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Ukraine: Condemning the displacement, indoctrination, and militarization of Ukrainian children by the Republic of Belarus and the Union State

**OSCE Warsaw Human Dimension Conference 2024
Plenary Session I: Humanitarian Issues I**

Freedom House continues to unambiguously condemn the Russian Federation’s illegal and ongoing full-scale war against Ukraine and its occupation of Ukrainian territories. We firmly stand with Ukraine and its allies in stating that Russia has no legitimate claim to the sovereign Ukrainian territory of Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia regions, and Crimea.

Today, Freedom House sounds the alarm over the displacement of Ukrainian children from these territories and denounces the active involvement of the Republic of Belarus and the Union State of Russia and Belarus in this crime. We also condemn the insidious role of Belarusian GONGOS in aiding the regime and Union State in their crimes. The Russian Federation has been displacing Ukrainian children from occupied territories since its illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014. The Belarusian regime and Union State have allowed it to intensify this practice.

Freedom House is grateful for the diligent work of its partners the Ukrainian civil society organizations the ZMINA Human Rights Information Center (ZMINA) and the Regional Center for Human Rights (RCHR), as well as independent Belarusian civil society organizations in exile, *Viasna* and BELPOL, in investigating and exposing these egregious crimes against Ukraine’s most vulnerable citizens. Our joint investigation, which we will publish on October 4, reveals that the Belarusian regime, Union State, and Belarusian GONGOs, such as the Aliaksei Talai Foundation, are guilty of not only displacing Ukrainian children, but also of their systematic indoctrination and militarization. Over 2,000 Ukrainian children have been subjected to this treatment.

Displaced Ukrainian children are being brainwashed through the Belarusian educational system and so-called “cultural programs.” By enrolling them in Belarusian schools where the language of instruction is Russian and where the curriculum promotes Russian propaganda narratives, and by forcing children to participate in “cultural” activities in which political, religious, and cultural figures tell them that they are, in fact, Russian, the Belarusian regime is violating these Ukrainian children’s right to identity and nationality. This deplorable policy of re-education is inextricably linked to the Russian Federation’s broader attempt to eradicate Ukrainian national and cultural identity.

Freedom House also condemns the militarization of Ukrainian children by Belarusian authorities and entities acting on their behalf. The Lukashenka regime actively forces Ukrainian children to meet with members of military units, military-patriotic clubs, and law enforcement who teach them how to use weapons and reinforce Russian propaganda narratives.

Furthermore, Freedom House deplores the exploitation of displaced Ukrainian children in Belarusian and Russian propaganda. The regimes and their agents force

Ukrainian children to feature in videos, broadcast on the news and across social media, aimed at justifying and legitimizing the crimes committed against them. State journalists subject them to leading questions and force them to recollect and re-enact [traumatic events](#), often bringing them to tears. Such videos completely disregard the children’s privacy, with some [mentioning](#) their real name and surname, as well as other personal data.

Freedom House calls for the personal accountability of three key Belarusian and Russian officials for these crimes against Ukrainian children:

- Aleksandr Lukashenko, self-proclaimed president of Belarus.
- Dmitry Mezentsev, State Secretary of the Union State.
- Mikhail Mishustin, Prime Minister of the Russian Federation and Chairman of the Union State’s Council of Ministers.

We also call attention to the complicity of former Belarusian paralympic athlete Aliaksei Talai and his namesake foundation. He and the named government officials are the architects of the Republic of Belarus and Union State’s displacement, indoctrination, and militarization of Ukrainian children. Their crimes must not go unpunished.

The systematic displacement, indoctrination, and militarization of Ukrainian children demands further international outcry and condemnation. Freedom House calls on OSCE participating States and OSCE institutions to shine further light on these human rights abuses and pursue justice for the victims. In addition, we urge the following actions.

Freedom House calls on **OSCE participating States** to:

- Join us in urging the International Criminal Court (ICC) to open a preliminary examination of the Russian and Belarusian regimes’ systematic re-education and militarization of Ukrainian children, as well as to issue arrest warrants for Aleksandr Lukashenko, Aliaksei Talai, Mikhail Mishustin, and Dmitry Mezentsev. Should these warrants be issued, we would discourage OSCE participating States from inviting any of these individuals for official visits.
- Impose targeted sanctions against Russian and Belarusian individuals and entities behind these coordinated efforts, as well as harmonize sectoral sanctions against Russia and Belarus, given the Lukashenko regime’s complicity and participation in Putin’s full-scale invasion Ukraine.
- Support the creation of a unified, independent database for the collection of evidence pertaining to the crimes of the aforementioned Belarusian, Russian, and Union State officials, as well as of the representatives of organizations cooperating with them.
- Highlight in diplomatic engagements and international forums the Belarusian regime’s complicity and active participation in the Kremlin’s ongoing efforts to eradicate Ukrainian children’s national and cultural identity.
- Publicly (re)affirm the principles behind the fourth point of Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s [Peace Formula](#), which calls on Russia to release of all prisoners and deportees that it has taken from Ukraine.
- Urge the Russian Federation to implement the recommendation of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.
- In coordination with the Government of Ukraine, consider joining and additional government members for the *International Coalition for the Return of Ukrainian Children*.
- Pursue the establishment of a formal international mechanism, whether through the UN or another international body, to systematically return Ukrainian children.