarantee the right of children for family upbringing.

Holistic reintegration efforts must also target the broader socio-economic challenges faced by families of returned children. Many families from temporarily occupied territories (TOTs) have lost their homes, jobs, and access to essential services, making it difficult for them to provide a stable environment for their children. Immediate assistance in securing housing, financial aid, healthcare, and education is crucial to support these families as they rebuild their lives. Housing and financial support are often the most urgent needs. Financial assistance programmes, including cash transfers and vocational training, can allow families to regain economic independence. Ukraine's continued pursuit of its ongoing efforts to coordinate among government agencies, child protection organisations, and international partners will be critical in ensuring that socio-economic support reaches those most in need. The opening of the Child Rights Protection Center (Kyiv) houses a multidisciplinary team that provides primary support including short-term housing assistance, document restoration, financial aid, help with enrolling children in educational institutions, medical examinations, and psychological support for both children and families. These services play a crucial role in protecting children and supporting their families upon their return. Whilst Ukraine's response is must be managed amidst an ongoing war, international examples, such as Rwanda's post-genocide recovery, demonstrate the effectiveness of a well-coordinated, multi-sectoral approach to supporting families in crisis.

Mental health and psychosocial support

Protecting returned children in Ukraine requires a robust and multi-layered response, particularly in addressing the psychological trauma they have endured. Displacement, disrupted education, child-family separation, and exposure to violence can lead to anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Embedding mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) within a holistic approach is essential to help traumatised children , families, and communities overcome these impacts in both the short and long term. Ukraine has established over 100 Mental Health Centres and 140 Resilience Centres to provide such support. Additionally, civil society organisations (CSOs) offer long-term psychological care services free of charge, ensuring immediate and sustained assistance for those in need.

Despite these efforts, challenges remain. Social stigma on mental health deters families from seeking help. A shortage of trained child psychologists with expertise in child trauma is another barrier. Given the psychological manipulation and disinformation to which children were subjected while in Russian camps, ensuring adequate access to MHPSS services is especially critical in order to ensure their ability to make informed and voluntary choices about their future. Existing public awareness campaigns about mental health should thus be disseminated to a wider audience, whilst long-term efforts also require investments to widen the network of social care specialists in child trauma. International practice can be illustrative, such as in Tajikistan, where clinical and community-based MHPSS are embedded in a broader set of reintegration services.

Large scale reform of Ukraine's social care system

A sustainable reintegration plan must be aligned with the Better Care Reform, also known as "Deinstitutionalisation Reform" in Ukraine, and facilitate the transition from institutional care to family-based alternatives, such as foster care and adoption, supported by the development of high-quality social infrastructure. Orphans and children deprived of parental care, especially those in institutional care settings, were particularly vulnerable to deportation and forcible transfer. Ensuring their return to stable, family-based environments is crucial for their recovery. Foster families caring for children who have experienced traumatic deportation, forced displacement, and/or life in temporarily occupied territories, as well as the biological families of children evacuated to the territories of free Ukraine, require quality social support within their local communities (hromadas). This support necessitates the development of comprehensive social services at the community level. . Ukraine has already initiated state-led efforts in this direction.

This transition, however, requires significant investment in social infrastructure and workforce, as well as improved coordination between the government, civil society organisations, and international partners. More foster families should be identified and provided with high-quality support, as returning children must overcome complex psychological trauma. The development of a robust and extensive system of social services in local communities is also necessary to prevent children from entering institutional care after being evacuated from temporarily occupied territories with their biological families. Countries like Rwanda have demonstrated the effectiveness of placing children in family settings to promote long-term emotional recovery— a model Ukraine can consider to safeguard its children and prevent future violations.

INTRODUCTION

Amidst the staggering nature and scope of serious violations of international law committed by Russian and Russian-allied forces in the war in Ukraine, crimes against children loom large. Amongst these crimes, the forcible transfer and deportation of Ukrainian children is particularly pernicious.

This White Paper serves as a resource on the critical question of how to best respond to and reintegrate children who have been forcibly transferred within the temporarily occupied territories and/or deported to Russia and Belarus during the war. In so doing, it aims to guide and inform efforts by Ukrainian policymakers and practitioners as well as international donors and stakeholders working in the field of child protection to further strengthen current efforts on reintegration.

Children who have been victims of human rights abuses experience specific vulnerabilities that demand a specialised approach. Unaccompanied and separated children are a particularly vulnerable group in the war in Ukraine. State and internationally supported responses to the commission of serious crimes against children should focus on identifying survivors and responding to their needs, whilst also considering how to prevent future violations from occurring. Reintegration thus invariably involves a host of measures that strengthen child protection systems and realise the best interests of the child across state services, adopting a trauma-sensitive approach.

In this work, established and tested norms and guidelines can be relied upon. For instance, the Handbook on Unaccompanied and Separated Children offers operational guidance for child protection practitioners and other actors involved in preventing and responding to family separation in emergencies. This established framework is invaluable in improving responses to vulnerable children.

The 2019 Rights of the Child Resolution adopted by the United Nations General Assembly also serves as an important reference. It emphasises the importance of family-based care, children's right to family life, and efforts to prevent unnecessary separation from families, especially for children without parental care. The Resolution highlights that children should not be separated from their families solely due to poverty or lack of resources.

Aims and approach

Focussing on children who have been forcibly transferred and deported, as well as those at risk of deportation, the White Paper seeks to inform the formulation and implementation of concrete solutions to support the reintegration of these children in their families and homeland. The White Paper is based on key informant interviews and a comprehensive review of available sources in the field of child protection. Through an analysis of current practices in Ukraine, the White Paper proposes concrete action to inspire a collaborative international response to realising the right of these children to a remedy.

Given the scale of the recommendations proposed, this White Paper is thus also a call to action to the international community to support Ukraine in the effective reintegration of children who have suffered serious crimes. By uniting in a sustained and decisive manner, these efforts can safeguard the rights and futures of affected children and restore their place in their communities.

Methodology

The findings and analysis of this paper are grounded in three sources of information:
- Key informant interviews;

- National and international policies, practice, laws and standards related to children's rights[1] and child protection;

- Subject-matter research from leading global experts on child protection, child psychology, children's rights and the reintegration of children affected by armed conflict.

Key informant interviews involved over a dozen interviews with senior government officials, justice sector officials, and Ukrainian and international child protection professionals, including experienced psy-

chologists. Individuals interviewed represent key actors working on the area of forcibly transferred and deported children and are deeply experienced in the field of child protection. The comparative expert and country sources represent a wide range of expertise and experiences relevant to the reintegration of children affected by serious crimes committed during war. A comprehensive review of applicable international standards and established practices on children affected by armed conflict and child protection are also relied upon.

This paper should be considered as a mapping of locally-identified priorities, providing a foundation for future investigation of related issues, many of which merit individual papers and independent blueprints for further action. Reintegration efforts invariably engage the entire social care system for children. Whilst the paper methodology ensured coverage of a wide-range of topics relevant to reintegration, for practical reasons, an in-depth investigation and assessment of Ukraine's social care system was not possible.

The forcible transferred and deportation of Ukrainian children

As demonstrated by the Bring Kids Back UA White Paper "Safeguarding Children from Forced Transfers and Deportation"[2], the forcible transfer and deportation of Ukrainian children by Russian forces constitutes an international crime and a breach of several international obligations to which Russia is bound[3]. It is estimated that thousands of children have been forcibly removed from Ukraine with many of them sent to Russian-controlled territories, foster systems, or adopted by Russian families[4].

Russian authorities refuse to provide any information on the identity and whereabouts of Ukrainian children under their control. Such denial of any form of information-sharing, coupled with other measures deliberately aimed at hampering the tracing of children, are intended to make the return of children to their families as difficult as possible.[5]

To date, different groups of Ukrainian children have been targeted for forcible transfer and deportation depending on their vulnerabilities. On the one hand, unaccompanied children in institutional care located in frontline and occupied areas have been particularly vulnerable to abductions.[6] Far-removed from family or legal guardians, they appear to have been specifically targeted for forcible transfer and deportation. Other categories of children have been separated from their parents by Russian authorities under coercive conditions, such as at checkpoints and filtration camps, including under the pretext of humanitarian evacuations. Children under parental care attending recreational camps have also been forcibly transferred or deported. Throughout, Russian authorities, with the complicity of their allies, systematically attempt to erase their Ukrainian identity.

Reports from returned children, their caregivers, and Ukrainian stakeholders confirm the commission of additional violations by Russian forces.[7] Children endure physical and psychological violence. Male adolescents are targeted for bullying and physical violence, whilst pressured to adopt Russian cultural markers, or forced to military-style camps. Once transferred, children lose their freedom of movement and are subjected to "Russification," where they must adopt Russian customs, listen to propaganda, and renounce their Ukrainian heritage. Propaganda instils a fear of return to Ukraine by perpetuating falsehoods over mistreatment of returned children and their families.

Formal measures to sever children's ties to Ukraine further complicate return efforts. These include changes in names or legal identity and the issuance of Russian passports obscuring nationality of origin, as well as illegal adoptions and the placement of children in Russian families. These measures contribute to long-term confusion over identity, nationality, and family. Reintegration efforts thus must also consider the nature and impact of these attendant violations, particularly in terms of trauma and potential procedural complications around their legal status.

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[1] For the purposes of this paper, children are considered as individuals under the age of 18 years, in accordance with Article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. That said, reintegration efforts should also consider young adults who were under the age of 18 at the time of experiencing a serious violation.

[2] Bring Kids Back UA White Paper "Safeguarding Children from Forced Transfers and Deportation"

[3] Bring Kids Back UA Task Force, 'Safeguarding Children from Forced Transfers and Deportation' (2024).

[4] Bilkova V., Hellestveit C., and Steinerte E., 'Report on Violations and Abuses of International Humanitarian and Human Rights Law, War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity, related to the Forcible Transfer and/or Deportation of Ukrainian Children to the Russian Federation' (2023) OSCE.

Ukrainian efforts to reintegrate children

Effective reintegration requires the close collaboration of many state institutions, child protection organisations, and international actors. A central element is coordination. A unified reintegration framework with clear lines of responsibility and regular dialogue can avoid duplication or gaps, especially if overseen by a centralised mechanism.

Bring Kids Back UA is a comprehensive initiative of the President of Ukraine and implemented by state bodies. The initiative serves as an umbrella framework for all state efforts and the synergy of governmental and non-governmental stakeholders in response to the unprecedented international crime of the deportation and forcible transfer of children by Russia and its allies.The Bring Kids Back UA initiative operates at both the national and international levels. It encompasses efforts to locate and identify deported children in Russia, engages in humanitarian and diplomatic efforts for their return, and facilitates their reintegration and recovery upon their return.

The Government and Parliament of Ukraine have adopted over 20 legal acts addressing the safety and protection of children during martial law. Relevant state bodies either have a mandate specifically focused on forcibly transferred and deported children or are involved in these cases as part of a broader general mandate. These institutions and their activities in relation to reintegration efforts are presented in detail below.

State action is duly supported by a range of efforts by civil society organisations and volunteer initiatives. These actors provide further support to child reintegration, including through the delivery of mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) to children and their families, mentoring programmes and other forms of support.

As part of the implementation of the Bring Kids Back UA initiative, the following bodies are in operation:

- **Coordinating Council for the Protection and Safety of Children[8]:** Operating under the President of Ukraine, this consultative and advisory body coordinates state efforts in child protection, assesses needs, sets strategic priorities, and guides policies to safeguard children's rights, including preventing forcibly transferred and deportation.

- **The Coordination Center for Family Upbringing and Child Care Development:** The Coordination Centre, with a consultative status under the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, coordinates the work of multidisciplinary teams, creating individualised plans for social support and reintegration of children, including psychosocial support for children and their families. The Coordination Centre works with local social services to ensure that families receive community-based support and oversees the coordination of efforts to provide family-based care for orphans and children deprived of parental care.

- **Child Rights Protection Centre (CRPC):** The CRPC provides specialised assistance to children who have been survivors or witnesses of crimes, including but not limited to forcibly transferred or deported children. The CRPC is also a place for conducting interviews with children within criminal proceedings, and it operates according to child-friendly justice principles. The Child Rights Protection Centre operates under the Secretariat of the Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights. The CRPC's multidisciplinary team assesses family needs to provide primary services, such as short-term housing, financial aid, document restoration, and medical care. CRPCs actively cooperate with civil society organisations to ensure comprehensive support for affected children and their families. A network of CRPCs is planned across the country to bring services closer to the residence of affected children and to coordinate efforts between state bodies and NGOs for more effective assistance.

- **Coordination Headquarters for the Protection of Children's Rights Under Martial Law:** A government mechanism that facilitates psychosocial and medical rehabilitation for injured children, including those in need of prosthetic care. The Headquarters also oversees adoption procedures for orphans and the establishment of guardianship, supports the integration of children into new communities, and promotes digital solutions for consular services, including assisting with lost or confiscated documents during deportation and in temporarily occupied territories (TOT).

- **Register of Forcibly Transferred and Deported Individuals:** Established in 2023 and managed by the National Information Bureau, it tracks cases of child deportation and forcible transfer, updates information when the child's status changes or new information about their whereabouts is received, and coordinates efforts to verify this information with state bodies.

- **Bring Kids Back UA Task Force** ensures that national mechanisms facilitating the return of unlawfully displaced children comply with international legal standards. The task force consists of international lawyers, experts in international humanitarian law, human rights, and child protection, as well as specialists in policy, legal, and diplomatic fields. This group provides recommendations for the return and reintegration of forcibly transferred and deported children and works to strengthen international legal frameworks, leveraging Ukraine's experience to prevent future violations of children's rights in armed conflicts.

- **International Coalition for the Return of Ukrainian Children**[9] (the "Coalition") was officially established in Kyiv, Ukraine, on 2 February, 2024. The Coalition coordinates joint efforts and cooperation between Ukraine and partner countries to address the issue of the unlawful deportation and forcible transfer of Ukrainian children by the Russian Federation. Co-chaired by the Governments of Ukraine and Canada, the Coalition focuses its efforts on returning Ukrainian children to their families and communities, as well as supporting their reintegration and family reunification. Currently, the Coalition includes 40 participating countries and is ready to expand further.

In addition to the abovementioned bodies created under the Bring Kids Back UA initiative, the protection and reintegration of children are also included in the mandate of the following offices:

- **Coordination Center for Family Upbringing and Child Care Development:** Promotes comprehensive reform of the child care system, focusing on family-based care and child protection. The Centre coordinates key stakeholders at central and local government levels to prepare and adopt the National Strategy for Ensuring the Right of Every Child in Ukraine to Grow Up in a Family Environment, as well as programmes aimed at the family-centred development of children.

- **The Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights:** With an independent mandate to protect and promote human rights, the Commissioner's office operates Consultation Centres and a free hotline since 2022, providing families with a point of contact for advice and reporting children's rights violations, including missing children[10]. The Child Rights Protection Centre operates under the Secretariat of the Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights.

- **Advisor-Commissioner of the President of Ukraine for Children's Rights and Rehabilitation:** Acts as the national focal point on Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC). An Inter-Ministerial Working Group on CAAC was established in Spring 2023 and officially approved by Presidential Decree in July 2023.

- **Unified Register of Persons Disappeared Under Special Circumstances:** This register tracks cases involving children who have gone missing in conflict zones, and it has been operating under the Ministry of Internal Affairs since 2018.

- **Coordination Centre for Mandatory Evacuation of the Population under Martial Law:** Oversees evacuation orders in areas under threat, including families with children.

- **Coordination Headquarters for the Protection of Children's Rights Under Martial Law:** Also responsible for the evacuation of unaccompanied children located in various social care institutions and for the safe relocation of children in foster care, including their families and guardians.

A final note: whilst centralisation is important, localised responses should continue to be prioritised. Child protection stakeholders recognise that reintegration efforts need to be tailored to the specific needs and contexts of individual children, families and their regions, particularly in frontline areas. Regional authorities and local organisations are often best placed to understand the risks facing children in their communities and to design interventions that are contextually appropriate. Local authorities and civil society groups can be supported by the central government through funding, training, oversight and technical assistance.

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[9]International Coalition for the Return of Ukrainian Children

[10]Red Cross and Red Crescent, 'Protect the rights of children affected by armed conflicts – Pledge Report of Ukraine' (2024)

A HIGH-LEVEL STRATEGY FOR REINTEGRATION

Collection of children's testimonies

A trauma-informed approach to the criminal justice process

Many Ukrainian children returned from Russian occupation bear deep emotional scars and struggles over their identity, having experienced extreme instances of psychological manipulation and coercion. A register of ongoing cases concerning forcibly transferred and deported children is currently operated by the Ukrainian Office of the Prosecutor General (OPG). However, the OPG faces important resource constraints, with small teams tasked with investigating thousands of deportation and forcible transferred incidents in addition to other complex cases of serious violations committed against civilians.

Investigators require greater support and specialised training to handle cases involving this particularly vulnerable group of survivors.

1. Training by child protection organisations such as Voices of Children, in collaboration with PFRU and by experts from the Atrocity Crime Advisory group (ACA), on trauma-informed approaches have greatly contributed to the safeguarding of the wellbeing of survivors but also to ensuring the reliability of witness testimony. Other investigative bodies, such as the Security Service of Ukraine (known as SBU), would benefit from greater participation in such training and increased openness to adopting child-sensitive approaches.

2. A consolidated policy on safeguarding techniques applicable across law enforcement can ensure that children are not retraumatised and avoid delays to their recovery and reintegration.

3. A well-resourced and specialised witnesses and survivors unit can be instrumental in acting as an intermediary between law enforcement, judicial actors and children whilst ensuring that the best interests of the child remain paramount in the process. In this regard, it is worth noting that in April 2023, the OPG launched the Coordination Centre for Support Victims and Witnesses of crime, which has the main task of assisting survivors on the path to justice. The Centre is a new entity and will need some time and support to fully operationalise its mandate and shift current approaches within the criminal justice system towards survivors and witnesses.

Limiting children's participation in public campaigns

Addressing the MHPSS needs of returned children should extend to considering their participation in advocacy and public information efforts aimed at raising awareness of the issue. In accordance with global guidance, Ukrainian child protection organisations regularly caution against using children who have returned to Ukraine after experiencing unlawful transfers, and in some cases, deportation to Russia, for testimonials in public forums. Whilst children may agree to speak to certain aspects of the war, sharing vulnerable experiences in a public setting can threaten their physical and psychological safety. Securing the informed and voluntary consent of the child and their parents or guardians is a necessary but insufficient condition to determine child participation. The best interest of the child remains the paramount consideration.

To ethically integrate children's testimony in public forums, it is essential to safeguard their physical security and provide psychological support before, during, and after they testify. Given the challenges outlined above, which highlight the difficulty in ensuring ethical use of such testimonials, the use of children in these settings should generally be kept to a minimum. Clear protocols, support services, and referral pathways should be employed if their participation is required. The Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights, together with specialised civil society organisations involved in child protection and safeguarding their best interests, has developed the recommendations *Ethics of Interaction with Children Affected by Armed Conflict*[11], which outlines the fundamental principles for this work.

The Advisor-Commissioner of the President of Ukraine for Children's Rights and Rehabilitation had the *Framework Policy on Ethics of Interaction with Children*[12] approved in 2024. The policy paper is based on a child-friendly approach, ensuring that the best interests of children are respected, including regulating their meaningful and ethical participation in the communication activities of the "Stolen Voices" campaign. The policy was drafted in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and coordinated with major child rights protection international organisations.

Mental health and psychosocial support

The war has severely impacted the mental health of Ukrainian children. Children who have been forcibly transferred and deported experience unique forms of trauma[13]. Displacement, disrupted education, and exposure to violence have left many children at risk of long-term psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, and PTSD[14]. These challenges have affected not only their cognitive development but also the social skills and emotional well-being of forcibly transferred and deported children. Left unaddressed, such trauma may present a risk for intergenerational mental health challenges.[15]

In response, over 100 Mental Health Centres and 140 Resilience Centres have been established across Ukraine, offering support to returned children and the broader population. Additionally, the Ministry of Education has launched programs within schools to help children develop coping strategies and train staff to address psychosocial needs.[16]

Overcoming stigma

Despite these considerable efforts, certain challenges persist. Many families hesitate to seek mental health support due to stigma or a lack of awareness about the nature of trauma and its long-term effects.[17] Cultural norms in Ukraine may discourage individuals from seeking mental health services, whilst families may not always immediately recognise the profound psychological effects of forced separations. Relatedly, current law requires that parental consent be given in order for children to access MHPSS. This complicates service delivery when such parental consent is unavailable, but also, precludes empowering children to make constructive decisions about their own well-being.[18]

Building expertise in child trauma and paediatric psychology

Returned children require particularly specialised interventions having undergone prolonged separation in coercive environments. The challenges they face can include identity confusion, emotional trauma caused by Russification efforts, and overcoming fear from disinformation on how they will be treated on their return to Ukraine[19]. Given the psychological manipulation and disinformation inflicted on forcibly transferred and deported children, ensuring adequate access to expert paediatric and trauma-sensitive psychological support is thus critical for their rehabilitation. This support will be especially important to ensure they are capable of making free, informed and voluntary choices about their future. Faced with multiple demands, Ukraine's MHPSS system is constrained by a shortage of trained child psychologists specialised in areas such as paediatric psychology. While international initiatives are already underway to fill this expertise gap within Ukraine, these efforts should be mapped and expanded upon.

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[11]Key recommendations "Ethics of Interaction with Children Affected by Armed Conflict" | Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights

[12]Framework Policy on Ethics of Interaction with Children | Advisor-Commissioner of the President of Ukraine for Children's Rights and Rehabilitation

[13]For more information on the toll of family separation on a child's mental wellbeing, see Gossmann, E., Erlewein, K., Hiller, I. et al., 'The impact of abduction and hostage-taking on the mental health of children and adolescents: a scoping review' (2024), Eur Child Adolesc Psychiatry, 33, 1217-1226, p.1217.

[14]Professional observations of members of child protection organisations working with returned children in Ukraine. For a detailed analysis of the psychological impacts of armed conflicts on children, see Betancourt, T. S., Simmons, S., Borisova, I., Brewer, S. E., Iweala, U., & De La Soudière, M., 'High hopes, grim reality: Reintegration and the education of former child soldiers in Sierra Leone' (2008), Comparative Education Review, 52, 565–587.

[15]See, e.g., Hamid Ullah et al., "Intergenerational Trauma: A Silent Contributor to Mental Health Deterioration in Afghanistan," Brain and Behavior 13, no. 2 (2023).

[16]UNICEF, 'Mental health and psychosocial support. Integrated programming promoting the well-being of children and their families' (2024), p. 3.

[17]Schwartz, L., et al., 'Addressing the mental health needs and burdens of children fleeing war: a field update from ongoing mental health and psychosocial support efforts at the Ukrainian border' (2022), European journal of psychotraumatology, 13(2).

[18]See articles 31 and 32 of the Civil Code of Ukraine, which prescribes the scope of the legal capacity of the child.

[19]Professional observations of members of child protection organisations working with returned children in Ukraine.

Addressing these gaps requires a multi-pronged approach:

1. There is a pressing need to continue public awareness campaigns on the importance of mental health care.[20]

2. Specific campaign messaging should encourage families to seek help for their children and provide advice on how to recognise signs of trauma in their children and themselves.

3. Legal measures should be explored to reform the state's ability to provide children with access to mental health services independently of parental or guardian consent. This would require considering how to responsibly empower children to make decisions about their well-being. These measures should focus on making sure children in vulnerable situations can get timely assistance, even without family support.

4. Investment is needed not only in training more child psychologists but building the network of trained social workers and community-based support systems that can alleviate the burden on psychologists. Specifically, to meet immediate needs, research and piloting is required into comparative models on building alternative support systems, through social workers, teachers, peers, parents, and community leaders. Expanding the capacity and availability of multi-pronged clinical psychology and family support programmes focused on child trauma can help build a skilled social development workforce capable of meeting the complex needs of war-affected children.

Extending socio-economic support to affected families

Reintegrating children forcibly transferred or deported during the war requires a comprehensive, family-centred approach that addresses the broader socio-economic challenges faced by families of returned children, which are especially difficult given the current challenges of war in Ukraine.[21] Reintegration goes beyond simply returning children to their homes; it involves rebuilding the social, emotional, and economic networks that have been disrupted.[22] Successful reintegration, as defined by international standards, thus requires enabling families and communities to restore sustainable connections that foster long-term resilience and well-being.[23]

Families returning from Russia, Belarus and TOTs often encounter immense challenges, including loss of homes, jobs, and access to essential services.[24] Many families have been displaced and need secure living conditions to create a stable environment for their children. Financial assistance, including cash transfers and vocational training, can help families regain economic independence. Reintegration programs should consider these broader family needs, delivering support in a transparent manner without discrimination. Coordinated efforts between government agencies, child protection organisations, civil society groups, and international partners are on-going. Reinforcing these efforts can include immediate assistance in the areas of housing, financial aid, healthcare, and education, which can strengthen family stability.

In keeping with a family-oriented approach, MHPSS should target all family members. Many parents and caregivers are grappling with their own trauma, which can impede their ability to provide the emotional support their children need.[25] Coordinated MHPSS programs should address child and parental trauma simultaneously, ensuring that the family unit heals together. Mental health professionals, educational institutions, and family support services should continue to work collaboratively to offer holistic care that prioritises communication and emotional security.

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[20] Consider, e.g., the All-Ukrainian mental health programme initiated by First Lady Olena Zelenska.

[21] Katz C, et al, 'Reclaiming their rights: A comprehensive framework for the reintegration of children abducted and held hostage during armed conflict and political violence' (2024), Children and Youth Services Review, 162, p 3.

[22] Wessells (2018).

[23] Ibid. Consider also UN DDR Resource Centre, 'Children and DDR' (2006), p. 25.

[24] As described by representatives of child protection organisations.

[25] Professional observations of members of child protection experts. On family trauma incurred due to separation, consider Katz et al., (2024), p. 3.

The multidisciplinary team operating under the Coordinating Center for the Development of Family-Based Care merits continued support, which takes a holistic approach to child welfare during reintegration. Future support can aim to expand this work, whilst embedding these tested approaches across all aspects of child protection programming, from state-run to internationally-supported projects.

Large scale reform of Ukraine's social care system

The experiences of forcibly transferred children highlight the urgent need for transforming Ukraine's social care system away from the institutionalisation of children to family-based care.[26] Children in institutionalised care settings appear to have been especially vulnerable to, and at high risk of deportation in occupied areas following the events of 2014 and later during the full-scale invasion.[27] For unaccompanied children who are returned, transitioning to family-based care, such as fostering or adoption, can help them recover from trauma and rebuild their sense of belonging.[28]

Ukraine has already taken important steps to reform the social care system. This includes the launch of the Coordination Centre for Family Upbringing and Childcare Development, and a soon to be adopted 2024-2028 Strategy to guarantee the right to all children in Ukraine to grow up in a family-type environment. Presently, the Coordination Centre is cooperating with UNICEF to implement the 'Better Care' programme to develop family-based care solutions. These efforts should continue to be supported and expanded further.

A transition to family-based care requires a well-coordinated and strategic effort between government agencies, social workers, foster care organisations, and CSOs.[29] As described earlier in this paper, Ukraine's social work system remains understaffed and under-resourced. Significant support for the investments will be needed in the future, which can expand the workforce in this sector and ensure that personnel have the training and tools to manage complex cases involving trauma, displacement, and reintegration. Coordination between the Ministry of Social Policy, other government ministries and bodies, child protection and civil society organisations, as well as international partners can assist in streamlining the placement process, ensuring that children are placed in family environments where they can receive the emotional and psychological support they need.

Recruiting and supporting foster families is another key element of childcare reform to a family-based system.[30] Reintegration efforts can target foster families, equipping them with the skills and resources to care for returned children as well as on-going training and support to manage their complex needs. Further study can consider what kinds of priority measures can best stabilise home environments, as well as longer-term support to promote resilience for children and their caregivers.

Tailored care plans will be needed to guide the transition of unaccompanied children to long-term family-based care. Individualised attention will need to be given to address their unique psychological, emotional, and developmental needs. Doing so will require a well-coordinated network of stakeholders, including child protection agencies, legal services, educational facilities, and healthcare providers. Legal frameworks must be examined, and measures put in place to facilitate restoring children's legal identities and guaranteeing access to education, healthcare, and social services. On-going government efforts to shift to family-based care should continue and be adequately supported where possible by international partners.

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[26] The negative impacts of Institutionalisation has been associated with increased risk of reduction in brain development, physical and sexual abuse, reduction in physical health, emotional and physical difficulties that persist into adulthood and lowered life expectancy. International child protection experts have long called for deinstitutionalisation processes, including calling on international donors to direct funding and existing institutional resources to family-based services. G. Mulheir, Deinstitutionalisation—A Human Rights Priority for Children with Disabilities, 9(1) The Equal Rights Review 117 (2012), p. 135.

[27] Bilkova V., et al (2023); "Human rights Situation During the Russian Occupation of Territory of Ukraine and its Aftermath: 24 February 2022 – 31 December 2024", Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine (March 2024), Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights ; *We Must Provide Family, Not Rebuild Orphanages: The Consequences of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine on Children* (March 13, 2023), Human Rights Watch ; Khoshnood, K., et al., 'Belarus' Collaboration with Russia in the Systematic Deportation of Ukraine's Children' (2023), Yale School of Public Health Humanitarian Research Lab.

[28] Multiple child protection professionals interviewed consider this issue a priority for the effective recovery and rehabilitation of returned children.

[29] G. Mulheir & L. L. Gyllensten, Institutionalization and the Commodification of Children: How to Ensure Children Regain Their Right to Family Life, in The Routledge Handbook of Global Child Welfare 293 (Routledge 2017).

[30] UNICEF, 'Child-and youth-centred humanitarian action and recovery in Ukraine' (2024).

Relevant international standards and comparative practice

A core guiding principle for the protection of returned children is the best interest of the child. A suite of standards and comparative practice that can instruct efforts in Ukraine that are grounded in realising the best interests of the child are presented below.

Standards and Good Practices	Comparative Practices
Crisis Response and Immediate Care	
• Immediate responses should address urgent medical, psychosocial, and protection needs.[32] • Rapid deployment of healthcare, MHPSS, and legal services to stabilise the child's condition and ensure safety post-return. • Provision of immediate support to reduce trauma, while creating a safe environment during the early stages of re-integration.	• Comparative practice from Rwanda and Sierra Leone demonstrates the importance of including healthcare into reintegration programs of returned children.[33] • In Tajikistan, the government and UNICEF ensured that children returned from Syria and Iraq received immediate MHPSS and medical care upon return.[34]
Multisectoral Approach and Coordination	
• Addressing both immediate and long-term needs, a multisectoral approach should integrate medical care, MHPSS, education, housing, and identity restoration.[35] Coordination mechanisms should be established early to foster shared responsibility and accountability among all stakeholders.	• In the Democratic Republic of Congo, reintegration policies provided an official framework, where roles and responsibilities as well as strategic objectives and beneficiaries were clearly identified.[36]
Hybrid MHPSS & Health Response	
• Integrating trauma-sensitive MHPSS and broader healthcare services.[37] • Use of a hybrid response to address children's physical and emotional needs, combining clinical interventions (e.g., crisis counselling, therapy) with community-based programs (e.g., peer support, recreational activities).[38] • Pair immediate psychological care and reintegration into supportive social environments to mitigate the long-term effects of trauma, strengthen social connections, foster resilience and promote faster recovery.[39]	• Research and lessons learned from other conflict-settings demonstrate the effectiveness of combining mental health care with community-based activities.[40] • In Palestine, programmes noted the benefits of studying and child attendance to structured nonformal activities such as cultural and recreational opportunities or after-school educational support on mental health.[41]

[31] Convention on the Rights of the Child, art. 3, Nov. 20, 1989, 1577 U.N.T.S. 3.

[32] RSG CAAC, 'Reframing Child Reintegration: From humanitarian action to development, prevention, peacebuilding and beyond' (2020), pp. 8-9.

[33] See for instance UNICEF, 'Hundreds of ex-child soldiers begin rehabilitation in Rwanda' (2001); SRSG CAAC, 'Action to assist war-affected children in Sierra Leone proposed by Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict' (1999); Betancourt, T. S. et al (2008), previously cited.

[34] UNICEF, 'Repatriation and reintegration of children affected by conflict in Syria and Iraq to Central Asia' (2023), p. 12.

[35] SRSG CAAC, 'Reframing Child Reintegration: From humanitarian action to development, prevention, peacebuilding and beyond' (2020), pp. 8-9. See also, J. Todres, 'Taking Prevention Seriously: Developing a Comprehensive Response to Child Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation,' 43 Vand. J. Transnat'l L. 1 (2010).

[36] Agborsangaya, O., 'Policy Dialogue to Advance the Process of Child Soldier Demobilization' in Educational Assessment: Demobilization of Child Soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo, The Global Bureau Human Capacity Development Center, (2000), USAID, p. 10.

[37] SRSG CAAC, 'Reframing Child Reintegration: From humanitarian action to development, prevention, peacebuilding and beyond' (2020), p. 19.

[38] Miller, K. E., Jordans, M. J., Tol, W. A., & Galappatti, A., 'A call for greater conceptual clarity in the field of mental health and psychosocial support in humanitarian settings' (2021), Epidemiology and psychiatric sciences, 8(30) and Betancourt, T. et al (2008).

[39] Psychosocial Reintegration Assistance, IOM Reintegration Handbook, International Organization for Migration (emphasising that successful reintegration involves not only psychological support but the creation of social support systems that can help individuals build resilience such as reintegrating individuals into their families and communities and using coping mechanisms that emphasise social connection and cultural familiarity). See also, Betancourt et al., previously cited.

Child-Centred & Inclusive Response	
• Use of a rights-based approach, empowering children as active participants in their recovery.[42] • Use inclusivity by tailoring interventions to individual factors like age, gender, and trauma history to ensure that the most vulnerable children are not left behind.[43]	• In Kosovo, developed child-centred and need-based approaches meant bringing care services to affected individuals and not move them from their calm and safe environment.[44]
Strengthening Response Capacity	
• Integrate building state capacity to deliver rapid, trauma-sensitive responses. This can include training healthcare and social workers to manage complex trauma and establishing strong logistical frameworks to ensure all children, especially those in remote or conflict-affected areas, have access to necessary services.[45] Strengthening infrastructure can also ensure long-term sustainability and alignment with international standards.	• The Kosova Rehabilitation Center for Torture Victims' programme for children returnees from Iraq and Syria included the capacity building of all actors involved in response, including health care and MHPSS professions, Ministry of Health officials, kindergarten educators, etc.[46]
Access to Information & Services	
• Provide children and families with rapid access to clear and reliable information about available services. Use wide-ranging communication channels to ensure that all families are aware of healthcare, education, legal, and MHPSS options. • Use early and efficient dissemination of information to prevent confusion and delay in accessing services and ensure that reintegration support is accessed promptly.	

[39] Psychosocial Reintegration Assistance, IOM Reintegration Handbook, International Organization for Migration (emphasising that successful reintegration involves not only psychological support but the creation of social support systems that can help individuals build resilience such as reintegrating individuals into their families and communities and using coping mechanisms that emphasise social connection and cultural familiarity). See also, Betancourt et al., previously cited.

[40] On the benefits of 'renewed socialisation' for children's rehabilitation, see Hettitantri, N., 'Resilience through connectedness: A pathway to promote an equitable early childhood development in adverse contexts' (2015), *The transformative power of Early Childhood Development (ECD) for equitable development', 15. See also Van de Velde, A., Building Bridges: Sport as A Tool for the Reintegration of Children Affected by Armed Conflict: A Case study of Colombia*. University of Coimbra. 2015, p. 59.

[41] Loughry, M. et al., 'The Impact of Structured Activities among Palestinian Children in a Time of Conflict' (006), *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 47 (12): 1211–18. Hundt, G. et al, 'Advocating Multi-Disciplinarity in Studying Complex Emergencies: The Limitations of a Psychological Approach to Understanding How Young People Cope with Prolonged Conflict in Gaza.' (2004), J Biosoc Sci 36(4), 417-431.

[42] UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 'General comment No. 15 (2013) on the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health (art. 24)' (2013), CRC/C/GC/15, para. 19; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 'General comment No. 20 (2016) on the implementation of the rights of the child during adolescence, CRC/C/GC/20 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), 'General Comment No. 12: The right of the child to be heard' (2009), CRC/C/GC/12, para. 59. See also, UNSC Resolution 2225 (2015) at para. 18. UN DDR Resource Centre, 'Children and DDR' (2006), p. 25; United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre (UNCCT), 'Children Affected by the Foreign-fighter Phenomenon: Ensuring a Child Rights-based Approach' (2019).

[43] UN DDR Resource Centre, 'Children and DDR' (2006), p. 25.

[44] European Society for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 'Lessons from Kosovo. Mimoza Shahini: mental health care for refugee children should be "culturally appropriate"'.

[45] SRSG CAAC, 'Reframing Child Reintegration: From humanitarian action to development, prevention, peacebuilding and beyond' (2020), p. 24.

[46] The Kosova Rehabilitation Centre for Torture Victims, 'Rehabilitation and reintegration of communities returned from armed conflicts'.

CONCLUSION

The findings presented in this paper aim to enhance the outcomes of existing efforts in Ukraine to ensure the safe return and holistic reintegration of children who have suffered the serious crime of forcible transfer and deportation. Beyond immediate response for children, this paper also aims to strengthen the overarching state systems responsible for child protection and care. By continuing these efforts to build a robust and coordinated framework that facilitates the recovery of vulnerable children, Ukraine will also be better equipped to prevent future violations of their rights.

National leadership and long-term commitment displayed to-date on this subject remain crucial. By implementing the recommendations presented in this paper with support from international partners, Ukraine can overcome the complex challenges inherent to reintegrating children who have experienced forcible transfers and deportation. Short-term donor funding will be insufficient to address the long-term rehabilitation needs of children and their families given the overarching need to rebuild state-led social care and child protection systems.

The Ukrainian government must continue to lead, with donors and child protection organisations providing support with implementation. An integrated approach is the only avenue to foster a sustainable recovery for Ukrainian children and a better future for Ukraine.

RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations aim to support existing efforts to realise the effective and sustained reintegration of forcibly transferred and deported children to their families and communities in Ukraine. Whilst framed for the Ukrainian government, they should be considered by actors within the international community and local organisations in order to inform areas of future support.

Establish a Comprehensive National Reintegration Framework

- Update policies within the Bring Kids Back UA initiative and consolidate measures for providing physical, psychological, and social support to deported, forcibly displaced children, and those at risk of deportation or forcible transfer, with the goal of ensuring that the immediate and long-term needs of those children (as well as those of their families) are met within a unified system.

- Reintegration policies and plans should be based on individualised needs assessments, consider the number of children deported and returned, the time they spent under Russian control, and whether they have immediate family or not. Additionally, needs should be determined individually at the family level. Lessons learned from previous experiences and best practices from comparable contexts should be considered.

Deepen Coordination Between Government, Civil Society, and International Actors

- Confer authority upon an existing centralised coordination mechanism within the framework of the Bring Kids Back UA initiative to oversee and coordinate the work of bodies currently involved in child protection and reintegration efforts. Such a mechanism should ensure regular dialogue, agreed work plans, division of labour, key performance indicators, and clarity around funding requirements and sources to ensure inter-agency collaboration between relevant governmental ministries, CSOs, and international partners.

- Establish and grant appropriate authority to a single coordination mechanism, ensuring clear pathways for engagement with local authorities to gather information on resource needs and shape policies. It is also crucial to ensure agreed work plans, clear division of labour, performance indicators, and transparency in funding.

- In parallel, empower and build the capacity of the State Service for Children to enable it to implement its mandate and be more actively involved with other government bodies and non-state actors working in the field of child protection.

Increase Public Awareness and Address Underreporting by Families

- Working with survivors' groups, child protection organisations, civil society groups, and the media, raise awareness about this issue and about services available to support affected children and their families, with the particular aim of encouraging reporting by affected families.

- Orient awareness-raising messages so that they expose and discredit Russian disinformation, which perpetuates falsehoods about how returned children and their families are treated in Ukraine.

- Launch a nationwide awareness campaign to reassure families that they will not face legal repercussions–such as being accused of collaboration or held liable for obtaining Russian-issued documents–if they seek help for their forcibly transferred and deported children.

Maintain a Central Database for Case Management and Coordination

Continue developing the functionality of centralised government-run database toretrace, verify, and store information on forcibly displaced and deported children, as well as information on children who have been returned after deportation, forcibly transferred, and those who have left the temporarily occupied territories due to the risk of deportation.

Enhance Investigative Capacity and Human Resources

- Strengthen the capacity of the OPG and relevant investigative agencies, including by strengthening their human resources, particular with regard to trauma-informed, child-sensitive investigations.

- Develop protocols to identify and protect alternative evidentiary sources, including working with expert and overview witnesses who can provide reliable testimony and reduce the need for child testimony. Utilise open source intelligence (OSINT) tools for information gathering.

- Cooperate with international law enforcement bodies to collect and verify evidence of war crimes.

- Deepen efforts to centralise investigative information-sharing among state, civil society, and international actors.

Continue Implementing Individualised Reintegration Plans

- Ensure that agencies supporting children and their families coordinate to develop individualised reintegration plans for children who have been forcibly transferred, deported, or forcibly displaced.

- Ensure that efforts respond to the specific needs of each child, including psychological recovery, family reunification, legal identity restoration, and access to social and other services.

Prioritise Holistic Family-Based Reintegration Support

- To create a stable environment for affected children, tailor individualised reintegration efforts to the needs of the whole family unit, including socio-economic support such as housing, financial assistance, healthcare, and vocational training.

- Integrate measures to address parental trauma and provide parents with all the necessary support to best help their returned children.

Expand Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Services

- Continue to expand MHPSS services across Ukraine, including in schools, community centres, and healthcare facilities, with a specific focus on trauma-informed care (especially for children).

- Integrate MHPSS in school programmes, including peer-support groups, in order both to help children regain a sense of community and stability and to build trust among children, families, and support organisations.

- The guiding principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child–in particular, the principle of best interests of the child should be applied to determine whether a child who has experienced forcible transfer or deportation may provide testimonials in public forums. Child participation in such forums should generally be kept to a minimum. Clear protocols, support services, and referral pathways should be employed if their participation is required.

Foster Local Responses

- Support local authorities and CSOs in frontline regions, where children are most vulnerable, by providing the funding, training, and technical assistance necessary to protect children at risk of deportation and to aid in reintegration efforts.

Structural Institutional Development

- Enhance early warning systems in high-risk areas in order to alert communities of potential deportation and forcible transfer risks, and to streamline evacuation efforts.

- Develop and implement, on behalf of affected youth, particularly those returning from Temporarily Occupied Territories (TOTs), long-term educational programmes, including vocational programmes that provide training in practical skills that enhance the employability and social integration of children.

- Rehabilitation of the education system and rebuilding of schools should include trauma-sensitive resources to foster supportive learning environments, as well as the infrastructure for vocational training designed for older children and youth.

- Prioritise a transition to family-based care models, such as fostering and adoption, and develop local social services systems to support these families.

- Dedicate greater resources to expanding the workforce engaged in social care, by training foster families and by developing adequate legal and administrative frameworks, in order to ensure that the child's best interests and other child rights are prioritised in placements.

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