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ENHANCING STATE POLICY ON THE PROTECTION OF CHILDREN'S RIGHTS DURING THE WARTIME AND POST-WAR PERIOD

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War and armed aggression generate large-scale social and humanitarian challenges, and children constitute one of the most vulnerable population groups. In Ukraine, since 2014 and especially after the full-scale invasion in 2022, thousands of children have witnessed violence, lost their parents, been forced to leave their homes, live in temporary shelters, or migrate abroad. These circumstances create an urgent need for child protection policies which cover not only physical safety but also psychological, educational, and social support.

International research shows that children exposed to armed conflict often face exploitation, violence, human trafficking, and forced labour. Internally displaced children, particularly those deprived of parental care, require round-the-clock protection, access to education, healthcare, and social and psychological services. According to UNICEF and the Council of Europe, insufficient coordination between governmental and non-governmental initiatives often results in duplicated services in some regions and complete absence in others, placing children in an extremely high-risk environment [4-7].

Ukraine has established a legislative framework aimed at protecting children's rights, including laws on social protection of children affected by armed aggression, as well as government programmes for internally displaced children. However, the effectiveness of these measures depends on proper coordination between central authorities, local governments, and international partners. Gaps in coordination, limited public awareness, and insufficient resources lead to unequal access to protection, especially during wartime and the post-war reconstruction period.

The psychological dimension is equally important. Prolonged exposure to war, fear for one's own life and the lives of loved ones, the loss of family members, and the destruction of familiar environments create chronic trauma with long-term

consequences for child development. Psychological support and rehabilitation programmes therefore become essential components of a comprehensive system of child rights protection.

In this context, attention should be paid not only to urgent humanitarian relief but also to long-term policies aimed at integrating children into normal social processes, restoring education, providing vocational training for older adolescents, and creating conditions for safe leisure and talent development.

The relevance of this study is also driven by the need to adapt international child-rights protection standards to the Ukrainian context and the specific conditions of wartime and the post-war period. Such adaptation requires a comprehensive approach combining legislative change, managerial decisions, social programmes, and international support to safeguard children's physical and mental wellbeing.

The purpose of this study is to analyse the current state of child-rights protection in Ukraine during the war and the post-war period, identify key challenges and policy gaps, and formulate practical recommendations for improving the protection system, particularly in legislative, social, psychological, and educational dimensions.

Since 2022, the full-scale armed invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation has resulted in severe humanitarian consequences. According to the United Nations Human Rights Office (OHCHR), between 24 February 2022 and 31 December 2024, 669 children were killed and more than 1,800 injured during hostilities [1]. These figures reflect only confirmed cases; actual numbers are likely significantly higher due to difficulties in data collection in occupied and high-risk areas.

Violence, destruction of infrastructure, and the devastation of schools, hospitals, and homes systematically deprive children of basic rights: to a safe environment, education, healthcare, and a normal childhood. A significant number of Ukrainian children have become internally displaced, creating the need for conditions for their adaptation, temporary housing, social protection, and psychological assistance [2].

Children who have lost parents or are unaccompanied, as well as those who have experienced violence, abuse, or trafficking, are particularly vulnerable. Human rights organizations report more than 1,200 criminal cases involving sexual violence against children during the full-scale aggression [3]. Many such incidents occur in temporarily occupied territories, where access for law enforcement, healthcare providers, and international organizations is limited.

Beyond physical harm, psychological trauma poses serious long-term risks. According to UNICEF, children experiencing prolonged conflict often suffer from anxiety, fear, depression, and post-traumatic stress, which significantly affects their development, learning, and socialization [4].

In response to these challenges, the Council of Europe launched the project "Protecting the rights of Ukrainian children during and in post-war context", aimed at strengthening systems for responding to cases of violence, sexual exploitation, and trafficking, particularly among displaced and unaccompanied children [5]. Another initiative, "Protecting the rights of Ukrainian children and ensuring child-friendly justice", focuses on reforming judicial and law-enforcement procedures to ensure

child-friendly justice, including adapted interviews, safeguards for child victims and witnesses, and professional training for mediators, psychologists, and lawyers [6].

These initiatives form an important legal, social, and humanitarian foundation. However, practical challenges remain far greater than the coverage provided by international assistance.

Major problems requiring urgent attention include:

- insufficient coverage of children affected by violence, deportation, displacement, or separation from caregivers;

- limited access to support and legal aid in frontline and de-occupied regions;

- shortages of qualified social workers, psychologists, and secure child-friendly spaces;

- difficulties with identification and documentation of affected children;

- lack of centralized databases and insufficient inter-agency coordination;

- widespread psychological trauma requiring long-term rehabilitation;

- limited resources for educational, social, and mental-health recovery programmes.

International organisations such as the Council of Europe and UNICEF recommend standardized approaches:

- implementing child-friendly justice procedures tailored to age and psychological needs [5];

- improving monitoring, documentation, and cross-institutional coordination [6];

- providing comprehensive humanitarian, psychological, educational, and reintegration support [7];

- strengthening cooperation among state authorities, NGOs, volunteers, and international partners.

Improving state policy on child-rights protection during wartime and the post-war period is therefore strategic for ensuring the safety, social protection, and development of the youngest citizens.

Ensuring comprehensive protection of children's rights during wartime and the post-war recovery period requires coordinated, systemic government action. The recommendations below summarize key policy directions and propose practical, evidence-based measures designed to strengthen the national child-protection system under conditions of armed conflict and reconstruction (Table 1).

The study demonstrated that although Ukrainian legislation partially aligns with international standards, significant gaps persist – especially in coordination, resource allocation, and long-term psychological rehabilitation. Strengthening cooperation between the state, civil society, and international partners, as well as integrating social, educational, medical, and psychological services, can substantially improve the overall system.

Table 1 Key policy recommendations for enhancing child rights protection during wartime and post-war recovery

Policy Area	Key Problem	Recommended Measures	Expected Outcome
Legal and Regulatory Framework	Gaps in legislation on children affected by war	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Update laws on the status and protection of war-affected children. • Standardize procedures for evacuation and reintegration. 	Stronger legal safeguards and unified state response mechanisms.
Government Coordination	Fragmented responsibilities among ministries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a National Coordination Center for Child Protection. • Create a unified national database of war-affected children. 	Faster decision-making and streamlined service delivery.
Social Protection	Insufficient coverage of vulnerable children with targeted assistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Automate benefit distribution. • Introduce digital child social-support cards. 	More efficient, transparent, and personalized support.
Psychological Support	Widespread trauma among children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand trauma-informed psychological service centers. • Launch online rehabilitation programs. 	Reduced PTSD prevalence and improved emotional resilience.
Education	Unequal access to quality education due to displacement and damaged infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop hybrid learning systems. • Deploy mobile educational units for frontline regions. 	Continuity and quality of education for all children.
Child Safety	High risks of injury, violence, and exploitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce mine-risk education in schools. • Mobile rapid-response teams and 24/7 hotlines. 	Decreased exposure to life-threatening risks.
Protection of Orphans and Unaccompanied Children	Increased risks of trafficking and illegal relocation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement biometric registration. • Strengthen border-crossing controls for children. 	Prevention of illegal displacement and child disappearances.
Inclusion and Accessibility	Children with disabilities lack adequate services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create modern rehabilitation centers. • Develop in-home assistance programs. 	Equal opportunities for participation and development.
Public Awareness & Engagement	Low public awareness of child-protection mechanisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National communication campaigns. • Platforms for child–state dialogue and feedback. 	Higher legal literacy and stronger public engagement.
Post-war Reconstruction	Lack of child-sensitive standards in rebuilding infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adopt “child-friendly standards” for schools, clinics, and childcare facilities. 	Safe, modern, development-focused environments for children.

Particular emphasis must be placed on combating PTSD, anxiety disorders, and social maladaptation among children. Establishing specialized centres, training teachers and psychologists, and ensuring continuous psychosocial support are essential.

The recommendations propose steps for enhancing legislation, improving inter-institutional coordination, supporting internally displaced children, restoring educational infrastructure, and preventing violence and exploitation. Continuous monitoring and evaluation are crucial for timely identification of gaps and adjusting policies based on real needs.

International cooperation and the adoption of best practices from other countries provide a solid foundation for creating an adaptive system capable of functioning effectively during and after the conflict. Use of digital tools, centralized data systems, and remote education technologies will further strengthen resilience.

Thus, improving state policy on child-rights protection must rely on a comprehensive interdisciplinary approach that includes legal, social, educational, psychological, and infrastructural measures. Only such an approach can ensure that children not only survive wartime challenges but also have opportunities for full development and successful social integration in the post-war period.

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