



Policy Insight Paper

ADDRESSING MILITARISATION, RECRUITMENT, ABDUCTION, AND
INDOCTRINATION OF CHILDREN:

AFRICA'S LESSONS FOR UKRAINE

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Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	2
INTRODUCTION.....	3
UGANDA.....	5
THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO.....	7
SUDAN.....	9
SIERRA LEONE AND LIBERIA.....	10
UKRAINE.....	11
CONCLUSION REGARDING THE IMPACT OF ARMED CONFLICT ON CHILDREN.....	15
RECOMMENDATIONS.....	16
APPENDIX 1: PROVISIONS OF INTERNATIONAL INSTRUMENTS VIOLATED WHEN (1) MILITARISING CHILDREN, (2) FORCIBLY DISPLACING CHILDREN), (3) RE-EDUCATING AND (3) ILLEGALLY ADOPTING (4) ASSIMILATING THEM.....	18
APPENDIX 2: RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTING THE MILITARISATION AND POLITICAL INDOCTRINATION OF UKRAINIAN CHILDREN UNDER CONTROL OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION.....	28

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The recruitment, indoctrination, and exploitation of children in armed conflicts is a persistent and deeply troubling challenge that has affected the African continent for decades. The recruitment and use of children in armed conflicts remains a grave violation of international law and a profound challenge across the African continent and abroad.

Despite international and regional legal frameworks, the use of children as soldiers, porters, spies, and tools of war continues to spread across the continent. The scale of the problem has only increased over time, becoming more systematic and complex, as illustrated by the case of Ukrainian children forcibly deported, militarised, and indoctrinated by the Russian Federation. This demonstrates that child exploitation in armed conflicts is not only an African challenge but a global one, and that Africa's experience provides critical lessons for international responses.

This policy brief examines the impact of conflicts on children in Uganda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Ukraine. These conflicts highlight patterns of abduction, forced recruitment, sexual exploitation, cultural erasure, and systematic militarisation. The long-term consequences include profound physical and psychological trauma, disrupted education, fractured communities, and diminished future opportunities. In Ukraine, the Russian occupation has escalated these practices on a large scale, with forced displacement, cultural assimilation, militarised re-education, and the erasure of national identity, showing how these violations can become more systematic and far-reaching. This mirrors, and in some cases expands upon, methods long documented in African conflicts, underscoring the global nature of the threat and the urgency of shared solutions.

Building on Africa's extensive experience in addressing child recruitment, abduction, and post-conflict reintegration, this brief advocates for a unified, multidimensional approach. It emphasises the need to strengthen child protection frameworks, enhance accountability through international legal mechanisms, and expand cooperation between African and Ukrainian governments, civil society, and international institutions. Special attention is given to the importance of Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) programs, safe repatriation mechanisms, trauma-informed rehabilitation, and the restoration of children's identities and rights.

Supporting legal frameworks and international mechanisms to prevent child Africa's decades of engagement with these challenges provide critical lessons, practical tools, and moral authority that can guide global efforts to protect children affected by armed conflict, including Ukrainian children currently under Russian control. By acting decisively and collaboratively, African Union member states, international partners, and civil society can help ensure justice, rehabilitation, and sustainable peace, affirming a shared commitment to safeguarding every child as a bearer of rights and a future contributor to society.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last three years, the number of conflicts and grave violations against children in armed conflict has alarmingly increased.¹ Despite over 30 years of international and continental efforts to address it, the recruitment, abduction, indoctrination and exploitation of children in armed conflict remain among the most persistent and grave violations of international law. These issues continue to have a profound impact on societies throughout the African continent and increasingly, beyond.²

The number of affected children has risen sharply in recent years. In 2024, the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC) estimated that up to 183 million children across the African continent were living in conflict zones.³ In the same year, the United Nations verified 41,370 grave violations against children in armed conflict: the highest number since record-keeping began.⁴ West and Central Africa have been identified by the UN as regions with the highest verified numbers of child recruitment.⁵

Despite international condemnation and legal prohibitions in several international treaties,⁶ militarisation of children and child recruitment persist. Key legal instruments establish 18 as the minimum age for compulsory recruitment/direct participation,⁷ while others set it at 15,⁸ creating inconsistencies. Enforcement relies heavily on state implementation and international/regional pressure. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) developed a Child Policy that serves as the overarching framework for promoting and protecting the rights of children across the 15 member states and specifically addresses the issue of child soldiers as part of its broader commitment to child protection in contexts of armed conflict. However, all these mechanisms face serious political and implementation challenges.

1 United Nations (2025) Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, General Assembly document A/80/266, 25 July 2025, United Nations, New York. Available at: <https://docs.un.org/en/A/80/266>

2 UN A/80/266, 2025.

3 ACERWC (2024) Joint statement of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and the ACERWC on the Day of the African Child, 15 June.

4 UN A/80/266, 2025.

5 UNICEF (2021) The West and Central Africa region among the most affected by grave violations against children in armed conflict, 23 November. <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/west-and-central-africa-region-among-most-affected-grave-violations-against-children>

6 See inter alia: Article 38 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child; Articles 2, 3 and 8 (amongst others) of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict; Article 22 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child; Articles 8(2)(b)(xxvi) and 8(2)(e)(vii) of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court; Article 4(c) of the Statute for the Special Court in Sierra Leone; Article 77 of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions; Article 4 of Additional Protocol II to the Geneva Conventions.

7 See Article 2 of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict. The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child provides that a child is under the age of 18, when prohibiting recruitment of children it is inferred that anyone below the age of 18 is excluded.

8 Additional Protocols I and II; Rome Statute; Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The following summary examines the armed conflicts in Uganda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, as well as Sierra Leone, Liberia and Ukraine, selected due to their well-documented patterns of child abduction, militarisation, recruitment, and use in hostilities.⁹ These conflicts have been the focus of extensive investigation and prosecution by the International Criminal Court and the Special Court for Sierra Leone. As such, they provide a critical foundation for identifying best practices in addressing these crimes, which may inform responses to the treatment of Ukrainian children by the Russian Federation in the context of the ongoing armed conflict. In each of these examples, the key international legal implications are highlighted, and the urgent need for comprehensive, collaborative action, including robust Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) initiatives¹⁰ and effective accountability mechanisms, is underscored.

9 Child Soldiers International (formerly known as “The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers”) identified a total of ten African states most affected by child soldiers, namely Uganda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sierra Leone, Liberia, the Sudan, Angola, Burundi, Congo-Brazzaville, Ethiopia, and Rwanda. See M Kalis “Child soldiers in Africa: solutions to a complex dilemma”, June 2002 <https://www.accord.org.za/ajcr-issues/child-soldiers-in-africa/>.

10 DDR programmes are crucial but complex, requiring long-term funding and collaboration. While many African countries have implemented DDR initiatives providing education, training, and psychosocial support, challenges persist. These include funding constraints, political instability, logistical hurdles, limited specialised mental health care, lack of accurate data for monitoring, and corruption diverting resources. Community engagement is vital for successful reintegration and preventing re-recruitment, but stigma, particularly against girls or those forced to commit atrocities, remains a major barrier.

UGANDA

The armed conflict in the North of Uganda with the involvement of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Ugandan government has had a devastating and long-lasting impact on children. The widespread cases of abduction, forced recruitment, and use of children in hostilities were reported by the ACERWC.¹¹ Many children were deprived of their rights to protection, education, health, and development.¹²

Since 2002, thousands of children were abducted by the LRA, forced to serve as child soldiers, porters, and domestic slaves. Many girls (estimated at 20% of abductees) were subjected to sexual slavery, forced into so-called "marriages" with LRA commanders and repeatedly raped.¹³ The conflict deeply scarred communities in northern Uganda, with widespread trauma among survivors, with studies indicating nearly all former child soldiers suffer clinically significant PTSD.¹⁴

The International Criminal Court (ICC) opened investigations in 2004 into war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in this context of the conflict between the LRA and Ugandan national authorities since July 2002. The investigation was instigated following a self-referral by Uganda in January 2004.¹⁵ The conflict has been characterised by the war crime of conscription and enlistment of children under the age of 15 and the crime against humanity of sexual and gender-based crimes. A notable conviction for atrocities committed against children is Dominic Ongwen.¹⁶ Ongwen is the former Brigade Commander of the Sinia Brigade of the LRA and was himself abducted as a child by the group. An arrest warrant for him was issued under seal on the 8th of July 2005, and he was convicted on the 4th of February 2020 of 61 counts of crimes against humanity and war crimes, both as a direct and indirect perpetrator. His conviction included conscription, enlistment, and the use of children under the age of 15 as soldiers, murder, torture, enslavement, sexual slavery, forced marriage, rape, and persecution. Ongwen's case was especially complex, as he was both a victim and a perpetrator. Nonetheless, the Court held him fully responsible for his actions as an adult and senior commander in the LRA. As part of Ongwen's conviction, the ICC awarded USD56 million in reparations to thousands of victims of the LRA, including former child soldiers and children born of forced pregnancies.¹⁷

11 ACERWC. 2022. Study on the impact of armed conflict and crises on children in Africa.

12 ACERWC. Decision on the communication submitted by Michelo Hansungule and Others (on behalf of children in Northern Uganda) against the Government of Uganda, 15–19 April 2013.

13 B Hlatshwayo "International criminal law and the African girl child soldier: does the international criminal law framework provide adequate protection to the African girl child soldier?", LLM in International Law thesis, University of Cape Town, 2017, <https://open.uct.ac.za/server/api/core/bitstreams/05d3cc64-d905-47ac-a21c-fba996c1a1b0/content>.

14 F Klasen, G Oettingen, J Daniels, M Post and C Hoyer "Posttraumatic resilience in former Ugandan child soldiers", in *Child Development*, July/August 2010, at 1096 – 1113, <https://www.psy.uni-hamburg.de/de/arbeitsbereiche/paedagogische-psychologie-und-motivation/personen/oettingen-gabriele/dokumente/klasen-oettingen-201-posttraumatic-resilience.pdf>.

15 For further information on the ICC investigation and prosecution efforts on Uganda, refer to: <https://www.icc-cpi.int/uganda>.

16 *The Prosecutor v Dominic Ongwen* International Criminal Court Trial Chamber IX (Trial Judgment) Case Number ICC-02/04-01/15, 4 February 2021.

17 *The Prosecutor v Dominic Ongwen* International Criminal Court Trial Chamber IX (Trial Judgment) Case Number ICC-02/04-01/15, 28 February 2024.

Another notable perpetrator is Joseph Kony. An arrest warrant was issued under seal for Kony, the alleged Commander-in-Chief of the LRA, on the 8th of July 2005, but he remains at large. He is charged with 12 counts of crimes against humanity and 21 counts of war crimes at the ICC, including conscripting, enlisting and using children under the age of 15 as soldiers, abduction, murder, cruel treatment, and sexual enslavement.¹⁸ Kony's continued evasion of justice remains one of the most significant failures in the enforcement of international criminal law.¹⁹

As a member state, Uganda has obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict (OPAC), and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC). These obligations include preventing the recruitment of child soldiers, as well as demobilising and rehabilitating those who have been involved in armed conflict. Allegations that the Ugandan People's Defence Force (UPDF) incorporated former LRA abductees raise concerns about potential breaches of state responsibility under international law. Furthermore, Ugandan law allowing the recruitment of minors under 18 with parental consent potentially conflicts with OPAC and ACRWC standards.

Beyond the focus on individual perpetrators and state responsibility, it is important to note that the long-term consequences of the conflict and the use of child soldiers have led to a profound breakdown of traditional social structures, leaving many children without the protection and guidance of their families and communities. The widespread abduction and forced conscription fractured kinship networks and community trust. The instability has also severely hindered access to education and sustainable economic opportunities, leaving youth, particularly former child soldiers, marginalised and vulnerable to re-recruitment or exploitation by armed groups or criminal elements. Many former child soldiers face significant stigma upon returning to their communities, hindering their reintegration and access to support. Furthermore, the lack of comprehensive accountability for the widespread crimes committed during the conflict has contributed to a pervasive culture of impunity, which risks perpetuating cycles of violence and undermining long-term peacebuilding efforts. The psychological toll is immense, with studies indicating high rates of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, and other mental health challenges among former child soldiers, though a notable percentage also show resilience despite extreme adversity. There are efforts to rehabilitate child victims by way of trauma counselling, education, and peacebuilding programs, often led by NGOs and community-based initiatives focusing on psychosocial support, vocational training, and reconciliation processes.

¹⁸ *The Prosecutor v Joseph Kony* International Criminal Court Pre-Trial Chamber III (Amended Document Containing the Charges) Case Number ICC-02/04-01/05, 17 April 2025.

¹⁹ *The Prosecutor v Joseph Kony* International Criminal Court Appeals Chamber (Judgment on the appeal of Mr Joseph Kony against the decision of Pre-Trial Chamber III of 29 October 2024 entitled "Decision on the criteria for holding confirmation of charges proceedings *in absentia*") Case Number ICC-02/04-01/05 OA4, 3 June 2025.

THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

Since 1998, armed conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has had devastating consequences for children, particularly in the Ituri and Kivu regions. According to United Nations and ACERWC documentation, thousands of children have been abducted, recruited, and used by both state and non-state armed actors, including the Armed Forces of the DRC (FARDC) and various armed groups.²⁰ Despite national and international efforts, child recruitment has persisted over time, with children used in combat and support roles and exposed to serious violations, including sexual violence and exploitation.²¹ These practices have resulted in long-term physical, psychological, and social harm, especially for girls.

The ICC began investigations into the conflict in the DRC in June 2004, after the DRC self-referred in April 2004.²² The investigations have focused on the war crime of conscripting and enlisting children under the age of 15, as well as crimes against humanity, including sexual and gender-based violence, committed in the context of armed conflict in the DRC since 1 July 2002. Several key figures have been prosecuted for crimes committed in the DRC, with a strong focus on crimes against children.

Thomas Lubanga, former President of the *Union des Patriotes Congolais/Forces Patriotiques pour la Libération du Congo* (UPC/FPLC), was convicted on the 14th of March 2012 of the war crimes of conscripting, enlisting and using children under the age of 15 to participate actively in hostilities.²³ Germain Katanga, alleged commander of the FRPI, was convicted in 2014 for crimes including murder, attacks against civilians, and sexual slavery following a 2003 attack on the village of Bogoro.²⁴ Although his conviction did not specifically include the use of child soldiers, children were among the victims of the violence. Bosco Ntaganda, former Deputy Chief of Staff and operations commander of the *Forces Patriotiques pour la Libération du Congo* (FPLC), was convicted in 2019 on 18 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity, including the use of children under 15 in hostilities, murder, sexual slavery, and rape of child soldiers.²⁵ His conviction underscored the scale and severity of crimes against children and civilians during the conflict. Other investigations have targeted leaders of armed groups, including the FNI, *Force de Résistance Patriotique en Ituri* (FRPI), and UPC, with ongoing efforts by the ICC and international partners to hold perpetrators accountable and strengthen protection for children affected by armed conflict.

20 Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (2024) DRC: Thousands of Children Face Escalating Violence and Exploitation Amid Intensifying Conflict, UN.

21 UNICEF (2025) Reports of grave violations against children in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo tripled, UNICEF.

22 For further information on the ICC investigation and prosecution efforts on the DRC, refer to: <https://www.icc-cpi.int/drc>.

23 *The Prosecutor v Thomas Lubanga Dyilo* International Criminal Court Trial Chamber I (Judgment pursuant to Article 74 of the Statute), Case Number ICC-01/04-01/06, 14 March 2012; *The Prosecutor v Thomas Lubanga Dyilo* International Criminal Court Appeals Chamber (Judgment on the appeals of the Prosecutor and Mr Thomas Lubanga Dyilo against the “Decision on Sentence pursuant to Article 76 of the Statute”), Case Number ICC-01/04-01/06 A 4 A 6, 14 March 2012.

24 *The Prosecutor v Germain Katanga* International Criminal Court Trial Chamber II (Judgment pursuant to Article 74 of the Statute), Case Number ICC-01/04-01/07, 7 March 2014.

25 *The Prosecutor v Bosco Ntaganda* International Criminal Court Trial Chamber VI (Judgment), Case Number ICC-01/04-02/06, 8 July 2019; *The Prosecutor v Bosco Ntaganda* International Criminal Court Appeals Chamber (Judgment on the appeals of Mr Bosco Ntaganda and the Prosecutor against the decision of Trial Chamber VI of 8 July 2019 entitled ‘Judgment’), Case Number ICC-01/04-02/06 A A2, 30 March 2021.

As part of its judgments, the ICC has ordered reparations for victims, including children affected by armed conflict. In the Lubanga case, reparations included psychosocial support, education, vocational training, and other reintegration services for former child soldiers.²⁶ The ICC ordered reparations of \$1 million against Katanga for victims of the 2003 Bogoro attack in Ituri, DRC.²⁷ The Court recognised 297 victims, awarding each \$250 in symbolic individual reparations, alongside collective reparations such as housing assistance, education, income-generating support, and psychological rehabilitation. As Katanga was found to be indigent, the reparations were implemented by the Trust Fund for Victims, which covered the full amount. The order was largely confirmed on appeal in 2018 and implemented over subsequent years. In the Ntaganda case, the Court ordered over USD30 million in collective and symbolic reparations, covering services for victims of sexual violence, child recruitment, and displacement.²⁸ These reparations programs are implemented with the support of the ICC's Trust Fund for Victims (TFV), which works with local partners in the DRC to provide healing, rehabilitation, and livelihood assistance to affected individuals and communities.

The DRC is a state party to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, and the ACRWC. As such, it is legally obliged to prevent the recruitment of children into armed forces and groups, and to ensure their demobilisation, protection, and rehabilitation. While the government has participated in DDR programs and action plans in cooperation with the United Nations, reports indicate that recruitment of children by certain elements within the national army (FARDC) continues, potentially breaching these obligations. The state is therefore required to take all feasible measures to prevent recruitment by all armed actors and to ensure accountability for violations.

Despite these efforts, the scale of the conflict and continuing instability in eastern DRC mean many children remain vulnerable. Ongoing international support and sustained local initiatives are essential for lasting rehabilitation and peace.

Similar to the situation in Uganda, the long-term impact of the conflict on children in the DRC has been devastating, with pervasive physical and psychological trauma often manifesting as complex PTSD or developmental trauma disorder due to prolonged exposure. The conflict has severely disrupted education, family structures, and community networks, and the loss of parents, teachers, and traditional leaders has deprived countless children of essential guidance, protection, and support systems.²⁹

Mass displacement, the destruction of infrastructure, including schools and health clinics, and ongoing insecurity have further limited access to healthcare, education, and basic necessities, significantly affecting children's development, well-being, and future prospects.³⁰ Many former child soldiers face additional challenges during reintegration, including stigmatisation, lack of skills, and insufficient support programs, which increase the risk of falling into cycles of poverty and violence.

²⁶ *The Prosecutor v Thomas Lubanga Dyilo* International Criminal Court Trial Chamber II (Order on the Trust Fund for Victims' First Update Report on the implementation of reparations for former child soldiers and for victims of the attacks, including for victims in urgent need, in the *Lubanga* and the *Ntaganda* cases), Case Number ICC-01/04-01/06, 21 August 2024.

²⁷ *The Prosecutor v Germain Katanga* International Criminal Court Trial Chamber II (Order for Reparations pursuant to Article 75 of the Statute), Case Number ICC-01/04-01/07, 24 March 2017.

²⁸ *The Prosecutor v Bosco Ntaganda* International Criminal Court Trial Chamber VI (Reparations Order), Case Number ICC-01/04-02/06, 8 March 2021.

²⁹ UNICEF (2021) *Education in Emergencies: Democratic Republic of the Congo*.

³⁰ IDMC (2023) *DRC: Displacement and Humanitarian Impact of Armed Conflict*.

SUDAN

The complex history of conflict in Sudan, including the long North–South civil war and the Darfur conflict, has repeatedly involved the recruitment and use of children by various armed actors, including government forces, allied militias (such as the Janjaweed in Darfur), and opposition groups like the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA).³¹ Children were abducted, forcibly recruited, or joined armed groups due to desperation, and were used in combat and support roles, often exposed to violence. The SPLA, for example, operated camps for underage soldiers and initially resisted some UN-supported reunification efforts. Reports have also indicated that the Sudanese government’s territory was used by the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) for training abducted children from Uganda.³² Even after South Sudan’s independence in 2011, both government and opposition forces continued to recruit and use children in ways that reflected patterns established during Sudan’s civil wars. The international community has consistently condemned these practices.

The outbreak of widespread conflict in April 2023 between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has resulted in a major humanitarian crisis and an escalation of violations affecting children. Reports indicate renewed recruitment and use of children by both parties, mass displacement, attacks on schools and hospitals, restrictions on humanitarian access, and instances of abduction and sexual violence.³³ Actions by parties throughout these conflicts constitute serious violations of international law, including war crimes such as child recruitment, attacks on civilians, murder, and rape, as well as crimes against humanity.

The ICC issued arrest warrants for former President Omar al-Bashir and other officials; however, none of these proceedings focuses specifically on child soldiers.³⁴ Accountability for violations in the ongoing SAF–RSF conflict remains a significant challenge. Thus far, ICC proceedings were limited to alleged crimes committed in Darfur since 1 July 2002, but on the 3rd of November 2025, the Office of the Prosecutor announced that it is investigating crimes allegedly committed in Darfur since the outbreak of hostilities in April 2023 in terms of UN SC Resolution 1593 (2005), mentioning alleged crimes committed in El-Fasher in particular.³⁵ In response to the 2023 conflict, the UN Human Rights Council established a Fact-Finding Mission on 11 October 2023.³⁶

Sudan is a state party to the Convention on the Rights of the Child,³⁷ the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict,³⁸ and the ACRWC.³⁹ As such, it is legally obliged to prevent the recruitment of children and to ensure their demobilisation, protection, and rehabilitation. However, historical patterns and the ongoing conflict indicate persistent challenges in fulfilling these obligations. The current situation has created one of the world’s most severe humanitarian crises, leaving children highly vulnerable to recruitment, exploitation, displacement, and violence, with long-term implications for their well-being and for Sudan’s future.⁴⁰

31 UNICEF (2022) *Children in Armed Conflict: Sudan*. United Nations Children’s Fund.

32 HRW (2019) *Children in Armed Conflict in Sudan: Recruitment, Abuse, and Protection*. Human Rights Watch.

33 UNICEF (2023) Sudan: Humanitarian Impact of the 2023 Conflict on Children. United Nations Children’s Fund.; OHCHR (2023) Report of the UN Human Rights Council Fact-Finding Mission on Sudan 2023. United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

34 ICC (2009) The Prosecutor v. Omar Al-Bashir: Warrant of Arrest. International Criminal Court.; ICC (2010) The Prosecutor v. Ali Kushayb and Ahmad Harun. International Criminal Court.

35 Forty-First Report of the Statement of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court to the United Nations Security Council Pursuant to Resolution 1593 (2005); ICC Office of the Prosecutor on the situation in El-Fasher, North Darfur, International Criminal Court, retrievable at: <https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/statement-icc-office-prosecutor-situation-el-fasher-north-darfur> (accessed 28 January 2026).

36 UNHRC (2023) *Resolution on Sudan: Establishment of a Fact-Finding Mission*. United Nations Human Rights Council.

37 UN (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child. United Nations.

38 UN (2000) Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict.

39 ACERWC (1990) African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

40 UNICEF (2023) *Sudan: Humanitarian Impact of the 2023 Conflict on Children*. United Nations Children’s Fund.

SIERRA LEONE AND LIBERIA

The armed conflicts in Sierra Leone (1991–2002) and Liberia (1989–2003) involved widespread violations of international humanitarian and human rights law, with children among the most affected populations. United Nations agencies and human rights organisations documented the recruitment and use of children by armed groups, including the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL).⁴¹ Children were recruited through abduction, coercion, or extreme socio-economic vulnerability and were used in combat and support roles. Girls were disproportionately affected by sexual violence and exploitation associated with armed groups. The long-term consequences for affected children and communities include physical and psychological trauma, disrupted education, and challenges to social reintegration.⁴²

Accountability for serious crimes committed during the Sierra Leone conflict was pursued through the establishment of the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL) in 2002. In 2012, the SCSL convicted Charles Taylor, former President of Liberia, for aiding and abetting war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Sierra Leone, including crimes involving violence against civilians and the recruitment and use of children.⁴³ This judgment marked a significant development in international criminal justice by affirming individual criminal responsibility for cross-border violations, including those affecting children. The SCSL also convicted senior RUF leaders for crimes including the conscription and use of children under the age of 15.⁴⁴

Although the SCSL did not implement a direct reparations programme, its jurisprudence acknowledged the harm suffered by victims and contributed to broader transitional justice processes, including the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Sierra Leone.⁴⁵ The experiences of Sierra Leone and Liberia continue to inform international approaches to preventing child recruitment, strengthening accountability mechanisms, and supporting long-term rehabilitation and reintegration of children affected by armed conflict.

41 “We’ll Kill You If You Cry: Sexual Violence in the Sierra Leone Conflict”, Human Rights Watch (2003), retrievable at: https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://www.hrw.org/report/2003/01/16/well-kill-you-if-you-cry/sexual-violence-sierra-leone-conflict&ved=2ahUKewiJlcDynb2SAxVmTEEAHY_ZCXIQFnoECBoQAQ&usg=AOvVaw0UexCg5QMsk3hOYFpxJR6C (last accessed on 3 February 2026); Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict, United Nations, (2000), UN Doc. A/55/163–S/2000/712.

42 Human Rights Watch (2004) *How to Fight, How to Kill: Child Soldiers in Liberia*. New York: Human Rights Watch.

43 *Prosecutor v Charles Ghankay Taylor* Special Court for Sierra Leone Trial Chamber II (Judgement) 18 May 2012.

44 *Prosecutor v Issa Hassan Sesay, Morris Kallon and Augustine Gbao* Special Court for Sierra Leone Trial Chamber I (Judgement), 2 March 2009.

45 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Sierra Leone, Reports, retrievable at: <https://www.sierraleonetr.c.org/index.php/view-the-final-report> (accessed on 28 January 2026).

UKRAINE

Since the occupation of the Crimean Peninsula and the parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine in 2014, and especially since the beginning of the full-scale invasion in February 2022, the Russian Federation has consistently implemented a policy aimed at assimilating Ukrainian children, eradicating their cultural and national identity and subordinate them to its own values. Such a policy is destructive for peace-building efforts as attempts against physical and mental integrity, linguistic, religious and family rights, academic and artistic freedoms, falsification and distortion of historical facts, degrading treatment and denial of the right to self-determination of the entire nation result in further degeneration and fuelling of open conflict.

The violations committed against Ukrainian children include unlawful deportation and forcible transfer, Russification, political indoctrination, propaganda of war, militarisation of education and leisure, restrictions on the use of the Ukrainian language, imposition of Russian citizenship, violations of the rights and persecution of Ukrainian educators, and the replacement of Ukrainian teachers with Russian citizens through the colonisation of occupied territories.

According to official Ukrainian data, since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, Russia has forcibly displaced around 20,000 children,⁴⁶ including 4,390 orphans and children deprived of parental care.⁴⁷ Ukrainian children were deported to 57 regions of the Russian Federation,⁴⁸ particularly the Omsk region and Sakhalin, where the climatic conditions differ significantly from those of their permanent place of residence.⁴⁹ Between 2014 and 2022, approximately one thousand Ukrainian children⁵⁰ might be abducted by Russians from the occupied Crimean Peninsula.⁵¹ As of early 2026, only 1,960 children have been returned from deportation, forced transfers, or temporarily occupied territories. The others remain under the control of the Russian Federation.⁵²

On 30 May 2022, Ukrainian children were forcibly recognised as citizens of the Russian Federation and started receiving Russian documents following a simplified procedure.⁵³ Imposing Russian citizenship is a tool for strengthening the Russian Armed Forces through the forced conscription of young men once they reach the age of 18, as well as for the forcible transfer of Ukrainian children to Russian families and Russification. Since October 2022 and up to this day, senior Russian officials claim that only 380 Ukrainian children have been placed under the care of

46 Ukrainian platform “Children of War”, <https://childrenofwar.gov.ua/en/>

47 According to the former Minister for the Reintegration of Temporarily Occupied Territories, Iryna Vereshchuk: <https://tsn.ua/ato/navit-ne-prihovuye-svoyi-zlochyni-vereschuk-ozvuchila-skilki-ditej-sirit-rosiya-vikrala-z-ukrayini-2295223.html>.

48 <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1YzILsandGTZVKvk15-xUPt0lqtJMWf6hoa4dljPGKM/edit?usp=sharing>.

49 <https://spravdi.gov.ua/dopomoga-vykradenym-syrotam-yak-rosiya-vsnyovlyuye-ditej-z-ukrayiny/>

50 According to information provided by the Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine at the beginning of the temporary occupation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, there were 4,323 Ukrainian orphans and children without parental care.

51 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 by Prof. Veronika Bilkova, Dr. Cecilie Hellestveit, and Dr. Elina Šteinerte, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/7/7/542751.pdf?fbclid=IwAR0RxUefyN2PKd7uVBgZnbwWZBLlIdtZfoZRP_qVeBeNkUI7bH5qayYDt8 (see p.16)

52 Official website of the Bring Kids Back UA Initiative, <https://www.bringkidsback.org.ua/>

53 Presidential Decree of the Russian Federation No. 330 dated 30 May 2022, <https://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202205300008>

Russian citizens since the full-scale invasion.⁵⁴ However, transfer of Ukrainian children to Russian families is also recorded in 2024-2025, involving boys between the ages of 5⁵⁵ and 10 placed with families of Russian military personnel.⁵⁶

On 17 March 2023, the ICC issued two arrest warrants against the President of the Russian Federation and the Commissioner for Children's Rights in his Office, Maria Lvova-Belova, for unlawful deportation and forcible transfer of Ukrainian children.⁵⁷

Ukrainian children under Russian control are forced to receive a Russian education characterised by a high level of militarisation. In the occupied territories of Ukraine 1,200 specialised classes were opened in schools including cadet, cossack, police, military-patriotic classes,⁵⁸ classes of the Investigative Committee, classes of the Russian Guard⁵⁹ to prepare Ukrainian children for military or civil service (in law enforcement and security agencies) in the enemy State, in particular tactical, engineering, fire training, and patriotic education.⁶⁰

In addition to specialised classes, militarisation is characteristic of formal education in general. The following subjects were integrated into the school curriculum: "Conversations about the Important", "Lessons of Courage", "Lessons of Faith and Victory", "Fundamentals of Security and Defence of the Motherland". In such lessons, in addition to justifying and normalising Russia's aggression against Ukraine, children are taught how to make trench candles, camouflage nets, and tactical bracelets. These items are then given to Russian soldiers at the front.⁶¹ Russian military personnel, in particular participants in "Special military operation", are regularly invited to Ukrainian schoolchildren, and children are also encouraged to write soldiers letters of support and gratitude. Ukrainian children are involved in such activities without the proper consent of their parents or other legal representatives. Resistance to such re-education can be perceived as an act of disloyalty to the aggressor state and have negative consequences for the family as a whole (threats of deprivation of parental rights, "preventive" conversations with Russian law enforcement agencies, forced psychological treatment⁶² etc.).

54 Children's Rights Protection Bulletin. Issue No. 2 / October 2023, <https://deti.gov.ru/Deyatelnost/documents/258>

55 Official Telegram channel of the Russian Presidential Ombudsman for Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova: https://t.me/detskiy_ombudsmen_lnr/1914

56 The data is corroborated by archived links : <https://web.archive.org/web/20250531121048/https://www.pskov.kp.ru/daily/27558/4882497/>
<https://helpspinabifida.ru/ya-ne-smogla-zabyt-foto-stepy-hudenkogo-v-odezhde-ne-po-razmeru-sibiryachka-usynovila-10-letnego-malchika-invalida-iz-detdoma-na-donbasse/>

57 Official website of the International Criminal Court, <https://www.icc-cpi.int/taxonomy/term/891>

58 Official Telegram-channel of the occupying authorities of the Kherson region, <https://t.me/depobrherson/11407>

59 Official Telegram-channel of the occupying authorities of the Lugansk region, <https://t.me/minobrlnr/16553>

60 The data is corroborated by the following link: <https://alchevsk.su/news/43878>

61 The data is corroborated by the following links: <https://crimea-news.com/society/2024/01/12/1278394.html>, <https://stv92.ru/news/news-7623/>, <https://herson.bezformata.com/listnews/aleshkinskogo/142892973/>, <https://rg.ru/2024/10/16/reg-dnr/v-dnr-shkolniki-stali-perehodit-na-ochnoe-obuchenie.html>

62 Official Telegram channel of the occupying authorities of the Lugansk region, https://deti-lnr.ru/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/%D0%94%D0%9E%D0%9A%D0%9B%D0%90%D0%94-2024_compressed.pdf

Militarisation is also a characteristic feature of non-formal education and leisure in the occupied territories, in particular within military-patriotic centres, movements and re-education camps.

In mid-2025, the network of re-education camps included 25 facilities in occupied Ukrainian territories, 121 in Russia, 19 in Belarus and other countries. In addition to Soviet-style re-education camps, where children's free time is mixed with collective discipline, labour, sports, and systemic propaganda, Ukrainian children are also sent to militarised facilities. These include Young Patriot Camp (Moscow Region), Avangard Camp (Volgograd Region), Airborne Forces Defence and Sports Center "Preobrazhensky", Patriotic Education Training Center of the Volga Federal District "Gvardeyets" (Penza region), Camp "Krasny Desant" (Rostov region)⁶³.

The activities in militarised camps are designed for teenagers aged 14–17. Under the guidance of instructors from the "Warrior" center, children undergo firearms, tactical, and engineering training, study communication organisation and the use of unmanned systems, receive first aid and tactical medical training, and learn the basics of Russia's national security⁶⁴. At the Avangard camp, there are also military-historical reenactments using equipment and pyrotechnics⁶⁵, simulators for BMP-2 and MI-8 helicopter piloting,⁶⁶ parachute jumps, "Zarnitsa 2.0"⁶⁷ and "Path of the Warrior" games with drones and laser tag,⁶⁸ propagandistic discussions on Russian history and military conquests, meetings with participants of the "Special military operation", "heroes of Russia," and politicians.⁶⁹

The largest children's military-patriotic movement in the occupied territories of Ukraine is The *Young Army*. According to the movement's Charter, it aims, among other things, to promote the preparation of citizens of the Russian Federation for military service and to form in young people the readiness and practical ability to fulfil their civic duty and constitutional obligations to defend the homeland [Russian Federation].⁷⁰ In 2025, 55,261 Ukrainian children were in the ranks of the Young Army, preparing to fight against Ukraine and other countries.⁷¹

63 Regional Center for Human Rights. The Weaponization of Children. Re-education Camps. 2025. <https://rchr.org.ua/en/analytics/dity-yak-zbroya-t-abory-perevyhovannya/>

64 The data is corroborated by the following link: https://web.archive.org/web/20250717192311/https://zo.gov.ru/news/show/podrostki_iz_zaporozhskoj_oblasti_stali_uchastnikami_tretej_smeny_vremya_yunyx_geroev_ot_centra_voin

65 Official VK-page of the Avangard camp, https://web.archive.org/web/20250826131725/https://vk.com/lageravangard34?w=wall-203504470_21614

66 Official VK-page of the Avangard camp, https://web.archive.org/web/20250826131914/https://vk.com/lageravangard34?w=wall-203504470_21531

67 Official VK-page of the Avangard camp, https://web.archive.org/web/20250826132131/https://vk.com/lageravangard34?w=wall-203504470_21458

68 The data is corroborated by the following link: <https://web.archive.org/web/20250826132332/https://yakutsk.bezformata.com/listnews/turniru-put-voina/149673261/>

69 Official VK-page of the Avangard camp, https://web.archive.org/web/20250826132131/https://vk.com/lageravangard34?w=wall-203504470_21458

70 Charter of the Yunarmiya Movement, <https://yunarmy.ru/ustav.pdf>

71 According to information collected by the Regional Center for Human Rights

As it was recognised by the European Court of Human Rights,⁷² the Ukrainian children's removal from their homes, their separation from their parents and caregivers, their transfer to Russia and the absence of any steps by the Russian authorities to secure their reunification, while active arrangements were being made for their temporary or permanent placement in foster families or adoption, amounted to the violation of human rights. The treatment of the children concerned attained the threshold of severity required to engage the prohibition of torture and ill-treatment with a long-lasting and traumatising impact on their physical and mental health. The militarisation of education and promotion of military service from childhood by Russia violate international law, including the Geneva Conventions⁷³ and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.⁷⁴ Such actions are one of the reasons that create a favourable background for crime and terrorism.

72 *Ukraine and the Netherlands v. Russia*. ECtHR. (8019/16, 43800/14). <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-244292>

73 Follow-up to decisions and resolutions adopted by the Executive Board and the General Conference at their previous sessions, part I: Programme issues, E. Follow-up of the situation in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea (Ukraine). <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000378910>, p. 13

74 Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 8 of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict. CRC/C/OPAC/ISR/CO/1. <https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/crc-c-opac-isr-co-1.pdf> pp. 22-23

CONCLUSION REGARDING THE IMPACT OF ARMED CONFLICT ON CHILDREN

Across the continent and abroad, children are typically recruited into armed groups through abduction or coercion. However, factors such as extreme poverty, lack of education and employment opportunities, displacement, family breakdown, the desire for revenge, or seeking perceived security also contribute to children joining armed groups. Recruiters often exploit these vulnerabilities with false promises. Children serve as soldiers, lookouts, porters, spies, cooks, messengers, or human shields. Girls face specific risks, often compelled into sexual slavery (“forced marriage”) alongside combat or support roles. The proliferation of light, inexpensive small arms facilitates the use of younger children in combat.

In the Russia–Ukraine war, children are often deliberately targeted to prepare them for participation in hostilities once they turn 18. The militarisation and politicisation of education, propaganda of war, and the glorification of aggressive conflict resolution have long-lasting negative effects on the physical and mental health of Ukrainian children. At the same time, the forced demonstration of loyalty to a hostile state, Russification, and the instilling of hatred toward other cultures and peoples distort the moral compass of the next generation, turning children into instruments of the aggressor. These actions undermine any prospects for a peaceful resolution to the conflict and reveal Russia’s unwillingness to coexist safely with its neighbours. They normalise violence against children not only in Eurasia but also globally.

This highlights the crucial role of other states in facilitating the repatriation of Ukrainian children from Russian control, as called for in the UN General Assembly Resolution “Return of Ukrainian Children” of 3 December 2025. South Africa’s leadership in this effort is vital for ensuring justice, peace, and security for Ukrainian children and for preventing future bloodshed involving young people.

The use of child soldiers and the militarisation of children, as such, inflict deep and lasting scars. Children are robbed of their childhood, education, and future prospects, enduring immense physical and psychological trauma (PTSD, depression) from witnessing and perpetrating violence. This hampers national development through lost human capital, reduced productivity, and long-term economic stagnation. Increased social service costs for healthcare and justice, social instability from reintegration challenges, and reduced foreign investment due to instability further strain national resources.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- African countries, as the continent with the youngest population and with children's rights enshrined in AU instruments, should take a leading role in developing and promoting robust mechanisms to safeguard children's rights globally.
- Due to their commitment to international treaties promoting and protecting the rights of children, African countries are obliged to promote return, reintegration, and rehabilitation programs for Ukrainian children affected by war crimes and crimes against humanity, combining education, psychosocial support, and peacebuilding curricula, as practised in African post-conflict contexts.
- African and Ukrainian Governments and Civil society organisations should consider supporting the recognition of politicisation and militarisation of schools by a hostile Power as a form of attack on schools, i.e. a grave violation against children in armed conflict. The monitoring and assessment mechanism of the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict should be extended to cover it. Pending the establishment of such a mechanism, the UN Human Rights Council should appoint a special rapporteur, an independent expert, or a working group to document these abuses and recommend actions to end them.
- The Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict should prepare a separate country-specific report on grave violations of children's rights committed in connection with the aggression of the Russian Federation, as it was for Somalia, South Sudan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali and other countries in the African continent.
- African countries are encouraged to urge the Russian Federation to comply with the Concluding Observations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, including measures to prevent the politicisation and militarisation of schools and the manipulation of curricula to reflect political or military agendas.
- African countries should support the establishment of the unified legal mechanism⁷⁵ for the repatriation, psycho-social adaptation and reintegration of abducted Ukrainian children. More knowledge should be shared between Ukrainian and African civil society organisations for its effective implementation.
- African countries should consider joining the International Coalition for the Return of Ukrainian Children.
- African Governments and African Civil society organisations, being part of the non-alignment movement, should support the process of identifying Ukrainian children unlawfully deported to Russia.
- In the event of a renewed vote this year, African countries should endorse the UN General Assembly Resolution on Return of Ukrainian Children, following the example set by South Africa, Benin, Cabo Verde, the Comoros, Lesotho, Malawi and others. This Resolution should

⁷⁵ <https://krymbezpravil.org.ua/en/analytics-en/mechanism-and-policy-framework-for-the-return-of-illegally-deported-and-forcibly-transferred-children/>

serve as a model for the safe return of children and the reunification of families affected by armed conflicts in other regions and should be complemented by specialised guidance and documents from UN institutions such as OHCHR, UNICEF, UNHCR, or other international governmental and non-governmental organisations.

- African countries should respect and implement international criminal justice mechanisms established under international law, including arrest warrants against Vladimir Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova, and urge all international partners to do the same.
- African Parliaments should call on Russia to stop the transfer of Ukrainian children and the alteration of their citizenship and national identity.
- African countries should encourage the creation of a “best practice manual” - practical measures to support children affected by armed conflicts.
- African countries, together with Ukraine and other UN partners, should advocate for the establishment of an international day on Children in Armed Conflicts and support the creation of a dedicated institution to address children’s rights and protection, recognising that childhood has an "expiry date" and the urgent need for timely interventions.
- Global media campaigns should be initiated by African countries and Ukraine to raise awareness of the situation and promote adherence to international norms protecting children in armed conflicts.

This document has been developed through a partnership between South African and Ukrainian experts from **the Centre for Human Rights, University of Pretoria**, **the Regional Centre for Human Rights, Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation**, and **the Ukrainian Association of South Africa**. It builds on ongoing collaboration among experts, following the presentation of the previous policy brief, *“Ukrainian Children Under Russian Control: Addressing Abduction, Deportations, Repatriation, and Justice,”* on the margins of the 2024 African Union Mid-Year Coordination Meeting in Accra.

The platform for expert collaborations was initiated by **the Institute of Justice and Reconciliation (IJR)**, **the Desmond and Leah Tutu Legacy Foundation (DLTLF)**, **Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation (DIF)**, and **the Ukrainian Association of South Africa (UAZA)**.

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APPENDIX 1: PROVISIONS OF INTERNATIONAL INSTRUMENTS VIOLATED WHEN (1) MILITARISING CHILDREN, (2) FORCIBLY DISPLACING CHILDREN, (3) RE-EDUCATING AND (3) ILLEGALLY ADOPTING (4) ASSIMILATING THEM

States involved in armed conflicts have committed and continue to commit serious violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law, including war crimes and crimes against humanity. Among the most egregious violations is the recruitment, militarisation, and use of children in armed conflicts, as well as their forcible displacement from occupied or conflict-affected territories. According to the United Nations, hundreds of thousands of children worldwide have been subjected to such practices.

In many cases, children are forcibly recruited as soldiers, porters, spies, or used for other military purposes. These practices are often accompanied by ideological indoctrination, “re-education,” or forced assimilation, which aim to erase their cultural identity and manipulate their loyalty. In some contexts, children are also illegally transferred or adopted, compounding the violations of their rights.

Which provisions of international law are violated when states engage in the recruitment, militarisation, and use of children, alongside forcible displacement, ideological indoctrination, or illegal adoption in situations of armed conflict or occupation?

Rule	Essence
General rules relating to all aspects	
Article 3 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child	The principle of the best interests of the child, which should be manifested in all aspects of the child’s life, is generally formulated. (Deportation, adoption, and education according to Russian standards are not in the best interests of the child)
Position of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child General comment No. 14 (2013) on the right of the child to have his or her best interests taken as a primary consideration (clause 6)	The obligation to protect the best interests of the child “in all actions” means that every action affecting the child or children must take into account their best interests as a primary consideration, and the word “action” includes not only decisions but also any measures, behaviour, offers, services, procedures, and inaction and failure, for example when social welfare authorities fail to take action to protect children from abuse or maltreatment.

<p>Position of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child</p> <p>General Comment №6 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child «Treatment of unaccompanied and separated children outside their country of origin» (clause 20)</p>	<p>Determining what is in the child's best interests requires a clear and comprehensive assessment of the child's identity, including the child's nationality, upbringing, ethnic, cultural and linguistic background, particular vulnerability and protection needs.</p>
<p>Article 17 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights,</p> <p>Article 12 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights</p>	<p>No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference in his personal and family life.</p> <p>(Disruption of family ties, obstruction of reunification, change of name/surname, adoption – all of those represent intervention)</p>
<p>Article 5 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child</p>	<p>Any decisions regarding the child must take into account the rights of guardians, parents, and relatives.</p>
<p>Article 9 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child</p>	<p>Separation of a child from its parents can only be carried out if such separation is in the best interests of the child. As a general rule, such decisions cannot be made without parental consent.</p>
<p>Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child</p>	<p>The child's right to be heard and to be involved in the decisions affecting the child must be ensured.</p> <p>(Granting Russian citizenship, deportation, adoption, and decisions on inclusion in Russian education do not take into account the right of the child)</p>
<p>Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child</p>	<p>The right to physical and psychological well-being of children must be ensured through the health care system.</p> <p>(Deportations, as well as the treatment after them, have profound negative consequences for children. The treatment of individual children without the consent of their parents and informing parents about the treatment itself, its nature, necessity and scope, as well as the lack of medical assistance for children, is a violation of the child's right to the most attainable level of health.</p>
<p>Article 24 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights</p>	<p>Every child shall have, without any discrimination as to race, colour, sex, language, religion, national or social origin, property or birth, the right to such measures of protection as are required by his status as a minor, on the part of his family, society and the State.</p>
<p>Article 10 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights</p>	<p>States recognise that families should be provided with the widest possible protection and assistance. Special measures of protection and assistance must be taken for all children and adolescents, without discrimination based on family origin or any other ground.</p>
<p>Article 38 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child</p>	<p>It is the duty of the parties to respect international humanitarian law, which additionally protects children in armed conflict. The protection and care of children in these conditions must be ensured.</p>
<p>Article 77 of Additional Protocol (I) to the Geneva Conventions of 1949</p>	<p>Children should be treated with special respect and be given the help and care they need.</p>

Militarisation	
Article 38 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child Articles 1–3 of the Optional Protocol to the CRC on the involvement of children in armed conflict	Children under 15 must not take a direct part in hostilities. It is established that 18 is the minimum age for direct participation; consent is required for voluntary recruitment.
Articles 6 & 24 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights	States must prevent child participation in violence, protecting the life and fundamental rights of children.
Article 77 of Additional Protocol (I) to the Geneva Conventions of 1949	Recruitment and use of children under 15 in hostilities are prohibited. It is also applicable to non-international armed conflict.
Article 8(2)(e)(vii) of the Rome Statute	Recruitment or use of children under 15 in hostilities is a war crime.
UN Security Council Resolution 1261 (1999)	First resolution addressing the use of children in armed conflicts. Calls for the protection of children and the prevention of recruitment.
UN Security Council Resolution 1314 (2000)	The resolution emphasises reintegration and rehabilitation of child soldiers and promotes comprehensive post-conflict support programs.
UN Security Council Resolution 1612 (2005)	The resolution creates the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) for violations against children in conflict and focuses on recruitment and use of children in hostilities.
UN Security Council Resolution 2427 (2018)	The resolution strengthens protection of children in conflict and post-conflict reintegration and calls for accountability measures.
General comment No. 13 (2011): The right of the child to freedom from all forms of violence (Committee on the Rights of the Child)	The General comment reinforces the protection of children from recruitment and militarisation.
General comment No. 24 (2019) on children's rights in the child justice system (Committee on the Rights of the Child)	The General comment covers specific issues, such as issues relating to children recruited and used by non-State armed groups, including those designated as terrorist groups.

Deportation and repatriation	
Article 14 of the Geneva Convention (IV) of 1949	<p>Prior to hostilities and in occupied territories, the Parties shall endeavour to create areas organised in such a way as to protect children under the age of fifteen and other vulnerable groups from the effects of war.</p> <p>During hostilities, the Parties may conclude agreements on mutual recognition of these zones and localities and refusal to attack them.</p>
Article 17 of the Geneva Convention (IV) of 1949	<p>The parties to the conflict should try to conclude agreements on the evacuation of the wounded, the sick, the disabled, the elderly, children and pregnant women from besieged or surrounded areas.</p>
Article 49 of the Geneva Convention (IV) of 1949	<p>Prohibition of the deportation of the population of the occupied territory to the territory of the occupying state or to the territory of other countries for any reason.</p> <p>Evacuation (not considered a crime) is carried out only in the presence of imperative military necessity and within the occupied territory, except when the latter is impossible for objective reasons.</p> <p>The person's home country and place of residence must be informed of such movements.</p>
Article 85(4)(a) of Additional Protocol (I) to the Geneva Conventions of 1949	<p>Prohibition of forced displacement of the population within the occupied territory.</p>
Article 78 of Additional Protocol (I) to the Geneva Conventions of 1949	<p>Temporary evacuation (not considered a crime) of children who are not citizens of the evacuating state may be carried out to a foreign country, if there are good reasons in connection with the child's state of health, the need to provide the child with appropriate treatment. Within the occupied territory, evacuation may be carried out for security reasons. Evacuation outside the occupied territory may be carried out if this cannot be absolutely avoided, and on condition that the population must be returned after the end of hostilities.</p> <p>If a parent or legal guardian can be located, written consent for evacuation must be obtained from them. If there are none, then consent must be obtained from the person who, by custom or law, bears primary responsibility for the care of the children.</p> <p>Evacuation must be agreed with the person's country of citizenship.</p> <p>The parties are obliged to take all necessary measures to avoid evacuation.</p>

Article 37 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child	Prohibition of inhuman and degrading treatment, arbitrary and illegal deprivation of liberty. (Applies to cases of children in so-called rest camps, institutional and medical facilities in Russia. Deprivation of liberty can also take place in private settings, including foster families/homes).
Article 147 of Geneva Convention (IV) of 1949, Article 85(4)(a) of Additional Protocol (I) to the Geneva Conventions of 1949, Articles 8(2)(a)(vii), 8(2)(b)(viii) of the Rome Statute, ICTY, Prosecutor v. Krnojelac, IT-97-25-T, Trial Chamber, Judgment, 15 March 2002, para 475	Deportation of the population to another state, forced transfer of the population within the occupied territory is a war crime. These provisions also exclude the creation of a forced environment that encourages the population to “voluntarily” move
Article 7(1)(d) of the Roman Statute	Large-scale or systematic deportation or forced transfer of the population within the occupied territory as part of the state policy of committing such actions is a crime against humanity.
Article 7, 36, 132 of the Geneva Convention (IV) of 1949, Article 11 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child	The parties should endeavour during the course of hostilities to conclude special agreements on repatriation, in particular, of children.
Article 85(4)(b) of the Additional Protocol (I) to the Geneva Conventions of 1949, Article 8(2)(b)(viii) of the Roman Statute	Unjustified delay in the repatriation of civilians is considered a serious violation of IHL and a war crime.

Identification and family reunification

Article 78 of the Additional Protocol (I) to the Geneva Conventions of 1949	The evacuating state and the state to which the child is evacuated must register a card with the child’s photo, his personal information and data on the child’s parents, relatives, origin, place of residence, distinguishing features, dates and place of movement, etc. The card must be sent to the ICRC Central Tracing Agency.
Article 24 of the Geneva Convention (IV) of 1949	All children under 12 must be properly identified and wear identity discs.
Article 25 of the Geneva Convention (IV) of 1949	All persons in the territory of a Party to the conflict, or in a territory occupied by it, shall be enabled to give news of a strictly personal nature to members of their families, wherever they may be, and to receive news from them.

Article 50 of the Geneva Convention (IV) of 1949	The Occupying Power shall take all necessary steps to facilitate the identification of children and the registration of their parentage.
Article 50, 136-137 of the Geneva Convention (IV) of 1949	A National Bureau should be established in the occupying state, which should take all necessary steps to identify children under its control and to establish their parents and any other relatives. It must have access to information about a person's movement. Such information should be sent from the Bureau to the country of origin, the country of residence, and the ICRC Central Tracing Agency. The Bureau should provide for the possibility of submitting an individual request to it.
Article 30, 142-143 of the Geneva Convention (IV) of 1949	Access by the ICRC and national Red Cross societies to persons protected under the Convention, including children, must be ensured.
Article 22 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child	The state is obliged to cooperate with the UN, intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations in order to find and identify the parents and relatives of the children for the purpose of their further reunification
Article 10 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child	The state that deported and separated children and parents is obliged to facilitate their reunification. This includes both the admission of the parents to the children and the provision of the opportunity for the child to leave the territory of such a state and return to the state of origin.
Article 74 of Additional Protocol (I) to the Geneva Conventions of 1949	Parties to the conflict and other parties to a treaty should facilitate in any possible way the reunification of separated families and encourage the activities of relevant humanitarian organisations.
Article 26 of the Geneva Convention IV of 1949	Each Party to the conflict shall facilitate enquiries made by members of families dispersed owing to the war, with the object of renewing contact with one another and, if possible, meeting.
Article 9 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child	If the state has deported and separated children from their families, it is obliged to provide all available information to the child's family.
Article 10 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child	Parents and their children should maintain regular contact, even if they are in different countries.
Article 8 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child	States should promote the preservation of the child's identity, including the child's name and family ties.
Position of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment №6 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child «Treatment of unaccompanied and separated children outside their country of origin» (clause 13)	States are obliged to take all necessary measures to identify children for tracing purposes and to reunite separated and unaccompanied children with their families as soon as possible.

Adoption	
Article 50 of the Geneva Convention IV of 1949	The occupying power cannot change the personal status of a child, including those children who were separated from their parents. Any support of the child by the occupying power is provided when appropriate care cannot be provided by a close relative or friend.
Article 21 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child	Adoption of a child must be in the child's best interests and carried out by competent authorities. Any adoption requires considering the status of the child in relation to the child's parents, relatives, and guardians, who, as a general rule, must give their consent to the adoption.
Article 6(e) of the Roman Statute Article 2(e) of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide	Deportation and adoption is considered a crime of genocide if: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) The children belong to a national, racial, religious or ethnic group 2) The children are persons under 18 years of age 3) There is a forcible transfer of children from the mentioned group (for example, Ukrainian nationals) to another group (for example, Russian nationals), in particular through deportation and adoption 4) It is carried out in order to destroy the group of said children by erasing their identity over time

Educational block	
Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Article 28 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child	Everyone's right to education should be ensured, and such education should be available, accessible, acceptable and adaptive. (The general idea is that there is no access to Ukrainian education for Ukrainian children, and Russian education is unacceptable for them.)
Article 27 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child	States Parties recognise the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.
Article 17 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child	The state must provide access to information and materials from various national and international sources. (The Russian Federation violates the child's right to information, because the Russian information space is quite limited and propagandistic. It does not provide for diversity of views, especially those that do not align with the line of power. The child's right to information is also violated in connection with the refusal to provide individual deported and forcibly displaced minors with information about the fate of their parents and the purpose and terms of their stay under the control of the Russian Federation.

Article 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights	Any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law.
Article 1 of the Convention against Discrimination in Education	Discrimination in the field of education on the basis of nationality is prohibited, in particular depriving a group of persons of access to education of any type or level, providing education of a lower level of quality., depriving a group of persons of access to education of any type or level, or
Article 30 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child	The child's right to use his own culture, religion and language should not be denied.
Article 29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child	A child's education should be aimed at developing respect for the child's parents, child's own cultural identity, language and values, national values of the country of child's residence and origin, as well as preparation for a conscious life in a free society in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality and friendship between all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups, as well as persons from the indigenous population.
Article 8 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child	States Parties should promote the preservation of the child's identity, including the child's nationality. If such an identity has been improperly changed, steps must be taken to quickly restore it.
Article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child	<p>States Parties recognise the right of the child to rest and leisure, the right to participate in games and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child, and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts. The child's right to comprehensive participation in cultural and creative life is respected and encouraged, and children are provided with appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural and creative activities, leisure, and recreation.</p> <p>(Children are required to join youth organisations that have a military-patriotic status. Participation in children's cultural life is limited by the cultural life of the Russian Federation.</p>
Article 14 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child	The State is obliged to respect the child's freedom of thought, conscience and religion, which also includes the child's right to choose one's own religion (especially relevant in the context of indoctrination by the Russian Orthodox Church of the Russian Federation). Moreover, States Parties must ensure that children are not punished for their religion or beliefs or that their future opportunities are not limited in any other way (compulsion to participate in Russian militarised or patriotic movements is a violation of this article).

<p>Position of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child</p> <p>General Comment №6 of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child «Treatment of unaccompanied and separated children outside their country of origin» (clause 42)</p>	<p>All unaccompanied and separated children have the right to preserve their cultural identity and values, including the preservation and development of their mother tongue.</p>
<p>Article 24 of the Geneva Convention (IV) of 1949</p>	<p>In conditions of armed conflict, the education of orphaned or separated children under the age of 15 must continue to be supported. As far as possible, such education should be carried out by persons of the same cultural tradition.</p>
<p>Article 50 of the Geneva Convention (IV) of 1949</p>	<p>The occupying power must promote the proper functioning of children’s educational institutions in cooperation with national and local authorities.</p> <p>Only if local institutions are unable to ensure the proper functioning of education, the occupying power takes measures to ensure such education provision. Whenever possible, education should be provided by persons of the same nationality, language and religion as the orphans and children separated from their parents.</p>
<p>Article 20 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child</p>	<p>If a decision is made on adoption or on another way of providing protection of the child, the continuity of the upbringing of the child must be ensured, including with regard to his ethnic, religious, cultural or linguistic background.</p>
<p>Article 70 of Additional Protocol (I) to the Geneva Conventions of 1949</p>	<p>Continuity of education of evacuated and deported children, including religious and moral education based on the wishes of their parents, must be ensured.</p>
<p>Article 7(h) of the Roman Statute</p>	<p>Crime against humanity – “Persecution”</p> <p>Large-scale or systematic interference with the fundamental rights (in particular in the context of the right to education and other rights of children) of any identified group of persons (in particular national) on a discriminatory basis within the framework of the state policy of committing such actions</p>

<p>The Prosecutor vs. Radislav Krstic, Judgement, IT-98-33-T, 02 August 2001, The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. Para 580</p>	<p>Briefly outlines the idea of so-called “cultural genocide” (it is better not to use this term), which involves an attack on the cultural or sociological characteristics of a human group with the aim of destroying those elements that give that group its own identity, distinct from the rest of the community. Such actions can be evidence of genocidal intent, for example, in the process of deportation and adoption of children, but NOT an independent act of genocide.</p>
<p>Article 2(e) of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide</p>	<p>Potential interpretation adopted by the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, but currently, there is no definition of what “transfer” is)</p> <p>The application of Russian educational standards in the occupied territory and in relation to deported Ukrainian children can be considered a crime of genocide if:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) The children belong to a national, racial, religious or ethnic group 2) The children are persons under 18 years of age 3) There is a forced transfer of children from the mentioned group (for example, Ukrainian national) to another group (for example, Russian nationals) 4) It is carried out in order to destroy the group of said children by erasing their identity over time <p>In this case, the application of Russian education leads to the same consequences as if the children of the Ukrainian national group were placed in the Russian group, since in both cases the identity of the Ukrainian group is erased, and therefore, with the passage of time, it ceases to exist. Hypothetically, we can say that the transfer can be not only physical (relocation and adoption), but also mental (due to education).</p> <p>All people have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.</p>

Cultural and National Identity

<p>Article 1 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights</p>	<p>All people have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.</p>
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APPENDIX 2: RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTING THE MILITARISATION AND POLITICAL INDOCTRINATION OF UKRAINIAN CHILDREN UNDER CONTROL OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

Title	Link
White Paper "Safeguarding Children from Forced Transfers and Deportation"	https://www.president.gov.ua/storage/j-files-storage/01/28/97/75efcd1d0be4294f9fccf191d672fad1_1724833481.pdf
White Paper "Reintegration of Children Affected by Deportation and Forcible Transfers: International Standards and Best Practices for Ukraine"	https://www.president.gov.ua/storage/j-files-storage/01/32/17/a49608e1f44b2040bd643118641cb5b3_1729839382.pdf
The Weaponization of Children. Re-education Camps	https://rchr.org.ua/en/analytics/dity-yak-zbroya-t-abory-perevyhovannya/
Methodology for assessing the implications of Ukrainian children being held under the control of the aggressor state	https://krymbezpravil.org.ua/en/analytics-en/metodolohiia-vyvchennia-vplyvu-perebuвання-ukrainskykh-ditey-pid-kontrolem-derzhavy-ahresora/
Stolen Childhood: How the Belarusian regime erases the identity of Ukrainian children through relocation, re-education and militarization	https://krymbezpravil.org.ua/en/analytics-en/vkradene-dytynstvo-iak-biloruskyy-rezhym-styraie-identychnist-ukrainskykh-ditey-cherez-peremishchennia-perevykhovannia-ta-militaryzatsiiu/
The Deportation and Forcible Transfer of Ukrainian Children from the Occupied Territories through the Prism of Change in Russian Propaganda Narratives	https://rchr.org.ua/en/analytics/the-deportation-and-forcible-transfer-of-ukrainian-children-from-the-occupied-territories-through-the-prism-of-change-in-russian-propaganda-narratives/
School Education: Hidden Weapon of the Russian Federation against Ukraine	https://krymbezpravil.org.ua/en/analytics-en/school-education-hidden-weapon-of-the-russian-federation-against-ukraine/
WAY HOME: Mechanism and policy framework for the return of illegally deported and forcibly transferred children	https://krymbezpravil.org.ua/en/analytics-en/mechanism-and-policy-framework-for-the-return-of-illegally-deported-and-forcibly-transferred-children/