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RUSSIA'S SYSTEMATIC PROGRAM FOR  
THE RE-EDUCATION & ADOPTION  
*of* UKRAINE'S CHILDREN

A CONFLICT OBSERVATORY REPORT  
Yale SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH  
*Humanitarian Research Lab*

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Cover image “Maria Lvova-Belova brought children from Donetsk People’s Republic to Russia,” Kremlin Executive Office, October 7, 2022. Source link CC0302 has been withheld due to protection concerns.

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# 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## 1.a. Introduction

Russia's federal government is operating a large scale, systematic network of camps and other facilities that has held at least 6,000 children from Ukraine within Russia-occupied Crimea and mainland Russia during the past year. The roles played by forty-three (43) facilities have been identified and their locations have been subsequently verified at the time of this report. These findings are based on a conservative reading of data confirmed to date and released due to the concerning nature of the trends identified. Additional data analyzed by Yale HRL suggests that the total numbers of facilities and children being held are likely significantly higher than can be reported at this time. Further investigation is ongoing.

These facilities appear to serve a range of purposes, including what Yale HRL terms 're-education,' an effort to ostensibly make children more pro-Russia in their personal and political views. Some installations are in Siberia and along Russia's far eastern Pacific coast. Four categories of children appear in this system:

1. Children who have parents or clear familial guardianship;
2. Children deemed to be orphans by Russia;
3. Children who were under the care of Ukrainian state institutions prior to the February 2022 invasion (often due to severe physical or mental disabilities); and
4. Children whose custody is unclear or uncertain due to wartime circumstances caused by the February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia.<sup>1</sup>

Children with clear guardianship status predating the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine by Russia appear primarily targeted for re-education camps and similar facilities. Both those purported to be orphans and those who were residents of state institutions appear mostly targeted for deportation to Russia's territory for adoption and/or placement in foster care. Many children taken to camps are sent with the consent of their parents for an agreed duration of days or weeks and returned to their parents as originally scheduled.

Other children have been held for months at these camps, including hundreds of children whose status is unknown; at the time of this report, it is unclear if they have been returned to their families. This report has identified two camps where children's scheduled return date has been delayed by weeks. At two other camps identified, children's returns have been indefinitely postponed.

The separation of children from their parents for indefinite periods documented in this report, even if initial consent for their temporary relocation during an

armed conflict was originally obtained, can constitute a violation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Some of the alleged actions of Russia's federal government and its proxies detailed in this report, such as unnecessarily expediting the adoption and fostering of children from Ukraine during the current emergency, could constitute a potential war crime and crime against humanity in some cases.

This report is the result of an investigation by the Yale School of Public Health's Humanitarian Research Lab (Yale HRL), a member of the Conflict Observatory, which is a project of the US State Department's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations. The findings of this report represent the most detailed public accounting to date of what has happened to Ukraine's children sent to these camps and other relevant facilities since 24 February 2022.

## 1.b. Key Findings

- **More than 6,000 children in Russia’s custody:** Yale HRL has collected information about at least 6,000 children from Ukraine ages four months to 17 years who have been held at camps and other facilities since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Arrivals to these facilities began in February 2022; the most recent transfers occurred in January 2023. The total number of children is not known and is likely significantly higher than 6,000.
- **At least 43 facilities in network:** The network spans at least 43 facilities identified by Yale HRL, 41 of which are pre-existing summer camps in Russia-occupied Crimea and Russia. Among the camps, 12 are clustered around the Black Sea, 7 are in occupied Crimea, and 10 are clustered around the cities of Moscow, Kazan, and Yekaterinburg. Eleven of the camps are located over 500 miles from Ukraine’s border with Russia, including two camps in Siberia and one in Russia’s Far East. The exact number of facilities is likely significantly higher than the 43 identified in this report. Yale HRL identified two facilities associated with the deportation of orphans: a psychiatric hospital and a family center.
- **Network of children’s facilities stretches from one end of Russia to the other:** The furthest camp this investigation identifies is in Magadan oblast in Russia’s Far East near the Pacific Ocean, approximately 3,900 miles from Ukraine’s border with the Russian Federation. The camp in Magadan is roughly three times closer to the United States than it is to the border of Ukraine.
- **Primary purpose of the camps appears to be political re-education:** At least 32 (78%) of the camps identified by Yale HRL appear engaged in systematic re-education efforts that expose children from Ukraine to Russia-centric academic, cultural, patriotic, and/or military education. Multiple camps endorsed by the Russian Federation are advertised as “integration programs”, with the apparent goal of integrating children from Ukraine into the Russian government’s vision of national culture, history, and society.<sup>2</sup>
- **Children from two of the camps have been placed with Russian foster families:** Yale HRL identified at least two camps that hosted children alleged to be orphans who were later placed with foster families in Russia. Twenty children from these camps were reported to have been placed with families in Moscow oblast and enrolled in local schools there.<sup>3</sup>
- **Consent is collected under duress and routinely violated:** Consent gathered from parents for their child to attend a camp included signing over power of attorney in some cases, including to an unnamed agent. Other parents allege that the specific elements of the consent they gave were violated, such as the term of stay and procedures for reuniting with their children. Still other parents allegedly refused to allow their children to go to camps but were ignored by camp organizers who enrolled the children in camps regardless. In many cases, the ability of parents to provide meaningful consent may be considered doubtful, as the conditions of war and implicit threat from occupying forces represent conditions of duress.
- **Children’s returns from at least four camps have been suspended:** In approximately 10% of camps identified by Yale HRL, children’s return to Ukraine was allegedly suspended. At two camps, Artek and Medvezhonok, children’s returns were suspended indefinitely according to parents. Medvezhonok is one of the largest camps identified, at one point hosting at least 300 children from Ukraine. Officials there originally told the children’s parents they would return at the end of summer, but later rescinded the date of return. Hundreds of children from Ukraine from at least two other camps, Luchisty and Orlyonok, have been or are being held past their scheduled date of return; Yale HRL has been unable to identify how many of these children have been reunited with their parents. Parents also described being unable to get information about their child’s status or whereabouts after their return has been suspended. It is unknown how many of Ukraine’s children Russia currently holds and how many have been released to their families.
- **All levels of Russia’s government are involved:** This operation is centrally coordinated by Russia’s federal government and involves every level of government. Yale HRL has identified several dozen federal, regional, and local figures directly engaged in operating and politically justifying the program. Activities of officials allegedly implicated in the operation include logistical coordination (i.e., transporting children), raising funds, collecting supplies, direct camp management, and promoting the program within Russia and occupied areas of Ukraine. At least 12 of these individuals are not on U.S. and/or international sanction lists at the time of this report.

## 1.c. Background on children's camp system

Russia began to systematically transport children from Ukraine into Russia days before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine began. These first transports of children in early February 2022 included a group of 500 purported orphans 'evacuated' from Donetsk oblast by Russia. The reason given publicly by Russia's government at the time was the supposed threat of an offensive by the Ukrainian armed forces against the so-called Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LPR).<sup>4</sup> Like other groups of orphans that would later be brought to Russia after the full-scale invasion, some were adopted by families in Russia.<sup>5</sup> By early March, additional groups of children would depart Ukraine for camps in Russia under the auspices of free recreational trips.<sup>6</sup>

Three dominant state-coordinated narratives appear for systematically moving children from Ukraine into Russia:

1. **'Evacuation' of orphans and state wards from Ukrainian facilities** controlled by Russia after February 2022 and from facilities that had already been under the control of Russia-aligned proxies before the invasion;
2. **Transfer of children to camps**, often with the initial consent of parents and guardians; and
3. **Movement of children to Russia for supposed medical care**, including children residing in Ukraine's state facilities prior to February 2022 that came under Russia's control.

The camps and other facilities holding children from Ukraine are part of a system centrally coordinated by officials of Russia's federal government. The management of these facilities and the logistics chains that support them fall to regional and local officials supported by members of Russia's civil society and private sector. Russia's President Vladimir Putin personally appointed many of the figures involved in this program and publicly supports their efforts.

The apparent leader of this multi-faceted operation at the federal level is Maria Lvova-Belova, the Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights in the Russian Federation. She is currently sanctioned by the United States for her involvement in these activities.<sup>7</sup> In January 2023, President Putin directed Commissioner Lvova-Belova to "take additional measures to identify minors" living in the occupied territories "left without parental care, and to promptly provide them with state social assistance, as well as to provide such persons with social support established by the legislation of the Russian Federation."<sup>8</sup> Additionally, in his New Year's speech, Putin thanked Russia's citizens for sending "children from the new subjects of the Russian Federation" on holidays.<sup>9</sup>

Russia-aligned officials have been bringing Ukraine's children from Russia- and proxy-occupied areas to summer camps in Russia's territory since 2014.<sup>10</sup> Some of the same facilities that have hosted children since 2014 continue to host children brought to Russia since February 2022.<sup>11</sup> Current operations, however, differ in their express purpose, apparent geographic scale, indeterminate duration, logistical complexity, breadth of official involvement, and the number of children involved. Since February 2022, Russia and its proxies expanded the promotion of 'camp holidays' in Russia and Russia-occupied Crimea to newly occupied territories. Statements made by high-level regional officials make clear that these camp programs are designed to "integrate" children from newly occupied territories into Russian life and to enforce a version of Russia's history, culture, and society that serves the political interests of Russia's government.<sup>12</sup> In some cases, children also undergo military training.<sup>13</sup> (See Section 2.)

"Giving [Ukraine's children Russian] nationality or having them adopted goes against the fundamental principles of child protection in situations of war... **This is something that is happening in Russia and must not happen.**"

- Filippo Grande  
UN High Commissioner for Refugees

In the cases of both individuals deemed orphans by Russia and children residing in state institutions, a Russia-appointed institutional authority or a higher-level occupation authority directs the transfer of Ukraine's children to Russia-occupied Crimea or Russia.<sup>14</sup> In at least one case, children whose custody status was unknown were transferred to Russia's territory for foster care and possible adoption.<sup>15</sup> Many of these transfers are coordinated by federal officials and conducted in concert with Russia's regional leaders and proxy authorities. Children have been transported by bus, train, commercial aircraft, and, in at least one case, by Russia's Aerospace Forces.<sup>16</sup> Alleged orphans and other children from Ukraine's state institutions are sometimes temporarily housed at camps and so-called family centers as waypoints during transit.<sup>17</sup>

The government of Ukraine and senior human rights officials at the United Nations have raised alarms about these activities for nearly a year. In June 2022, Ukraine's then-prosecutor general Iryna Venediktova told journalists, "From the first days of the war, we started this case about genocide.... That's why this

forcible transfer of children is very important for us.”<sup>18</sup> The then-UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet similarly told the Security Council in June 2022 that the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) was investigating alleged plans for the forcible deportation of Ukraine’s children to Russia, “which do not appear to include steps for family reunification or respect the best interests of the child.”<sup>19</sup> In September 2022, the UN Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights, Ilze Brands Kehris, told the UN Security Council that he had seen “...credible accusations that Russia’s forces have sent Ukrainian children to Russia for adoption as part of a larger-scale forced relocation and deportation programme.”<sup>20</sup> On 27 January 2023, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi said, “Giving [Ukraine’s children Russian] nationality or having them adopted goes against the fundamental principles of child protection in situations of war...This is something that is happening in Russia and must not happen.” He added that his office was unable to estimate the number of Ukraine’s children put up for adoption in Russia because of the limited access that is allowed: “We are seeking access all the time, and access has been rather rare, sporadic and not unfettered, if you see what I mean.”<sup>21</sup>

## 1.d. Methodology

The investigative methodology for this report relies on extensive open source research. This process includes aggregating and cross-verifying multiple sources to understand the system of relocations, camps, re-education, adoptions, and foster placements. Facilities that allegedly host children from Ukraine were identified through social media posts, government announcements and publications, and news reports. The locations of these camps and related facilities were then geolocated by referencing photographs, videos, and descriptions of children from Ukraine at the location against reference photographs on the camp’s website or user-generated photographs on mapping sites (e.g., Yandex Maps). Information about the activities at these sites and the experiences of children and parents was also collected, analyzed, and verified by multiple researchers. Each location and thematic claim required independent concurrence by at least two researchers to be included in this report. Specifically collected Very High-Resolution (VHR) satellite imagery was used to verify and corroborate those claims through the identification of relevant visible components, such as activity at a location during a relevant period.

Those who facilitate this system were often clearly identified in open source material gathered through the above steps. In many cases the information connecting officials, camp administrators, and civil society and private sector actors to camps represents *prima facie* evidence of their involvement. Many officials celebrate their involvement in social media posts, give interviews

to Russian media outlets, or pose in photographs with children from Ukraine at camps and facilities in territory under Russia’s control. When officials do not implicate themselves in this program through their own words, multiple credible sources are required to verify their involvement.

The methodology used for this report has the distinct advantage of collecting data not initially intended for researchers, prosecutors, or others documenting alleged abuses. This methodology has limitations. Yale HRL explicitly relies on open source information to do its work and does not conduct interviews with witnesses or victims. When analysts are unable to identify whether a child had returned home, it can be difficult to determine who has custody of the child through open source means alone. The 43 facilities identified in this report represent only those for which data were available to establish their locations and the presence of Ukraine’s children to sufficient confidence at the time of publication. (See *Appendix I for further detail on methodology and limitations.*) Further investigation is ongoing.

Similarly, the public’s limited access to these facilities and the children from Ukraine held there results in specific information about conditions and activities in the camps coming largely from the officials overseeing the system. Information that casts these activities negatively is unlikely to be reported by these officials. The experiences of children who have either been returned to their families or retrieved from the camps by loved ones are sometimes shared publicly by their families, but these cases are understandably rare. Many families in Ukraine do not want to publicly share their experiences because they fear they will be seen as collaborators with Russia. Those living under Russia’s occupation may likewise not report mistreatment due to fear of reprisals from Russia’s forces. Certain especially sensitive subjects, such as sexual and gender-based violence, are likely to be routinely underreported because of cultural stigma and the risk of retaliation.

All open source materials in Ukrainian or Russian were initially translated using Google or DeepL and subsequently verified by a language expert. Names of camps in Russia are transliterated, rather than translated, from the Russian.

## 1.e. Legal analysis and recommendations

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) passed UNSC Resolution 1261 in 1999, which details six grave violations against children during armed conflict.<sup>22</sup> These six grave violations are derived from accepted instruments and bedrock principles of international humanitarian law, international human rights law, and international juris prudence, including the Four Geneva Conventions and their additional protocols, the Rome Statute, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.<sup>23</sup> Grave violation 5 is the abduction of children by either state or non-state actors during both interstate and intrastate warfare.<sup>24</sup> The United Nations' 2013 edition of its working paper on the legal foundation of the six grave violations explains why child abduction during armed conflict constitutes a grave violation:

Abducting or seizing children against their will or the will of their adult guardians either temporarily or permanently and without due cause, is illegal under international law. It may constitute a grave breach of the Geneva Conventions and in some circumstances amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity.<sup>25</sup>

The alleged actions of the Russian Federation since its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 can constitute the grave violation of child abduction during armed conflict. The rushed adoption and rehoming of children in emergency conditions, transferring children across international borders unnecessarily, holding children incommunicado from their families, prolonged custody of children, even if eventually temporary, without express parental consent in each case, and political indoctrination and (in some cases) military training of minors may all constitute potential violations of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Geneva Conventions.<sup>26</sup>

At present, Russia should be considered in breach of its obligations under multiple international treaties and instruments to which it is party. Russia can easily and quickly take the following four steps to move towards compliance with international humanitarian and human rights law related to the treatment of children during armed conflict:

- Russia must create a registry of all children from Ukraine currently in its custody and share it with the Government of Ukraine and all relevant inter-governmental organizations responsible for child protection and the restoration of family links.
- All Ukrainian children in Russia or Russia-occupied territory separated from their parents or legal guardians must be given the ability to immediately communicate with family members of their choosing.

- Adoptions and other forms of rehoming Ukraine's children by Russia and its proxies must be stopped immediately. All adoption records, court decisions, and other relevant documents generated by the Russian government related to Ukraine's children from the start of 2022 to the present should be shared with appropriate inter-governmental authorities at once.
- A neutral inter-governmental organization must be granted immediate and free access by Russia to the sites identified within this report and other facilities at which children from Ukraine are being held inside Russia and Russia-occupied territory to meet with the children held there and conduct unhindered inspections of the facilities.

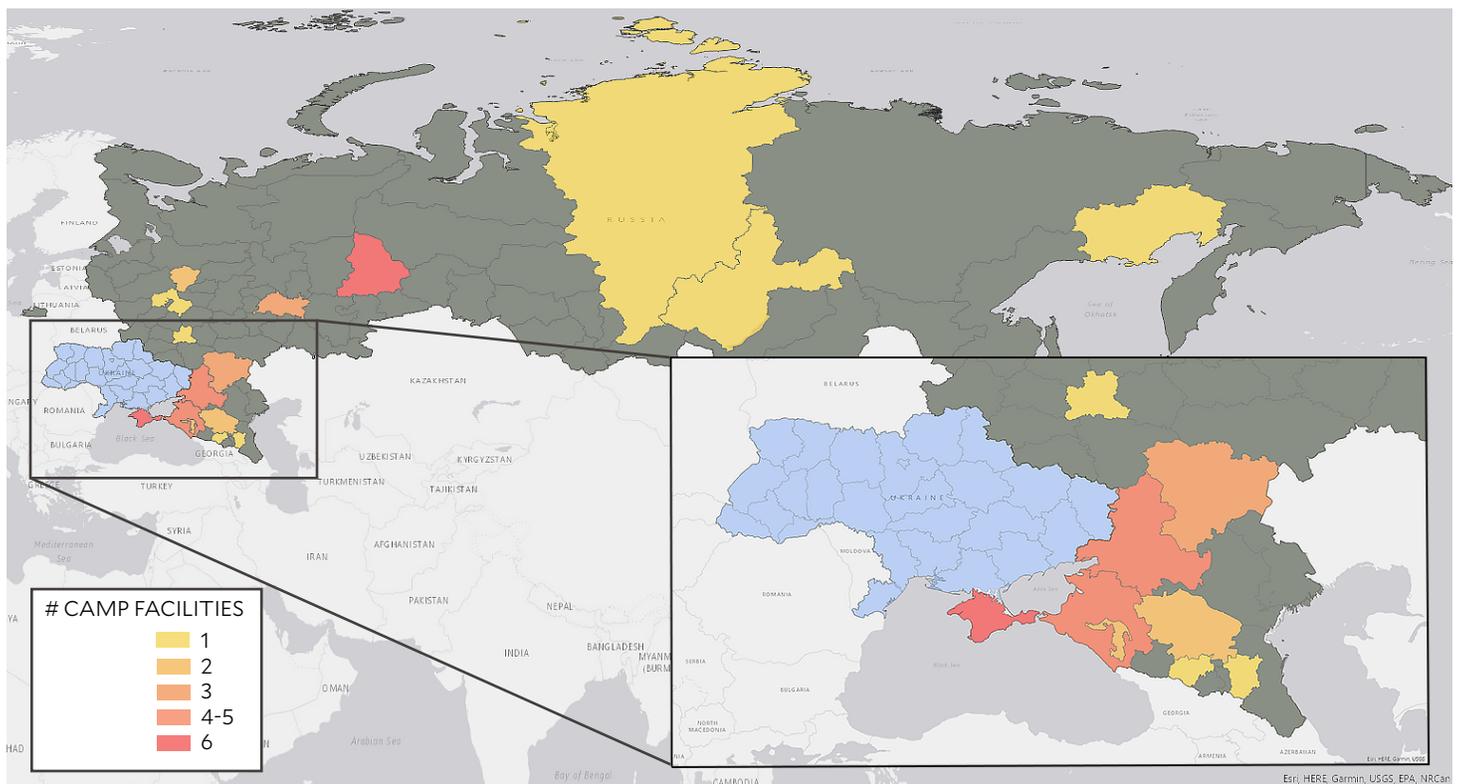
## 2. LOGISTICS & CONCERNING TRENDS WITHIN THE CAMP SYSTEM

All the camps analyzed by Yale HRL were hosted on pre-existing campgrounds and establishments, many of which are located near the Black Sea. Among the 41 camps included in this analysis, 7 camps are in Russia-occupied Crimea and 34 are in mainland Russia. The furthest camp identified was in Magadan, nearly 4,000 miles from Ukraine's border with Russia. In most cases, children from Ukraine living in the same region travel together to the camps. In many cases, but not all, a group's destination is determined by which region of the Russian Federation has taken patronage over that location (see *Section 3 for more on patronage*). Three camp locations analyzed in this dataset were still active as of December 2022 and at least one site was active in January 2023.<sup>27</sup> In addition to 41 camp facilities, HRL also identified a psychiatric hospital in Russia-occupied Crimea and a family center in Moscow oblast to which children with disabilities and allegedly orphaned children were deported, respectively. Given President Putin's empowerment of Commissioner Lvova-Belova to "take additional measures" regarding children in newly occupied territories, it seems likely that deportation of orphaned children and programming for Ukraine's children in Russia's territory will continue.<sup>28</sup>

### NUMBERS TO WATCH

- **1000+** "ORPHANS" PENDING ADOPTION
- **350** OF UKRAINE'S CHILDREN ALREADY RE-HOMED
- **14,700** OF UKRAINE'S CHILDREN OFFICIALLY DOCUMENTED AS "DEPORTED"
- **126** DEPORTED CHILDREN RETURNED TO UKRAINE (JAN 2023)
- ACTUAL ESTIMATE: CLOSER TO **SEVERAL HUNDRED THOUSAND** CHILDREN DISPLACED OR DEPORTED

FIG 1 | Russia's system of re-education camps and adoption



## 2.a. How and why children are transported to Russia and Russia-occupied territory

Children from Ukraine are typically transported to Russia or Russia-occupied Crimea for four claimed reasons:

1. To attend nominally ‘recreational’ camps;
2. For ostensible **evacuation** from fighting in frontline areas;
3. For apparent **medical evacuation**; or
4. For **adoption** by or placement with **foster** families in Russia.

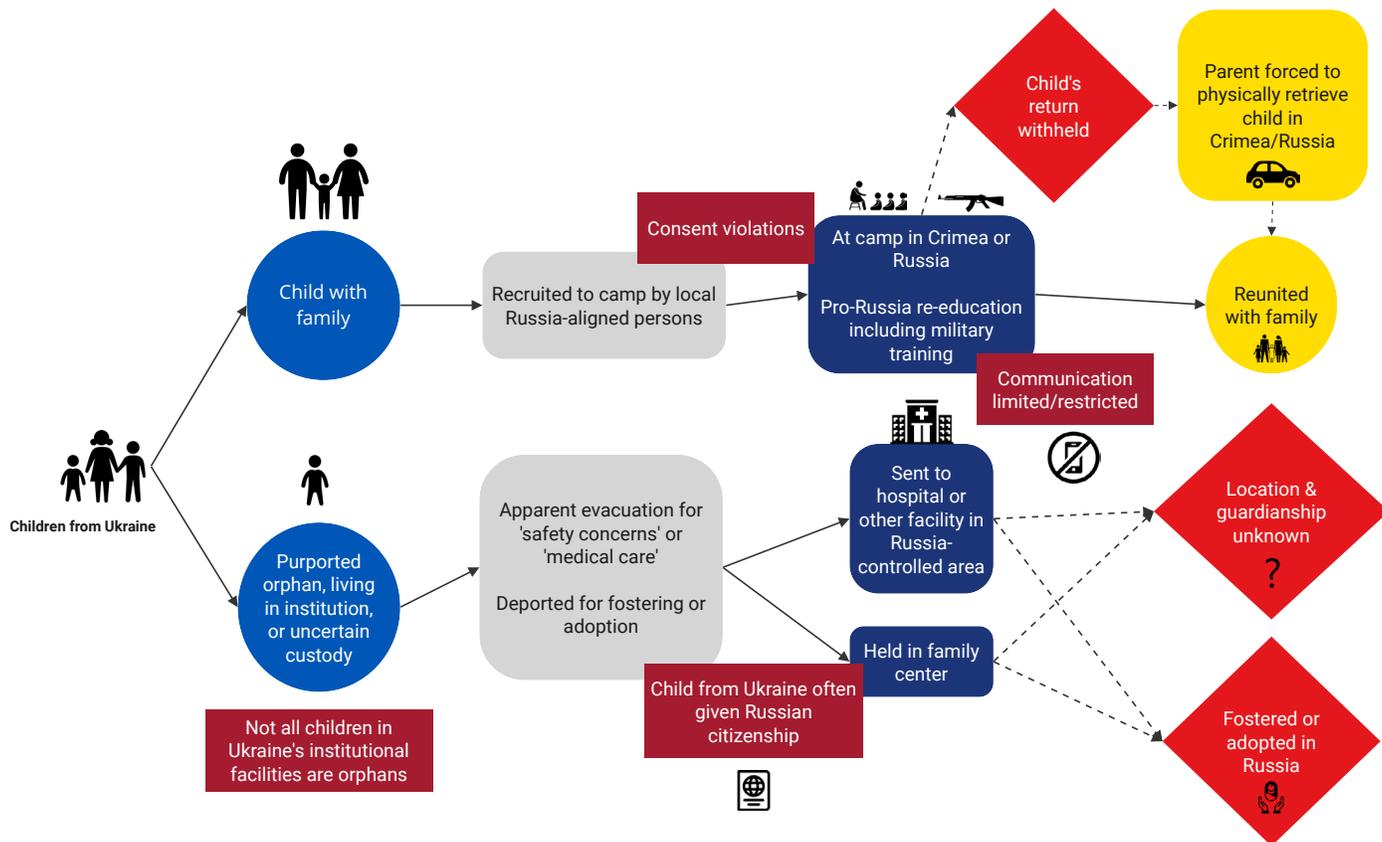
The exact number of children who have been transported to Russia for the reasons mentioned above is unknown. In January 2023, Russia claimed that 728,000 children had arrived in Russia since February 2022; this estimate likely includes children who evacuated into Russia with their families.<sup>29</sup>

As of 26 January 2023, Ukraine’s government had collected reports of over 14,700 children classified as “deported” to Russia.<sup>30</sup> The government portal does not specify whether these children were unaccompanied or under what circumstances they went to Russia. Ukraine’s Presidential Commissioner for the Rights of the Child and Child Rehabilitation has stated that this database consists only of “documented cases” where the child’s full name and date of birth are known.<sup>31</sup> “These are children who, according to the statements of their parents, friends and relatives, were recognized

as forcibly deported or displaced.”<sup>32</sup> However, these numbers represent only the cases that have been officially documented and reported; the government of Ukraine estimates that the actual number is “several hundred thousand.”<sup>33</sup>

In summer 2022 Commissioner Lvova-Belova claimed that 350 “orphans” had been adopted from Russia-occupied Donetsk and Luhansk and “over a thousand” were awaiting adoption.<sup>34</sup> However, not all children in Ukraine’s orphanages are necessarily orphans: Ukraine informed the United Nations prior to the invasion that the majority of children of the state “are not orphans, have no serious illness or disease and are in an institution because their families are in difficult circumstances.”<sup>35</sup> According to official statistics published by the Ukrainian government, as of late January 2023 Ukraine has recovered only 126 of the “deported” children.<sup>36</sup> The United States estimated in October that Russia’s authorities have taken 260,000 children from Ukraine to Russia.<sup>37</sup> These numbers do not specify how many of the total number of Ukraine’s children in Russia are at or have been to camps. Russia’s first Deputy Minister of Education announced in October 2022 that 22,000 children from Donbas stayed in camps in Russia during summer 2022 and 5,000 more from Kherson oblast would visit camps in the fall.<sup>38</sup> The so-called DPR reported in November 2022 that over 18,000 children from the

**FIG 2 | A child’s journey through Russia’s system of re-education camps and adoption**



region had gone to camps that year with the support of Russia's federal government.<sup>39</sup>

## 2.A.I. SUPPOSED RECREATION CAMPS

Yale HRL found that children from temporarily occupied areas of Ukraine have been sent to 'recreation' camps in Russia since February 2022, including children from Zaporizhzhia, Kharkiv, Kherson, Donetsk, and Luhansk oblasts. Yale HRL found no data to suggest that any families paid for their children's trips; it appears that all camps analyzed in this dataset were provided completely free of charge to children from Ukraine, often funded by Russia's regional governments (see *Section 3 below*). Parents and children in Ukraine became aware of these recreational camps through Russia-appointed occupation authorities, local teachers, and Russia's soldiers.<sup>40</sup> In several cases, officials persuaded or pressured parents who were reluctant to send their children to Russia.<sup>41</sup>

Parents from Ukraine cited many reasons for sending their children to Russia-sponsored camps. Many of these parents are low-income and wanted to take advantage of a free trip for their child.<sup>42</sup> Some hoped to protect their children from ongoing fighting, to send them somewhere with intact sanitation, or to ensure they had nutritious food of the sort unavailable where they live.<sup>43</sup> Other parents simply wanted their child to be able to have a vacation.<sup>44</sup> While the majority of parents appeared to give their consent for their child to attend a camp, that consent may not be meaningful in many cases (see *Section 2(b)(iv)*). Children are taken to the camps in groups by bus, train, and commercial planes. Several camps were located thousands of miles away, so some groups of children have been required to take multiple modes of transportation. Children attending a camp in Magadan in Russia's Far East were required to travel by bus, train, and two flights.<sup>45</sup> Once at the camps, some children from Ukraine are not returned in the agreed-upon timeframe and are unable to contact their parents. Some parents are not notified when their children's return is suspended and, in numerous cases, parents who were able to regain custody had to make the difficult and dangerous journey to the camp to retrieve their children in person.<sup>46</sup> (See subsection below on suspended returns.)

## 2.A.II. RUSSIA'S DESIGNATION OF ORPHANS

Children who are deemed orphans by Russia's authorities are taken from Ukraine's territory for various reasons, often being 'evacuated' for claimed safety concerns which may or may not be true. It is important to note that there are allegations that not all the children deemed "orphans" by Russia and its proxy officials are in fact orphans; the government of Ukraine told the United Nations before the invasion that some children in Ukraine's orphanages "are not orphans, have no serious illness or disease and are in an institution because their families are in difficult circumstances."<sup>47</sup>

During one evacuation, hundreds of children from orphanages and boarding houses were transported from already-occupied areas of Russia-occupied Donetsk and Luhansk oblast in the week prior to the full-scale invasion.<sup>48</sup> Some of those children stayed at camps and were later fostered by families in Russia.<sup>49</sup>

Another group of more than 50 alleged orphans ranging in age from nine months to five years was taken from Donetsk oblast to Moscow oblast via a Russian Aerospace Forces plane accompanied by Commissioner Lvova-Belova in October 2022.<sup>50</sup> According to the Kremlin, the head of the so-called DPR "requested their evacuation to safe areas of the country", claiming that "some [children] need lifesaving assistance and rehabilitation," and stipulating that children's placement with families in Russia would be made following their medical examinations.<sup>51</sup>

### WHY SEND KIDS TO CAMP?

- Protection from fighting
- Access to intact sanitation
- Regular access to nutritious food unavailable at home
- A break their families could not afford



### REST FOR CHRONIC ILLNESS

One mother sent her daughter to Medvezhonok because she has a chronic illness and seizures; she wanted her daughter to have a rest. Once her daughter's return was stopped, the mother got the phone number for the camp director through her daughter.

The director told the mother that her daughter would not be returned to Ukraine.

In a separate instance, the Russia-appointed director of a home for children with disabilities in Kherson oblast transferred the children from this home to Russia-occupied Crimea or further into Russia-occupied territory. These children with disabilities were transported in two stages: first more than a dozen children were sent to a psychiatric hospital in Russia-occupied Crimea, allegedly for treatment; the remaining children were transported further into Russia-occupied territory, allegedly to protect them from fighting.<sup>52</sup> There are no indications in open source reporting that, in the latter case, Russia's proxies sought opportunities to evacuate the children to Ukraine-controlled territory or to return them to Ukraine's care after Ukraine's forces retook the area.

In September, President Putin ordered mandatory medical examinations for all children in occupied territories, which some activists worry could provide justification for detaining children in Russia for alleged medical reasons.<sup>53</sup>

## 2.b. Experiences of children in the camps

Many of the children who have attended these camps appear to return to their families when scheduled. However, there have been a significant number of children across multiple camps whose return has been suspended. Communication between parents, children, and camp administrators has been restricted and limited in some camps. Additionally, Yale HRL has documented a crisis related to parents' ability to meaningfully consent to their children's involvement in these camps (see *Section 2(b)(iii)*). Additionally, Yale HRL has found that 78% of the camps included an identified component of Russia-aligned re-education, which at times included military training.

### 2.B.I. SUSPENDED RETURNS

Multiple groups of children attending the 'recreational' camps did not return home at the end of their scheduled camp term.<sup>54</sup> Yale HRL confirmed that four camps in Russia-occupied Crimea and Krasnodar Territory suspended returns. Safety concerns and ongoing hostilities in Ukraine were cited as reasons for delay in all four camps, one of which specified that Ukraine's liberation of Kherson compelled them to suspend the children's return.<sup>55</sup> Three hundred (300) children from Ukraine at Medvezhonok were also prevented from returning home after Ukraine's forces liberated Kharkiv oblast.<sup>56</sup> Another camp, which housed children from both Russia and Ukraine in February 2022, allowed the children from Russia to return home but held the children from Ukraine for additional camp shifts at the directive of an authority of the so-called DPR for alleged safety reasons following Russia's full-scale invasion.<sup>57</sup>

#### WHEN CHILDREN DO NOT COME HOME: MEDVEZHONOK CAMP

- **300** children from Ukraine were stopped from going home after Ukraine's forces liberated Kharkiv oblast.
- A camp official told a boy from Ukraine that his return home was conditional: he would go home if Russia re-captured Izyum.
- Another boy was told he could not go home due to his "pro-Ukrainian views."

Reports suggest that there is a significant lack of communication between parents and camp officials when delays occur. Multiple reports from parents whose children were delayed at one of the camps reveal that parents were not directly informed about the delays. Parents found out about the delays through phone conversations with their children, word of mouth, and local news outlets.<sup>58</sup> After Ukraine's forces liberated their region, one group of parents contacted the camp officials only to be told that the camp would not be returning their children.<sup>59</sup> After calling the camp director, one mother was allegedly told that children could not be returned because, "There is war there."<sup>60</sup> There is little information on the explanation given to children regarding the delay. An official at the Medvezhonok camp told a boy from Ukraine that his return was conditional: the children would only be returned if Russia re-captured the town of Izyum.<sup>61</sup> Another boy was told he wouldn't be returning home due to his "pro-Ukrainian views."<sup>62</sup>

Children have been held in excess of several weeks to several months. Several hundred children have attended camp sessions that have been indefinitely extended.<sup>63</sup> As of December 2022, over 100 children from Ukraine were still being held in a camp in Russia-occupied Crimea roughly two months after they were supposed to return home.<sup>64</sup> However, there is a lack of sufficient evidence to definitively determine whether these children continue to be held at these camps at the time of publication. Additionally, the number of children whose return was suspended is likely underreported; Yale HRL was not able using open source methods to identify the return status of the majority of children who attended camps or comprehensively trace all groups of children who had been held. It is important to note that some parents have expressed reluctance to report their missing child to Ukrainian authorities for fear of being shamed or accused of being collaborators.<sup>65</sup>

### 2.B.II. COMMUNICATION LIMITATIONS & RESTRICTIONS

Parents' ability to communicate with their children has allegedly been limited or restricted. Some of these barriers appeared before children even departed: one mother who sent her daughter to the camp Medvezhonok and was later forced to retrieve her said that "we were convinced" not to send cell phones with the children.<sup>66</sup> Another child who attended camp Medvezhonok said the children in his group were given smartphones upon their arrival to camp, while another report said children were provided smartphones once authorities made the decision to suspend their return.<sup>67</sup> A pro-Russia blogger stated that children from that camp returned home with those smartphones, though Yale HRL could not identify other reports of this claim.<sup>68</sup>

Parents of children who were delayed also report being unable to get information about their child's status. One mother whose daughter went to Medvezhonok said parents were not given any contact information for the person in charge of the children. Instead, parents and guardians were told information would be passed through the village council. The same mother only received updates about her child from another parent who went to retrieve their child from the camp.<sup>69</sup> She learned that her daughter had been taken to a hospital due to a "nervous breakdown" because her mother did not retrieve her from the camp, but the mother could not get any more information about her daughter's whereabouts or health.<sup>70</sup>

Another mother sent her daughter to Medvezhonok because she has a chronic illness and seizures and wanted her to have a rest. Once her daughter's return was suspended, she got the phone number for the camp director through her daughter, and the director told the mother her daughter would not be returned to Ukraine.<sup>71</sup> Other parents read about the suspended return from Medvezhonok in the news or guessed what had happened but were seemingly never directly informed or provided consent to the indefinite hold.<sup>72</sup> Another mother from Kherson oblast went to retrieve her daughter from a camp in Russia-occupied Crimea only to find out her child had been moved to the Republic of Adygea and she had not been informed.<sup>73</sup>

### 2.B.III. CONSENT CRISIS

Parents were required to submit and sign various legal documents consenting to their child's attendance at the camp and giving Russia's officials authority over their child. In addition to reports of parents having to submit copies of the passports along with original copies of the child's birth certificate, Yale HRL has identified multiple reports of parents being required to sign power of attorney in order for their child to attend summer camp.<sup>74</sup> In at least one of these instances, parents were



### NO INFORMATION, PROBABLE HARM

- Parents not given contact information for camp officials
- Children moved across regions and into medical care for emergent issues without parental notification
- Families forced to gather news through word of mouth and the media
- Some parents told not to send cell phones with their children to camp

A girl at Medvezhonok had a nervous breakdown when her mother did not arrive to retrieve her. According to another parent who witnessed the event, the girl was hospitalized. The child's mother has been subsequently unable to obtain any information about her daughter's whereabouts or health.

forced to sign over power of attorney to an unknown person or entity — the field for the name of the person who would receive legal authority over the child was left blank.<sup>75</sup> This camp subsequently indefinitely suspended the children's return home, with leaders stating that they were no longer able to return the children despite an initial 'promise' that children would be returned.<sup>76</sup> In this case and at least three others in which children's return was suspended, the failure to return children on time (or at all) may violate the terms of the consent forms that parents signed.

While many parents signed consent to send their child to a camp for a limited period, data suggests that many of these attestations of consent occurred under duress, which violates the conditions of consent. Russia's forces, occupation authorities, and teachers have all been mobilized to recruit children for camps.<sup>77</sup> For some parents, these recruitment efforts may be implicitly threatening. Many parents also centered their decision to send their children to camps around conditions created by Russia's invasion: parents reported that they sent their children to camp to remove them from the danger of fighting, to stay somewhere with intact sanitation, or to get nutritious food of the sort unavailable where they live.<sup>78</sup> These reasons, which are the direct results of Russia's invasion, represent an indirect form of coercion that call into question the validity of any consent.



### CONSENT CRISIS

- At one site, camp officials stated that several teenagers from Ukraine (ages 14-17) were present despite explicitly lacking parental consent.
- Russia's federal law establishes 18 as the age of majority, making a legal guardian or parent's consent essential.

Yale HRL identified multiple instances in which the terms of consent forms signed by parents may have been violated. There appears to be a complex and varied system of consent throughout these camps. Data suggests that in many cases, parents have willingly consented to send their child to one of these camps. However, Russia has not informed parents of their child's location.<sup>79</sup> While Yale HRL was able to identify limited information on specific consent procedures through open source investigation, evidence suggests Russia's engagement in the suspension of returns and lack of communication to parents on the whereabouts and status of children overrides any previous consent that may have been established.

One camp held children whose parents allegedly did not consent to their children attending the camp. The camp, which had over 200 children from Ukraine aged 14-17, publicly acknowledged that they were holding children whose parents forbade them from attending.<sup>80</sup> Russia's federal law establishes 18 as the age of majority, meaning that a parent's consent is *the* consent required.<sup>81</sup>

One mother sent her 13-year-old daughter to one of the camps in Krasnodar Territory of Russia, stating that she originally signed medical forms allowing her daughter to be provided first aid and medical care if necessary. As noted in the previous section, after her daughter was sent to the hospital for an apparent nervous breakdown, the mother stated that she has not received information since this incident occurred and does not know where her daughter is located.<sup>82</sup>

**FIG. 3 | Boys at a military training facility learn to handle firearms. Their uniform attire shows Russia's flag on the right arm, and the Chechen Republic's flag on the left.** Source: Source CC0300 has been withheld due to protection concerns.



**FIG. 4 | Children attend classroom instruction as part of re-education programming, a part of 78% of camps assessed for this report.** Source has been withheld due to protection concerns.

## 2.B.IV. RE-EDUCATION

The emphasis on re-educating children from Ukraine with Russia's state curriculum and culture is integral to the camp network. Yale HRL defines re-education in this context as the promotion of cultural, historical, societal, and patriotic messages or ideas that serve the political interests of Russia. The widespread re-education of Ukraine's children has occurred in 32 (78%) of camps ranging from Russia-occupied Crimea to Magadan in the Russian Federation's Far East. The systematic pro-Russia education of Ukraine's children takes many forms, including school curriculum, field trips to cultural or patriotic sites throughout the country, lectures from Russia's veterans and historians, and military activities.<sup>83</sup>

### 2.B.IV.1. ACADEMIC INSTRUCTION

In addition to pro-Russia patriotic and military-related education, camps also re-educated children from Ukraine on various academic subjects, ranging from history to theater according to Russia's education standards.<sup>84</sup> Various camps were also a part of university-affiliated efforts in which children from Ukraine attended an education-focused camp hosted by one of the regional universities across Russia. The stated goal of these programs was to attract children to Russia's universities for future enrollment.<sup>85</sup> One such camp, located in Siberia and attended by 25 children from Ukraine aged 12 to 16, introduced the children to various educational institutions in the region and exposed them to Russia's curricula.<sup>86</sup> In all camps that withheld the children's return to Ukraine, education was provided either at the camp or in local schools.<sup>87</sup> One camp noted that high school-aged children were provided education at the site in Russia, while younger children were sent to school alongside local children in a nearby rural area.<sup>88</sup>

Russia's government has supported these re-education endeavors: federal, regional, and local government officials and agencies provide school supplies, support cost-free educational excursions, and coordinate



**FIG. 5 | From left to right in the center of the group are Vladimir Khromov (Representative of the Russian Federation Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights), Zamid Chalayev (Commander, A.A. Kadyrov Special Police Regiment), and Akhmed Dudayev (Minister of the Chechen Republic for National Policy, Foreign Relations, Press, and Information).** Source: Source CC0301 has been withheld due to protection concerns.

university-affiliated camps.<sup>89</sup> Institutions such as Russia's Ministry of Education have supported the camps, with high-level officials acting as liaisons between federal institutions and the camps involved in re-education initiatives.<sup>90</sup>

According to the Kremlin and Commissioner Lvova-Belova, Lvova-Belova personally sponsored numerous camps, including those Russia has called "integration programmes" aimed at re-educating children from Ukraine in accordance with Russia's education standards, immersing them in Russia's culture, and encouraging children from Ukraine to "become their own" in Russia.<sup>91</sup> In addition to high-ranking federal officials, regional and local officials have engaged in efforts to re-educate at the camps. Deputy Prime Minister of the Russian Federation's Republic of Tartarstan Leyla Fazleeva helped oversee three camps in the region, noting that, "all camps...are aimed at patriotic education of youth, the development of communication skills and the preservation of cultural heritage."<sup>92</sup>

Aside from limited communication between parents and children and the widespread re-education and Russification of Ukraine's children, current camp conditions are unclear. Russia's media has shown children participating in skits, songs, and sporting events, with the social media accounts of various camps

displaying numerous photos and videos of children engaging in these activities. There is no documentation of child mistreatment, including sexual or physical violence, among the camps referenced in this report; concerns have been raised regarding the mental health of some children.<sup>93</sup> Past visual indicators of living accommodations may or may not be consistent with current conditions. Security conditions at the camps, including any personnel assigned, also remain unclear at the time of this report.

#### **2.B.IV.2. MILITARY TRAINING**

Military training was part of the program at camps in Chechnya and Russia-occupied Crimea. One camp near Grozny, Chechnya detailed how boys would take a course "for a young fighter" at the Russian University of Special Forces.<sup>94</sup> This camp was organized at the initiative of Russia's federal government and was for designated at-risk boys, including those with criminal records.<sup>95</sup> Another camp in Russia-occupied Crimea titled "School of Future Commanders" was organized by the Yunarmia movement — an "all-Russian military-patriotic public movement" — and attended by approximately 50 children from Ukraine.<sup>96</sup> Children at the camp were able to handle military equipment, drive trucks, and study firearms.<sup>97</sup> Vladimir Kovalenko, chief of staff of the Sevastopol regional branch of Yunarmia, was present at the camp and reported that the camp program was "aimed at fostering patriotism and love for the [Russian] homeland."<sup>98</sup> Children at a school in Russia-occupied Kherson oblast were also visited by representatives of Yunarmia who advertised opportunities to visit camps like Artek and spoke about "the concept of Motherland and the requirements to the future defenders of the Fatherland."<sup>99</sup>

## 2.c. How children from Ukraine leave camps

Children from Ukraine with parental care who attend the camps leave under varying circumstances: many children appear to return to their homes in the intended timeframe, some are held in camps beyond the agreed-upon date of return, and others' return status is unknown.<sup>100</sup> When scheduled returns are withheld, some children have been brought home through intervention by the Ukrainian government, some children have been retrieved personally by their parents, and others' fates remain unknown.<sup>101</sup>

### 2.C.I. UKRAINIAN GOVERNMENT AND CIVIL SOCIETY INTERVENTION

Several hundred children from Ukraine's Kharkiv oblast were indefinitely held at the Medvezhonok camp and Ukraine's government intervened to return some of the children. The parents of 37 children coordinated with Ukraine's government representatives and the international charity organization SOS Children's Villages to retrieve their children several weeks after they were not returned on the promised timeline.<sup>102</sup> The children and their families were then placed in western Ukraine for rehabilitation. A further seven children from Ukraine were retrieved by their parents, but these two groups appear to represent only a portion of those who remained in the camp, and HRL was unable to verify at the time of publication whether the remaining children had been released.

### 2.C.II. PARENTAL RETRIEVAL OF CHILDREN

When camps withhold children from their parents, sometimes outright refusing to return them, parents will sometimes physically try to retrieve them. One mother described having to retrieve her daughter from a camp in the Krasnodar Territory of Russia after the camp delayed the children's return. According to the mother, the camp did not inform parents of the delay; the mother only learned of the delay when her daughter called crying. The camp director relayed that they would not be returning the children, but that parents could retrieve their child themselves. The mother hoped that relatives living in Russia could retrieve the child but was told that only parents were permitted to do so.<sup>103</sup>

Other parents reported the same: camp administration told them that neither grandparents, nor relatives, nor anyone given power of attorney could retrieve the child from camp — only parents.<sup>104</sup> A significant portion of these families are low-income and have not been able to afford to make the trip.<sup>105</sup> Some families were forced to sell belongings and travel through four countries to be reunited with their child, relying on help from volunteers in Russia and Belarus along the way.<sup>106</sup> In at least one case, once parents arrived at the camp, authorities tried to convince them to stay in Russia and told them everything would be provided for them.<sup>107</sup>

It is difficult for parents to retrieve their children. Men aged 18 to 60 years are prohibited from leaving Ukraine.<sup>108</sup> Mothers end up as often the only people permitted to retrieve their child.<sup>109</sup> This parental retrieval policy poses an additional challenge for families because fathers, if aged 18 to 60, are unable to leave the country to retrieve their child and are not permitted to have someone else retrieve their child. Even if a father aged 18 to 60 were to travel from Ukraine to Russia-occupied territory, Russia's so-called "filtration" system managed by Russia's forces and its proxies has a demonstrated history of targeted extrajudicial detention for male military-aged Ukrainian nationals.<sup>110</sup>

In single female-headed families with other children, mothers must either bring their other children or find someone in Ukraine to look after them while they retrieve their child. Additionally, retrieving a child requires resources including a foreign passport, money for travel, and the physical ability to travel. Some parents reported that their financial situation made it difficult or impossible to retrieve their child.<sup>111</sup> Furthermore, commercial air travel has been suspended since Russia's full-scale invasion, forcing some parents to drive thousands of miles to retrieve their child.<sup>112</sup> Lastly, retrieving one's child imposes significant safety threats by requiring parents to travel near and sometimes across the war's frontlines.

# 3. POLITICAL COORDINATION OF CAMP SYSTEM AND ADOPTIONS

## 3.a. Senior federal leadership involvement

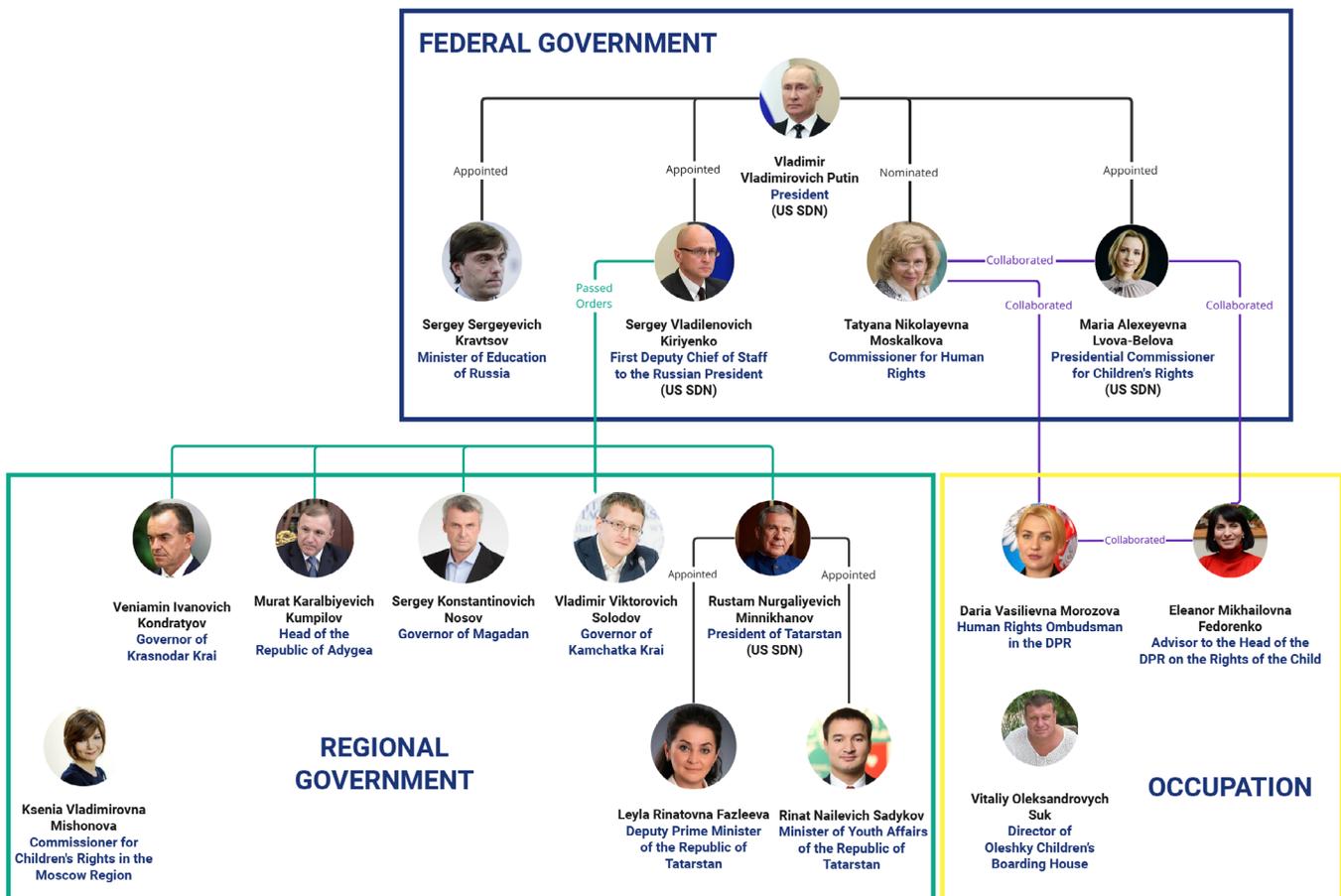
The system of camps and adoptions described in this report appears to be authorized and coordinated at the highest levels of Russia’s federal government. Vladimir Putin thanked Russia’s people for arranging these camps for children from Ukraine, directed Maria Lvova-Belova to “take additional measures” regarding children left without parental care in occupied territories, and received updates from regional governors on their efforts to bring children from Ukraine to camps.<sup>113</sup>

On 30 May 2022 Putin signed a decree easing the process for orphans and children without parental care from Ukraine to receive Russian Federation citizenship.<sup>114</sup> The decree was interpreted by many as an effort to expedite the process for adopting Ukraine’s children into families in Russia.<sup>115</sup> President Putin also spoke virtually to children at Artek over the summer at a session where Ukrainian children were likely present, saying he would head the “supervisory board of the new Russian movement of children and youth” which would foster “love and respect for the Fatherland.”<sup>116</sup> Taken together, these

actions indicate Putin is well aware of and encouraging adoption and camp schemes for children from Ukraine.

As the Presidential Commissioner for Children’s Rights, Maria Lvova-Belova is one of the most highly involved figures in Russia’s deportation and adoption of Ukraine’s children, as well as in the use of camps for ‘integrating’ Ukraine’s children into Russia’s society and culture.<sup>117</sup> Commissioner Lvova-Belova has actively partaken in these efforts since the beginning of the full-scale invasion and reports directly to Putin on them.<sup>118</sup> In the weeks prior to 24 February 2022, hundreds of children from Ukraine were evacuated from orphanages and boarding houses across the already-occupied areas of Donetsk and Luhansk. Some of those children stayed at camps analyzed in this report and were later placed in foster families in Russia under Commissioner Lvova-Belova’s direction.<sup>119</sup> More recently, Commissioner Lvova-Belova transported a group of 53 alleged orphans aged nine months to five years from Ukraine by Russian Aerospace Forces plane and facilitated their placement

**FIG 6 | Senior leadership involved in systematic relocation, re-education, and adoption of Ukrainian children**



into foster families in Russia.<sup>120</sup> Maria Lvova-Belova has claimed that “Russians have already adopted 350 orphans from the [Russia-occupied] Donetsk and Luhansk regions, and more than a thousand children are waiting for adoption.”<sup>121</sup>

Russia’s Commissioner for Human Rights Tatyana Moskalkova also plays an important role in the system of camps. Commissioner Moskalkova, who was nominated for the role by President Putin and appointed by the State Duma (the lower house of Russia’s Federal Assembly) in 2016, is involved both in specific camp programs and in the overall effort to cloak the program in human rights language.<sup>122</sup> For example, in August 2022 a group of 120 children from Russia-occupied Donetsk went to a camp in Russia-occupied Crimea through an agreement reached between Commissioner Moskalkova and her counterpart in the so-called DPR.<sup>123</sup>



**Tatyana Nikolayevna  
Moskalkova  
COMMISSIONER FOR  
HUMAN RIGHTS**

Commissioner Moskalkova, he said, had told him that “[Russia’s authorities] have children who do not want to be in Russia, but do not have contact with their family, and they are ready to pass them on. But they did not agree to give us a list of these children so that we could look for relatives...”

- Dmytro Lubinets  
Ukraine Ombudsman Human Rights

Commissioner Moskalkova works closely with Commissioner Lvova-Belova on issues pertaining to children. Commissioner Lvova-Belova told the state-owned TASS news agency in December 2022 that “... everything related to children, we work with Tatyana Nikolayevna Moskalkova together. It is very important and I am very grateful that she is sympathetic to the issue of children, it is important for us to work together on such a collaboration.”<sup>124</sup> Together, the two commissioners legitimate the camp and adoption system for Russia’s domestic constituencies.<sup>125</sup> By attaching her name and title, the Commissioner for Human Rights coats a program characterized by allegations of human rights violations with a false veneer of human rights legitimacy.

In December 2022, Commissioner Moskalkova engaged in negotiations with Ukraine’s Ombudsman for Human Rights, Dmytro Lubinets, in Ankara, Turkey. In an interview given after the conference ended, Commissioner Lubinets expressed appreciation for Moskalkova’s efforts to return some children to their

families in Ukraine, but also expressed frustration. Commissioner Moskalkova, he said, had told him that “[Russia’s authorities] have children who do not want to be in Russia, but do not have contact with their family, and they are ready to pass them on. But they did not agree to give us a list of these children so that we could look for relatives...”<sup>126</sup>

Another federal official with an important role in the system is Sergey Kravtsov, the Minister of Education of the Russian Federation. Minister Kravtsov supervises all primary and secondary education in Russia, including updating curricula in the so-called DPR and LPR school systems.<sup>127</sup> He also helped to facilitate camps by providing vouchers for children from Russia-occupied parts of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts to attend camps in Russia.<sup>128</sup> Minister Kravtsov also visited children in at least one camp and one university exchange program, where he lectured on the state-backed version of history:

Children from the liberated territories of the LNR and DNR, mostly high school students, come to the regions of our country and virtually rediscover Russia. Many of them do not know that there was a time when we lived in one country, that we had common victories, achievements, common culture and language. Today, when students from the DNR and LNR visit museums devoted to the Great Patriotic War and history, many are surprised that we lived in one state. Today, returning from the ‘University shifts’—and there are about 15 thousand schoolchildren—they leave different, open, and friendly, many want to return...tell their peers about it, this is very important.<sup>129</sup>

Russia’s weaponized narratives erasing Ukraine’s history have a long track record of their own,<sup>130</sup> but without credibility among historians, linguists, or anthropologists.

### 3.b. Patronage System, Regional & Local Official Involvement

Officials in the DPR and LPR often encourage parents to send their kids to the camps. The trips are often funded by Russia's regional and republican governments. The concept of patronage (попечительство) is central to how the camps are bankrolled and politically supported. Patronage occurs when one of Russia's oblasts or republics 'adopts' a town or oblast in Ukraine and funds vouchers for children to visit camps in their region.<sup>131</sup> Governors and other officials visit occupied territories to offer vouchers to Ukraine's children for visiting camps, and often visit the children in the camps themselves.<sup>132</sup>

Regions have undertaken these patronage efforts at the direction of Russia's federal government.<sup>133</sup> In May 2022, the First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration of Russia Sergey Kiriyenko announced that President Putin had decided that regions and republics in the Russian Federation should take patronage of occupied areas of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts: "Now the president has decided that the Russian regions will take patronage over the districts and municipalities of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics."<sup>134</sup> The effort included, Kiriyenko said, integrating children from Ukraine into federal children's programs, including those that have since brought children to camps in Russia.<sup>135</sup>

Fourteen regions initially took patronage of districts or towns in eastern Ukraine (some had allegedly already declared patronage before Kiriyenko's announcement).<sup>136</sup> In a call to President Putin—the transcript of which was published by the Kremlin—governor Sergey Nosov of Magadan reported that the sending of Ukraine's children to camps in Magadan in Russia's Far East and Russia-occupied Crimea was a key success of his patronage relationship: "As for patronage assistance to those territories of Donbass, which, among other things, are assigned to our region, we, in particular, are talking about Donbass: we have the settlement of Zhdanovka... Most importantly, 190 children from Zhdanovka, our sponsored community, had a vacation in the Crimea, and, Vladimir Vladimirovich [Putin], we had 20 people come to Kolyma."<sup>137</sup> By July 2022 more than 40 regions and cities in Russia had declared patronage over parts of occupied Ukraine.<sup>138</sup>

According to the independent Russian news website *Meduza*, anonymous Kremlin sources said that the effort was centrally imposed; Moscow and Saint Petersburg, as well as several nearby regions, were allowed to choose areas of Ukraine to sponsor, while the sponsored region for other regions was "determined from above," by Presidential offices in the regions across Russia.<sup>139</sup> Participation was initially voluntary—according to the Kremlin source, "[Governors] understood that in this way they could attract the attention of the president, who is interested in this agenda. Once again, demonstrate zeal and loyalty."<sup>140</sup> When, by the middle of June, only 18 regions had volunteered, pressure was put on governors

to "volunteer."<sup>141</sup>

In at least one case, the patronage relationships directed from the Kremlin were allegedly supplemented by a volunteering governor. Russia's federal subjects that are heavily subsidized by the central government were excluded from the patronage system because of the drain that participation would put on budgets.<sup>142</sup> Yet Vladimir Solodov, the governor of the heavily subsidized Kamchatka Krai in Russia's Far East, says that he proactively petitioned the federal government for an area of Ukraine to sponsor (the region took patronage over Svetlodarsk district and the village of Mironovsky).<sup>143</sup> Solodov "asked to take special control over providing places in suburban children's camps for children from Donbass."<sup>144</sup> Yale HRL has documented the substantive involvement of several of these regional leaders, including five not currently under U.S. sanctions.

While governors often take credit for the patronage relationship and the children brought to camps as a result, the execution of these programs falls to lower-level regional officials. In the Republic of Tatarstan, camps for children from Ukraine were overseen more directly by the Republic's Deputy Prime Minister Leyla Fazleeva and Minister of Youth Affairs Rinat Sadykov. Both are involved in planning, budgeting, and oversight of camps in the Republic, and paid particular attention to groups of children from the so-called DPR and LPR, visiting them with media.<sup>145</sup> Deputy Minister Fazleeva's involvement is of particular note, as she also chairs the Republic's Commission on Juvenile Affairs and the Protection of their Rights, a role which gives her further oversight responsibilities and lends legitimacy to the system of camps.<sup>146</sup>

### 3.C. Russia-aligned occupation authorities involvement in camps and facilities

All levels of occupation authorities, referring to those appointed to official roles in the Russia- and proxy-occupied territories of Ukraine, are essential to the camp system as well. They play essential roles in identifying children for movement into foster homes, adoption and evacuation (including ‘medical’) into Russia. These actors include head occupation authorities of various oblasts who assist in the logistics of transporting children, local occupation village authorities who recruit and encourage local families to send their children to camps, and teachers and sometimes even parents who recruit and accompany children to the camps.

#### 3.C.I. OCCUPATION AUTHORITIES

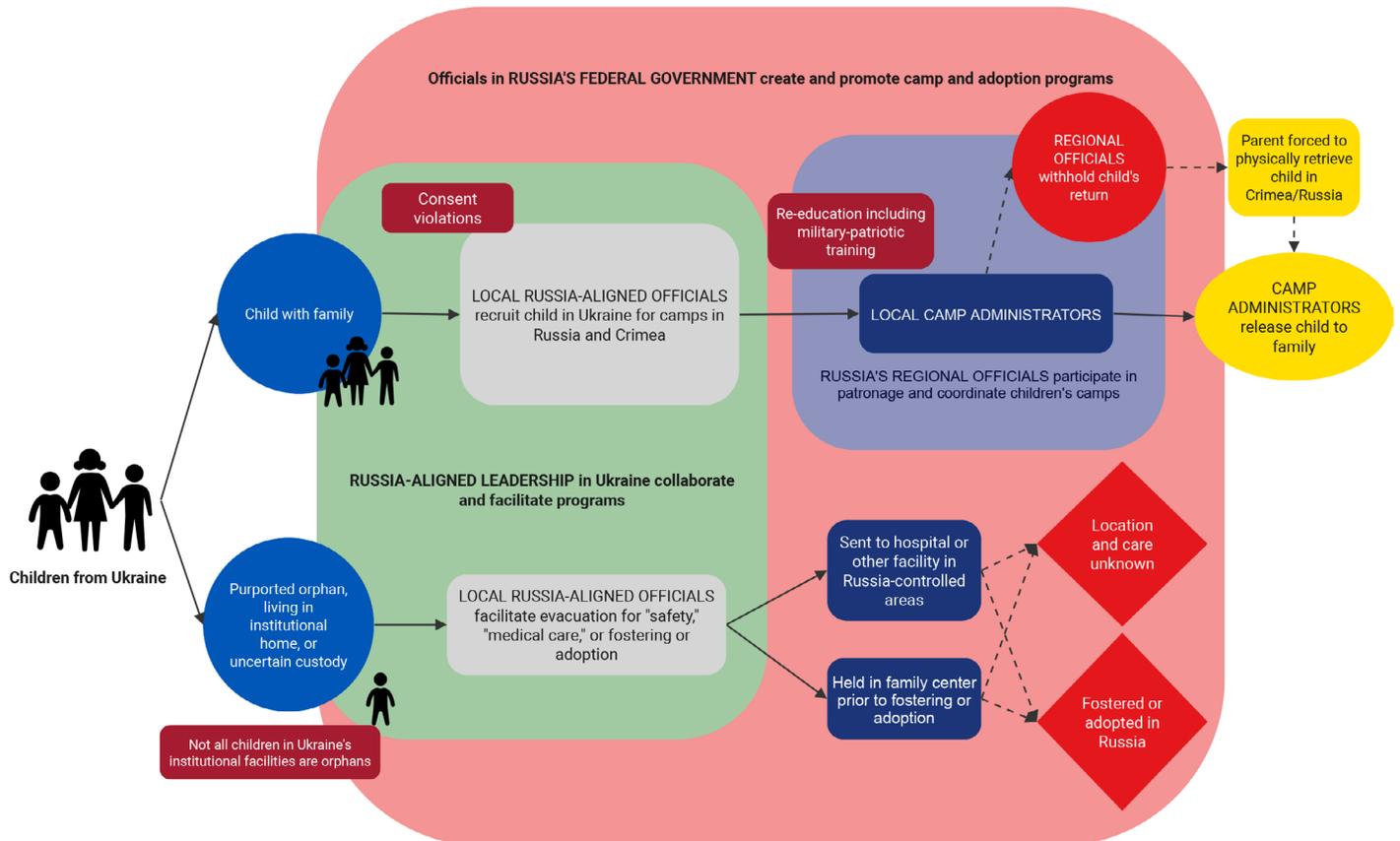
Local occupation officials have been integral in facilitating both the camp system and placing children from Ukraine among families in Russia. Eleanor Fedorenko, the Advisor to the Head of the so-called Donetsk People’s Republic on the Rights of the Child, accompanied 27 orphans, including 20 who had been relocated from Donetsk and placed in camps, to a train station near Moscow. These children were then placed under temporary guardianship with families in the Moscow area.<sup>147</sup> Fedorenko also assisted in transporting 24 orphans from Donetsk to Nizhny Novgorod in Russia

and placing them with foster families.<sup>148</sup> She worked closely with Commissioner Lvova-Belova in both efforts.

Daria Morozova, the Commissioner of Human Rights of the so-called DPR, serves a similar role at a local level to that played by Commissioner Moskalkova at the federal level. In addition to collaborating with Commissioner Moskalkova on the transport of at least 120 children from Ukraine to a camp in Russia-occupied Crimea, Commissioner Morozova also lends a similar façade of human rights legitimacy to a program marked by abuse allegations.<sup>149</sup>

Some involved at the local level were appointed to positions of authority in education or childcare capacities by occupation authorities. Vitaliy Suk was appointed Director of the Oleshky Children’s Boarding House by occupation authorities. At their direction, he allegedly sent one group of children with disabilities to Russia-occupied Crimea and sent another group further into Russia-occupied Kherson oblast. The former group was allegedly first sent to a psychiatric hospital, from which they would be sent onwards to homes for children with disabilities throughout Russia.<sup>150</sup>

FIG 7 | Russia’s leadership roles in the systematic transfer of children from Ukraine to occupied Crimea & Russia



## 4. LEGAL ANALYSIS

Other local appointees aided occupation authorities with the recruitment of children for camps, the collection of documents and consent forms from parents, chaperoned groups of children traveling to camps, and led lessons in “patriotic education.”<sup>151</sup>

The individuals identified as key facilitators of this system of camps and adoptions represent a diverse set of actors implementing and interpreting clear instruction from the highest levels of government. Many have professional relationships while the relationships between others are unclear or non-existent. Rather than a single, hierarchical arm of Russia’s government orchestrating this system, what emerges is a network of actors—some apparently acting on orders, others seemingly capitalizing on an apparent opportunity—coordinating these camps at the national, regional/ republican, and local levels.

Children are recognized as protected persons under the 1949 Geneva Conventions and are considered an “object of special respect” under Article 77 of Additional Protocol I of 1977.<sup>152</sup> The Fourth Geneva Conventions provide specific legal guidelines for the treatment of children who have been separated from their families during war, including those who have been evacuated from their homes due to fighting. Family members must be able to communicate with one another, systems must be established to identify and register separated children, and temporary evacuation of children should be always to a neutral state with parental consent.<sup>153</sup>

The abduction of children is considered one of the “Six grave violations against children during armed conflict” and is an act prohibited by international humanitarian law, international human rights law, international customary law, and multiple international judicial precedents.<sup>154</sup> The forcible transfer of children from one group to another may constitute a violation of Article 2(e) of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide of 1948.<sup>155</sup> The Rome Statute also recognizes the forcible transfer of children as one of the component acts of the crime of genocide, which is a crime against humanity.<sup>156</sup> Russia’s alleged deportation, reeducation, and, in some cases, forcible adoption of children manifestly violates multiple articles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), an instrument to which Russia is party. Dr. Alison Bisset summarizes Russia’s potential violations of the CRC since its invasion of Ukraine as follows:

States Parties undertake to respect the right of the child to preserve their identity, including name, nationality, and family relations, without unlawful interference (Article 8(1)). States must ensure that children are not separated from their parents against their will, other than in accordance with due process and where this would serve their best interests (Article 9(1))...If accurate, allegations that Russia has arbitrarily separated children from parents and caregivers, deported them and imposed Russian citizenship upon them suggest manifest contravention of CRC standards, and failure to adhere to international legal obligations.<sup>157</sup>

# APPENDIX I. INVESTIGATIVE METHODOLOGY

The investigative methodology for this report relies on extensive open source research, with support from very high resolution (VHR) satellite imagery analysis. It consists of the aggregation and verification of multiple sources of data to understand the system of relocations, camps, re-education, and placement of children from occupied areas of Ukraine, and the tracing of groups of children and implicated officials from Ukraine to sometimes distant parts of Russia. The units analyzed were a) groups of children b) officials involved in the camps and adoptions and c) facilities that house children, ranging from camps to hospitals to reception centers. Verification of all claims made in this report was conducted according to protocols developed by Amnesty International and the Berkeley Protocol on Digital Open Source Investigations.

## A. FACILITY IDENTIFICATION

Facilities that allegedly hosted children from Ukraine were identified through open source research in social media posts, government announcements and publications, and news reports. New facilities were found through a mix of keyword searches and, more commonly, snowball techniques; many sources describing an identified camp mention others, which could then be assessed. Many actors involved in facilitation of these camps celebrated their involvement and made no effort to hide it, and occupation authorities sometimes published lists of upcoming camp sessions.

## B. GEOLOCATION

Once named, initial camp locations were established. In most cases the name of a camp and the region it was in were sufficient to establish a single probable location using public mapping sites like Google Maps, Yandex Maps and OpenStreetMap. In a small number of cases, multiple camps of the same name existed in the same region. In both cases open source geolocation methods were used to either confirm or establish a camp's location. Information from reports of the presence of children from Ukraine—whether descriptive, photographic or video—was compared against reference material from facilities' websites, social media pages and user-uploaded photographs on mapping sites. Of particular value were reference materials posted before 24 February 2022 on major sites where tampering is unlikely. Once located, photographs and videos were checked for authenticity by examining their metadata, passing them through an image verification software, and identifying elements that confirmed that the image or video was captured when claimed. Once the authenticity of images and videos was established, unique identifiers pictured in the photographs or videos were matched to identical identifiers in the reference material. For the location of a site to be considered confirmed, at least two open source analysts had to reach concurrence.

## C. ACTIVITY

Once a facility's location was confirmed, information about the activities at these sites and the experiences of children and parents was also collected, analyzed, and verified by open source analysts. Information about what occurred at a camp during a particular session was collected from social media posts (especially Telegram, VK, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram), Russian and Ukrainian media, the reports of human rights organizations and official communications of governments. All available information related to each—the demographics (usually age, place of origin, custodial status), kinds of activities or education children engaged in, and the experiences of parents—were collected and analyzed. Where any information was contradictory, further investigations were needed to clarify and, where impossible, contradictory information was excluded. Particular attention was paid to allegations of mistreatment, impediments to communication, delays and indefinite impediments to return, and specific issues of consent. Very High-Resolution (VHR) satellite imagery was used to verify and corroborate those claims with relevant visible components, such as whether there was activity at a location during a certain period. In no case was the absence of information related to a phenomenon taken to indicate that that phenomenon did not occur.

## D. INDIVIDUAL INVOLVEMENT

Russia's and occupation officials involved in both the camp and adoptions systems in many cases made no secret of their involvement. Many appear to have considered their activity the apogee of humanitarianism, or else wanted their superiors to see their work. In either case, the information connecting officials, camp administrators, and civil society and private sector actors to camps represents *prima facie* assertions of involvement made by those very actors. Most celebrated their involvement in social media posts, gave interviews to Russian media outlets, or posed in photographs with children from Ukraine at camps.

Where such *prima facie* information was unavailable, multiple sources were required to verify an individual's involvement. The individuals specifically mentioned in this report represent only those for whom:

1. Their precise role could be confidently established through open source methodology and,
2. Their actions were considered to be marked by substantial intentionality, culpability, and apparent illegality. Their role or rank was also evaluated for authority.

For all sources, the identity of the poster or publisher was checked to identify potential bias. Verification by large, independent organizations with strong reputations for careful work and ground access, such as the *The New York Times* and Human Rights Watch provided additional corroborating information. Primary sources were also checked for expertise, clear proximity to events, political, economic or other ulterior motivations, and reputation for posting authenticated content. The presence of multiple types of sources attesting to the same fact or image lent credibility to assertions made.

All open source materials in Ukrainian or Russian were initially translated by Google or DeepL and then verified by a language expert. Throughout the report, Yale HRL uses the Ukrainian name of cities, towns, and villages according to the State Statistics Service of Ukraine.<sup>158</sup> The spelling of place names can differ across Ukrainian and Russian, and a note is included where something may be unclear or require an explanation.

## LIMITATIONS

The open source methodology used in this report has the distinct advantage of collecting data not initially composed or disseminated for researchers, prosecutors, or other critical observers. The officials advertising their involvement in Telegram posts do so to advance their careers or celebrate their achievements, yet implicated themselves nonetheless. This methodology does, however, pose some limitations. Yale HRL does not conduct interviews with witnesses or victims; only the specific information available in open source is collected. When analysts are unable to identify public information about whether a child has returned home, it can be difficult to ascertain the current status of the child.

Similarly, Yale HRL does not conduct ground-level investigations and therefore did not request access to the camps. International organizations like UNHCR have also claimed that “access has been rather rare, sporadic and not unfettered...”<sup>159</sup> Limited access to facilities that may be holding children means that little specific information about conditions and activities in camps comes from sources other than the officials overseeing the system. Thus, potentially negative information about the conditions there is unlikely to be shared. Those returned children and their families who do share information about their experience represent a very specific subgroup; many families on the Ukrainian side of the frontline claim reticence to share due to threatened accusations of collaboration with occupying forces.<sup>160</sup> Those living under Russia’s occupation are likewise limited in the criticisms or allegations of mistreatment they may feel safe asserting publicly. Other information is inaccessible because it has been removed from social media sites. Given the public nature of these data, certain socially sensitive subjects are likely to be routinely underreported, resulting in a reporting bias. Underreporting is particularly common for sexual and

gender-based violence (SGBV), which victims may not report due to shame or fear of social censure.

Satellite imagery analysis played a secondary role in this report. Much of the activity of interest was unlikely to be registered in remote images. All of the camps that housed children were pre-existing camps and appear the same regardless of whether the children in them came from Ukraine or Russia. Other facilities like schools, hospitals, group homes and reception centers would likewise register little visual difference regardless of who occupied them. Where satellite imagery could be used was in confirming that facilities were active when they were alleged to be.

# ENDNOTES

1. For example, children whose guardians may have been killed or children who may have been separated from their guardians.
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