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THE PROBLEM OF IDENTIFYING AND DETERMINING THE REAL NUMBER OF UKRAINIAN CHILDREN WHO WERE DEPORTED FROM THE OCCUPIED TERRITORIES OF UKRAINE

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Abstract. *The article explores the problem of identifying and establishing the real number of Ukrainian children who were deported from the occupied territories of Ukraine. The main problem is the inability to determine their actual number (data range from tens to hundreds of thousands). Orphans and children deprived of parental care suffered the most. The article uses data from a study by the Yale Human Rights Laboratory (Yale HRL), which found that the forced removal of children was carried out under the leadership of the Russian President and the Ombudsman and developed a special program of forced adoption and guardianship in Russia. Since it was children of vulnerable categories, including those who were in boarding schools in the occupied territories, that were forcibly removed, the program provided for their placement among Russian citizens and/or institutions with a change in their personal data in databases or information about their alleged birth in the Russian Federation. The goal is to prevent further identification of such children and their return to Ukraine at its request, in accordance with international law. It was established that such forcibly deported children were subjected to intensive propaganda and re-education, placed in camps, which is a silent violation of their rights. Among the methods were renaming children, changing citizenship, and transferring them to permanent adoption or guardianship to Russian families. In addition, Russian psychologists and medical workers were used in the process of systemic violation of the rights of Ukrainian children.*

Key words: *deportation, children, forced displacement, best interests of the child.*

Introduction.

The full-scale invasion of the Russian Federation on the territory of Ukraine, the occupation of the regions of Ukraine, created many challenges for the citizens of Ukraine and caused the violation of their rights. One of the complex problems that needs to be solved is the deportation of children of Ukrainian citizens from the

occupied territories of Ukraine. The issue of deportation of children is highly complex and multifaceted, since it involves private and public interests: parents, children, society and the state. Thus, the topic of deportation of children is the subject of international humanitarian law, international criminal law, private international law and family and civil law at the national level.

The most problematic and complex issue in the study of the deportation of children is to find out what deportation is and whether the transfer of children of Ukrainian citizens from the occupied territories to the territory of the Russian Federation corresponds to the signs and content of deportation, which are defined by Articles 49 and 50 of the Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War (1949) [1]. There are difficulties in identifying and establishing the real number of Ukrainian children deported from the occupied territories of Ukraine.

It should also be noted that today the study of the problem of deportation of Ukrainian children has become of particular importance in the context of the qualification of crimes of the Russian Federation in connection with the recognition by the Council of Europe in 2023 of the deportation of Ukrainian children to the territory of the Russian Federation as an act of genocide [2].

At the scientific level, the problem under study remains unstudied and requires an interdisciplinary approach to a solution. The available scientific works of Ukrainian researchers (M. Sirant, S. Markin (2024) [3], O. Sushch (2024) [4], V. Dzhugan (2022) [5], I. Koval (2023) [6], T. Malanchuk (2024) [7]) mainly reveal the general problems of protecting children's rights in armed conflicts. This emphasizes the importance and relevance of the research topic.

Main text.

Their identification is essential for the return of deported children. The multilateral collaboration among the state, state bodies, volunteer organisations, and public associations contributes to collecting information on deported children, their identification, and the establishment of an accurate count. According to Ukrainian statistics (as of May 2023), more than 180 thousand Ukrainian children have been

deported from the Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics [8]. However, according to official data from law enforcement agencies, as of April 2025, only 19,546 children deported or forcibly removed by Russians from Ukraine are 19,546 [9], but the real number may reach 300 thousand [10]. Thus, even taking these data into account, the number of deported children is not in the tens of thousands. Still, in the hundreds of thousands: according to various estimates (Ukrainian statistics and foreign experts [11]), the range is 19,000-728,000.

Unfortunately, the statistics of missing persons are increasing (from 2015 to 2024, with 2231 children as of December 2025). At the same time, the number of missing persons is also increasing, from 38,454 in June 2024 to 49,206 in December 2025 [9].

However, the report of the Russian Commissioner for Children's Rights, M. Lvova-Belova, in the spring of 2023 referred to 700 thousand Ukrainian children who crossed the border with Russia. However, the text of the report by the Russian ombudsman disappeared from the official website as early as October 2023. The report noted that most of these children "arrived with their parents or legal representatives". According to Bring Kids Back UA, 744 thousand people were deported, including children [12].

Vulnerable categories of minors suffered the most, in particular, almost 4390 of them are orphans and children deprived of parental care [13]. In particular, the media has repeatedly emphasized that it is challenging to establish the real number of such children due to the lack of official data on the institutions in which such children were forcibly displaced from the occupied territories.

According to experts, the most difficult category of children to find and return is children who were in boarding schools in the occupied territories. They were hidden; their documents were replaced. Such tragic consequences are associated with the failure to promptly implement the deinstitutionalisation reform, which began in 2017, for the gradual reorganisation of residential children's institutions, as confirmed by the European Commission's report on Ukraine's compliance with the European Union's criteria [14].

The forced displacement or deportation of children from Ukraine results in the systematic, deliberate, and forced adoption of such children. The operation was initiated by Putin and his subordinates with the intent to “Russify” children from Ukraine. “Yale HRL defines Russia’s program of coerced adoption and fostering as the deportation of children from Ukraine and their subsequent placement with citizens of Russia and/or in institutions at which they are listed in Russia’s child placement databases by the explicit command of Russia’s senior federal and occupation authorities. These orders have been executed by multiple elements of the Government of the Russian Federation in close coordination with occupation officials in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts” [15]. Yale HRL has identified 314 individual children from Ukraine who have been placed in Russia’s systematic program of coerced adoption and fostering following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Among these individuals, 148 children were listed in Russia’s child placement databases, including 42 who have already been placed for adoption or guardianship, or who have had a citizen of Russia appointed as their guardian. An additional 166 children have been placed with Russian citizens. This is the largest and most comprehensive high-confidence assessment to date of the placement of children from Ukraine with citizens of Russia or listed in Russia’s databases [15; 16].

Children have been taken to at least 21 regions throughout Russia, where they were placed with citizens of Russia or placed in institutions and listed on Russia’s child placement databases. Many of them have already had their citizenship forcibly changed, and their personal data in official databases has been changed to hide their Ukrainian origin. Children assessed to be from Ukraine have been listed across three primary child placement databases in Russia as if they were born in Russia. These databases are operated by, affiliated with, and/or coordinate closely with Russia’s federal government. These databases are operated by affiliates and/or closely associated with the federal government of Russia. The children were taken out of the occupied territories, mainly from Donetsk and Luhansk regions. At least 80.4% of children from Ukraine listed in Russia’s databases have been taken from the Donetsk Oblast. 80.4% are from Donetsk. They were held in Russian institutions for months,

where they were subjected to intensive propaganda and re-education. Among the methods were renaming children, changing citizenship, and transferring them to permanent adoption or guardianship to Russian families [15].

Around 67 of the 314 children from Ukraine have been naturalised as Russian citizens since being taken to Russia. At the same time, other children in the databases may come from different Ukrainian regions, such as Zaporizhzhia, Kharkiv, and Kherson [17; 15].

«At least 208 of the 314 children identified have been placed for adoption or guardianship with citizens of Russia, have been temporarily placed with citizens of Russia, or have had a citizen of Russia appointed as their guardian. Following legal changes introduced between May 2022 and April 2023, Russian citizens who are the legal guardians of minors from Ukraine have been empowered to apply for Russian citizenship and renounce Ukrainian citizenship on the minor's behalf. Russia's system of coerced adoption and fostering has been ordered and facilitated by President Vladimir Putin and Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights in the Russian Federation Maria Lvova-Belova» [15].

K. Rashevskaya reports that the Russian media, citing the Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation, reports on 800 children with changed status (children who became orphans or whose parents were deprived of parental rights), and 78 children have already been adopted into Russian families [14; 18; 16].

Unfortunately, the Russian Federation uses medical workers as an auxiliary means of systemic violation of the rights of Ukrainian children. The occupiers continue forced "medical examinations" for children in the temporarily occupied territories in order to have grounds for the deportation of Ukrainians. After the examination, the vast majority of children are prescribed "treatment" in the Russian Federation, which parents cannot refuse, because then they are threatened with taking away parental rights. For example, since the beginning of the year, 75,000 children have been examined in the Donetsk region, and 39,000 have been taken to the Russian Federation as a result. In Luhansk region, 94,000 were "examined" and 66,000 were "diagnosed with pathology", after which they were taken away [19].

Agencies operating Russia's databases would later limit what personally identifiable information was publicly available about children in the databases. In some instances, the profiles of children from Ukraine have been retroactively amended to reflect that they were available for both guardianship and adoption, whereas they had previously been listed only for guardianship. Data with investigative significance, including profile data of children from Ukraine and Russian media reports about the transfer, has been removed at various points prior to 15 August 2024. These profile changes and content removal follow the issuance of arrest warrants by the International Criminal Court (ICC) against Vladimir Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova in March 2023. At the same time, after the arrest warrant, the Russian Federation announced that it would return the children to Ukraine when there were "safe conditions" [12]. Russia's Ministry of Education developed agreements that facilitate the placement of children from Ukraine in Russian Federation households, transferred purported orphans and children left without parental care to Russia, and operates one of Russia's federal child placement databases in which children from Ukraine were identified [15].

Summary and conclusions.

Summing up the above, we hope that the illegal criminal actions of the Russian Federation will be adequately qualified and the perpetrators will be justly punished. According to the authors, all studies and investigations of unlawful actions of representatives of the Russian authorities should be disseminated and publicised, because, unfortunately, the world community does not understand the scale of the tragedy of the full-scale invasion of the Russian Federation, which has been going on for almost four years. In the context of the studied problem of forced deportation of Ukrainian children, we emphasize the need to comprehensively inform the world community about the current state of the issue, the need to establish the real number of deported Ukrainian children, the volume of violations of their rights, in order to immediately stop such violations, ensure their protection and bring the perpetrators to justice.

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