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BELARUS' COLLABORATION WITH RUSSIA IN THE SYSTEMATIC DEPORTATION OF UKRAINE'S CHILDREN

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

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Yale School of Public Health's Humanitarian Research Lab (Yale HRL) has found that at least 2,442 children from Ukraine between the ages of six and 17 have been taken to Belarus between the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 and 30 October 2023.¹ Russia and Belarus are jointly targeting children for removal from Ukraine, coordinating their transport from occupied Ukraine to Russia and onward to Belarus, and subjecting children to re-education, including military training. Belarus' direct involvement in Russia's forced deportation of children represents a collaboration between the two regimes on deportation activities conducted by Russia. Russia's campaign of child deportation and transfer has been previously reported by Yale HRL.² These activities are a joint effort between Belarus and Russia through the Union State.

This research demonstrates Belarus' complicity in and support for Russia's systematic campaign of child deportation, which was the subject of arrest warrants issued by the International Criminal Court for alleged war crimes in March 2023.³ While this report is not a legal analysis of Belarus and Russia's activities, Yale HRL does conclude that these activities by Belarus and Russia contravene accepted protections for children during armed conflict enshrined in instruments of international humanitarian law (IHL) and international human rights law (IHRL) to which both nations are parties. The stated reasons for the deportation of these children does not comply with Article 49 of Geneva Convention IV, which states: "Individual or mass forcible transfers, as well as deportations of protected persons from occupied territory to the territory of the Occupying Power or to that of any other country, occupied or not, are prohibited, regardless of their motive."⁴

While a component of Russia's larger campaign of forced deportation, Belarus' role as documented in this report is unique for two reasons. First, according to Belarus, the children's time in Belarus is temporary. Yale HRL has not discovered evidence of permanent transfer (including adoption or fostering) for children transported from Ukraine to Belarus following Russia's full-scale invasion in early 2022. Second, Belarus' current involvement appears to rely on multiple non-state actors for execution in addition to both states.

It is unclear if the parents and legal guardians of the children transported from Ukraine to Belarus provided consent that could be considered free and meaningful. Evidence reviewed by Yale HRL clearly indicates that free and meaningful consent was not provided in all cases.

The targeting and movement of vulnerable children from Ukraine under similar conditions and by the same and related actors has been alleged to be deportation.⁵ In addition to the well-documented recent trend of deportations of children from Ukraine, this report demonstrates additional reasons why consent cannot be considered to have been freely and meaningfully given.

This research demonstrates Belarus' complicity in and support for Russia's systemic campaign of child deportation.

Many of the children targeted for deportation to Belarus are members of highly vulnerable populations for which achieving full, free, and meaningful consent is more difficult, including children who are orphans, children with disabilities, children from low-income families, children with military parents, and "adopted children." This is most clearly demonstrated by Russia's occupation officials preparing powers of attorney for at least 30 purported orphans to be deported to Belarus. Russia's officials have also waived requirements for documentation needed for children to cross from Russia-occupied Ukraine into parts of Russia. Finally, the context of occupation in which the identification of children takes place is highly coercive, with frequent incidents of extrajudicial detention and disappearance.⁶

Some of the children documented in this report were identified and recruited for deportation to Belarus by the Investigative Committee, a domestic criminal investigative agency of Russia's federal government, which may make any consent subject to coercion and therefore unfree. These actions, along with the documented trend of deportation of children from Ukraine to Russia, indicates that the activities captured in this report require urgent review to ensure that consent was properly obtained. International investigations into the terms of consent, including any medical procedures or treatments conducted after deportation, are required to determine whether consent was both meaningfully given and consistent with any treatment and activities that occurred.

Key Findings

1) At least 2,442 children from Ukraine have been transported to 13 facilities in Belarus:

Yale HRL has found that at least 2,442 children from Ukraine between the ages of six and 17 have been transported to 13 facilities in Belarus following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Children were transported from at least 17 cities across Ukraine in waves that continue through the date of publication. Over 2,050 children from Ukraine were transported to the Dubrava facility in Belarus between September 2022 and May 2023.⁷ The other approximately 392 children have been accommodated across the remaining 12 facilities. Children have been moved from Ukrainian cities and towns across Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia oblasts, including: Khartsyzsk, Makiivka, Yenakieve, Chystiakove, Horlivka, Shakhtarske, Donetsk, Mariupol, Volnovakha, Ilovaisk, Berdianske, Yasinovataya, Snizhne, Kirovsk, Debaltseve, Lysychansk, and Vasilevsky.⁸

2) Russia's systematic effort to identify, collect, transport, and re-educate Ukraine's children has been facilitated by Belarus:

Russia's federal government and Belarus' regime have been working together to coordinate and fund the movement of children from Russia-occupied Ukraine through Russia to Belarus. The movement of children from Russia-occupied Ukraine to Belarus is ultimately coordinated between Russia's President Vladimir Putin and Belarus' authoritarian leader Alyksandr Lukashenka through the Union State, a supranational entity constituted of Russia and Belarus.⁹ This program has been facilitated by both Russia's and Belarus' security services: Russia's Investigative Committee—a federal state agency reporting to President Vladimir Putin and responsible for criminal investigations—has played a significant role in identifying children in Ukraine for movement to Belarus, while Belarus' "Internal Troops of Belarus" have subjected children from Ukraine to military training.¹⁰

3) Lukashenka has directly overseen Belarus' efforts in coordination with Russia:

The movement of children from Ukraine to Belarus, as well as their re-education and military training, has been jointly directed and co-funded by Belarus' authoritarian leader Alyksandr Lukashenka in direct coordination with Russia's President Vladimir Putin [Figure 3].¹¹ Lukashenka approved the use of both state and non-state organizations based in Belarus to help transport children from Ukraine to Belarus, financed their transportation

through the joint Russia-Belarus Union State budget, and worked with various pro-regime actors to facilitate the transportation of children from Ukraine to Belarus.¹² In 2022, the Lukashenka regime also passed legislation mandating pro-regime education, to which children from Ukraine were subjected.¹³ Lukashenka, as well as members of the Union State and pro-regime actors, have also visited the children transported from Ukraine to Belarus on various occasions.¹⁴

4) Russia's Investigative Committee, Russia's Ministries of Education of the former so-called Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) and Donetsk People's Republic (DPR), and regime-aligned organizations from both countries, have facilitated the movement of children from occupied Ukraine to Belarus:

Russia's Investigative Committee and the Ministry of Education of the former so-called LPR and DPR have identified and targeted children from Russia-occupied Ukraine to be sent to various facilities in Belarus, at least one of which subjected children from Ukraine to military training.¹⁵ The Ministry of Education of the former so-called LPR also prepared power of attorney for 30 purported orphans to be transported from Ukraine to Belarus.¹⁶ Additionally, Yale HRL has identified various pro-Russia and pro-Belarus regime organizations facilitating the movement of children from Ukraine to Belarus and exposing them to re-education. Yale HRL has identified that Belarusian public figure Alyksei Talai (and his eponymous foundation); Belarus' state-owned potash producer OJSC Belaruskali; and Olga Volkova, the purported director of the Donetsk-based non-governmental organization named "Dolphins," have played key roles in transporting children from Ukraine to Belarus.¹⁷ Additionally, Yale HRL has established that the Belarusian Republican Youth Union and the Belarus branches of the pro-Russia regime ultranationalist militant motorcycle clubs Night Wolves and Night Valkyries have been involved in the re-education of children from Ukraine.¹⁸

* * N.B. The use of "so-called", generally used in this report in reference to "patriotic education" "humanitarian" "rehabilitation" programs, is to denote that this is the way these programs and activities are described by Russia, Belarus, and related actors and are not descriptions used by Yale HRL. "Purported" is primarily used in reference to language from actors in this system about the status of individuals, often related to children designated as orphans but for whom other data to assess this status may not be available. These terms are used to denote that Yale HRL may not accept the claims that are made.

5) Children from occupied Ukraine have been transported to Belarus through Russia:

Yale HRL concludes that children have been transported from Russia-occupied Ukraine to Rostov-on-Don in Russia, and then taken by train from Rostov-on-Don to Belarus.¹⁹ The Rostov-to-Minsk rail route matches the route described in a 21 March 2023 letter from Dmitry Mezentsev, Secretary of State of the Union State—to Oleg Valentinovich Belozerov, General Director of Russian Railways OJSC—which details plans to move 2,000 children from Ukraine to Belarus in 2023.²⁰ Based on available information to date, including alternate analysis of available transportation routes from the children’s origin points, Yale HRL has found no information indicating that children from Ukraine have been transported from Russia-occupied territory of Ukraine to Belarus without first passing through Russia itself.

6) More than half of the facilities housing children from Ukraine have been involved in re-education, military training, or unknown medical activities:

Yale HRL has identified that at least nine groups of children from Ukraine have been subjected to pro-regime re-education in at least eight of the 13 locations identified in this report.²¹ Yale HRL defines re-education as the promotion of cultural, historical, societal, and patriotic messages or ideas that serve the political interests of the regimes of Belarus and Russia.²² Additionally, at least six groups of children from Ukraine were subjected to military training in Belarus, including by Belarus’ internal security services the “Internal Troops of Belarus.”²³ Re-education efforts have been orchestrated by a network of Russia’s and Belarus’ officials and organizations, including pro-regime civil society organizations, ultranationalist militant extremist groups, state-owned industrial companies, local organizations in Belarus, and regime-aligned politicians.²⁴ Multiple groups of children from Ukraine, totaling more than 67 children, have been transported to hospitals in Belarus between March 2022 and April 2023 for alleged medical treatment and what is referred to as “rehabilitation” by officials in the Lukashenka regime.²⁵

7) The number of children remaining in Belarus is unknown:

Key figures involved in the transportation of children from occupied Ukraine to Belarus claim without evidence that all children have been returned to Ukraine.²⁶ However, the transport of Ukraine’s children to Belarus for “rehabilitation” has been ongoing since 2016 with significant increase since the 2022 full-scale invasion.²⁷ For each group of children identified in this report, Yale HRL was unable to identify clear, consistent, and corroborative data that confirm 1) that specific groups of children had remained in the identified facilities in Belarus, or 2) that the identified children had returned to Russia-occupied Ukraine from Belarus.

Methodology

The investigative methodology for this report relies primarily on open source research. This process includes aggregating and cross-verifying multiple sources to identify and validate estimates of the number of children that have been deported to Belarus, geolocate the facilities to which children from Ukraine were deported, and identify both the activities that occurred at these facilities and the chain of command involved. Analysis of commercially available very high resolution (VHR) satellite imagery was performed in limited cases to verify information established through open source research.

The claims in this report were verified according to standards established by the Berkeley Protocol on Digital Open Source Investigations.²⁸ Sources were assessed for expertise, clear proximity to events, political, economic, or other ulterior motivations, and history of posting authentic content. An assessment of bias did not mean that the information provided was not valid, but it did require additional analysis and scrutiny. 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, Russian, or Belarusian were translated and verified by language experts.

Facility Identification and Geolocation

Facilities were geolocated based on the names, addresses, and photographs identified in open source material, often published by individuals facilitating transportation. VHR satellite imagery was used to verify and corroborate details about facilities with relevant visible components. At least two analysts were required to concur on a facility's location to consider it to be geolocated. Once a facility's location was geolocated, information about the activities that occurred at these sites and the experiences of children was also collected, analyzed, and verified.

Network of Entities Involved

Many of the individuals and organizations involved in the movement of children from Ukraine to Belarus publicly acknowledged and even advertised their involvement through official channels.²⁹ These assertions, when they occur, were treated as *prima facie* evidence of the involvement of these individuals and organizations. Where such information was unavailable, multiple independent sources were utilized to verify the involvement of an individual or organization named in this report. Individuals and entities who appeared to be coerced into participation were not identified.

The network of entities involved in this systematic program includes regime officials of Belarus and Russia, as well as ministries and official agencies of Belarus and Russia. What is unique about the particular activities described in this report is the integral involvement of a complex network of regime-aligned private individuals, state-run enterprises, civil society groups, and nationalist extremist groups from both countries, including a motorcycle club and a swimming organization.

Limitations

This report's sources are limited to remote sensing and open source data. As a result, some data are not incorporated because it was not public or not yet known to the researchers at the time of writing. The activities described in this report were often framed and presented in open source data that contained significant misinformation and disinformation that itself had to be analyzed. Yale HRL relied on well-established procedures for identifying mis- and disinformation and mitigating its impact on research. These procedures require linguistic and area experts to interpret misleading information, conduct forensic analysis of any visual material suspected to be manipulated, and evaluate multiple independent sources to verify claims. Processes for identifying and mitigating these types of content—regardless of whether it was intentionally or unintentionally generated—have been standardized within Yale HRL's investigative workflow.

II. BACKGROUND AND TIMELINE OF KEY EVENTS

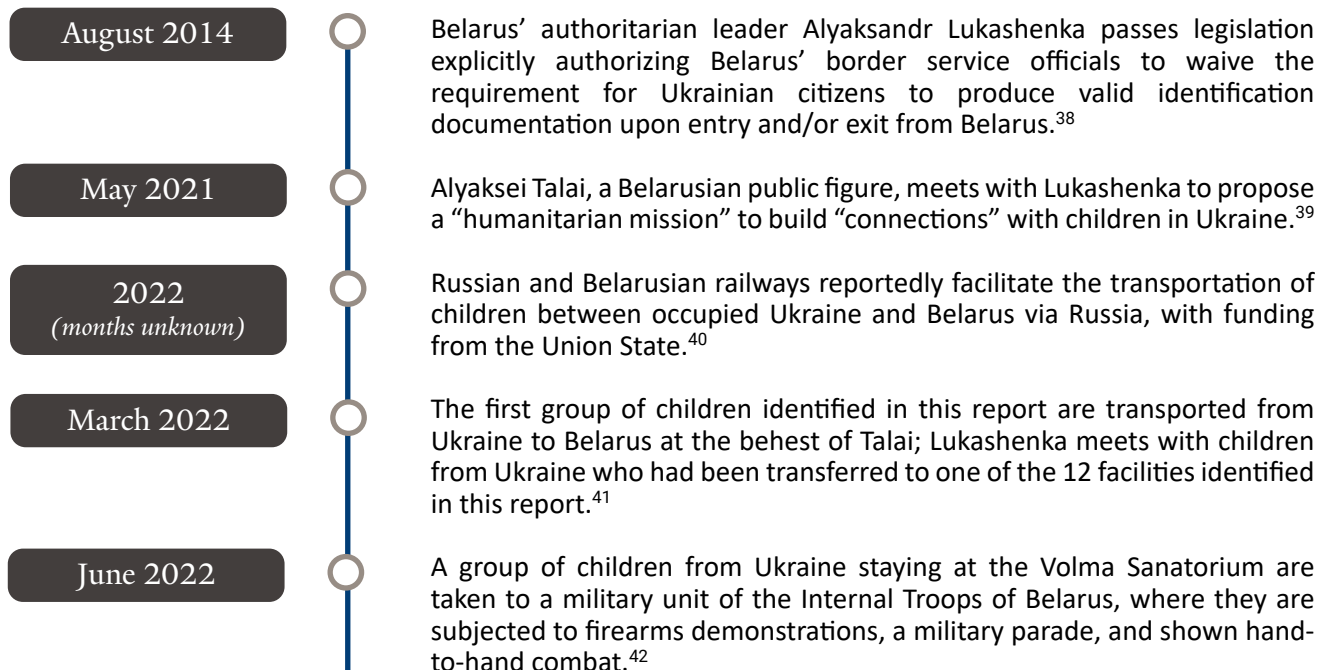
Belarus is a Russia-aligned authoritarian client state that severely restricts civil liberties and has criminalized opposition groups and independent civil society, according to human rights monitors.³⁰ The activities that this report documents occur in an environment in which the actions of state and non-state organizations could not reasonably be expected to take place without either the direct or implicit approval of the Lukashenka regime.

Russia and Belarus are co-members of what is known as the “Union State,” a supranational entity created in the immediate post-Soviet period through a series of formal bilateral agreements.³¹ The Union State is headed by Lukashenka and Putin and executes decisions on common defense, economic, and social policies.³² Russia’s forces used Belarus as a staging ground to launch its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, including but not limited to: hosting thousands of Russia’s troops; providing fuel, air defense, and air traffic control; and supporting the flow of Russia’s ground forces across its borders into Ukraine.³³ High-level officials in Russia’s federal government and Belarus’ regime passed decrees facilitating the movement of children from Ukraine to Russia and mandating pro-regime education

throughout Belarus both before and after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022.³⁴ These legislative changes allowed children to be transported from Ukraine to Russia without parental consent and supported the re-education of children from Ukraine. Officials from Russia and Belarus also coordinated with relevant transportation authorities to deport thousands of children from Ukraine to Belarus.³⁵

The campaign of transporting children from Ukraine to Belarus between 2022 and 2023 described in this report is not the first time that Lukashenka and Putin have worked together to take children from Ukraine to Belarus. Belarus and Russia have an established prior history of systematic, coordinated removal of children from Ukraine to facilities in Belarus that pre-dates Russia’s most recent invasion of Ukraine, with reports of similar activities dating back to at least 2016.³⁶ Children at those facilities were placed in a program of what Yale HRL defines as “re-education”—activities that promote specific military, cultural, and historical education narratives determined by the regime.³⁷ “Pro-regime” in this report refers to individuals, activities, directions, and policies aligned with or subordinate to the Lukashenka and Putin regimes.

TIMELINE OF MAJOR EVENTS



September 2022

The Union State declares its intention to support the so-called “rehabilitation” of children from Donetsk and Luhansk; the Union State’s Council of Ministers adopt a resolution to send 1,050 children from Ukraine to Belarus.⁴³

14 Sept. 2022

The Ministry of Education and Science of the former so-called Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) identifies and targets children from Republican Budgetary General Education Institution (RBOU) “School 4 – Cadet Corps” in Donetsk to be moved to the Dubrava facility in Belarus.⁴⁴

Sept. to Oct. 2022

1,050 children from Ukraine are transported to the Dubrava facility in Minsk.⁴⁵

October 2022

Putin signs a decree granting regional government officials the authority to make amendments to their border policies for people arriving from Russia-occupied areas of Ukraine.⁴⁶

25 Oct. 2022

Dmitry Mezentsev, the Secretary of State of the Union State, and Talai meet children from Ukraine at the Dubrava facility.⁴⁷

December 2022

Russia’s Investigative Committee creates a cadet class entirely of children from Ukraine at a Luhansk educational complex named after Russian pilot-cosmonaut Georgy Beregovoy, representing Russia’s concerted effort to militarize Ukraine’s children. Children from this school were subsequently taken to Belarus, where they were subjected to re-education in August 2023.⁴⁸

A group of children from Russia-occupied Horlivka are taken to see the Internal Troops of Belarus by Talai. Social media images show children wearing tactical gear and handling firearms.⁴⁹

March 2023

The Education Department of the Russia-occupied Horlivka city administration establishes a “quota” for four children aged between nine and 15 years old to be sent to the Dubrava facility in Belarus.⁵⁰

9 March 2023

The Governor of Rostov waives documentation requirements—including valid passports and powers of attorney—for children from Ukraine entering the Rostov region of Russia, in explicit reference to Putin’s decree issued in October 2022.⁵¹

10 March 2023

Talai “requests assistance” from the Union State to organize the transportation of 2,000 children from Ukraine to Belarus, including specifically “children from low-income families and orphans”.⁵²

21 March 2023

Mezentsev writes a letter to the CEO of Russian Railways OJSC stating the intent to transport more than 2,000 children from Ukraine to Belarus in 2023 in coordination with Talai, 1,050 of whom will be transported to facilities in Belarus via Rostov in the first half of the year and 950 in the second half of 2023.⁵³

28 April 2023

Talai meets with Russia’s ambassador to Belarus, Boris Gryzlov, to discuss the “rehabilitation of schoolchildren from new Russian regions” and initiatives aimed at “preserving the historical history and truth about the Great Patriotic War”.⁵⁴

April - May 2023

More than 1,000 children are transported from Ukraine to the Dubrava facility in Minsk.⁵⁵

Reported in
June 2023

The Ministry of Education of the former so-called LPR reportedly prepares powers of attorney for 30 purported orphans in Ukraine to be transported to Belarus.⁵⁶

3 June 2023

Mezentsev claims that more than 2,000 children from the former so-called LPR and DPR had been transported to Minsk at the behest of the Union State.⁵⁷

June 2023

Russia's Investigative Committee identifies children in a school in Russia-occupied Ukraine to be transported to Belarus.⁵⁸

20 June 2023

An OSCE report finds that at least one child evacuated to Belarus for medical reasons had their stay extended for non-medical reasons, which the report's authors determine to be a violation of Article 78 of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions.⁵⁹

July 2023

Alyaksei Talai, Dmitry Shevtsov, and pro-Russia regime bloggers visit children at a school in Russia-occupied Luhansk.⁶⁰

August 2023

Lukashenka states that he and Putin have been coordinating the transportation of children from Ukraine using Union State funds. He specifically states that he and Putin coordinate to finance the removal of children from Russia-occupied territory in Ukraine to Belarus.⁶¹

A group of five children from the school in Russia-occupied Luhansk visited by Russia's Investigative Committee in December 2022 are transported to the Zubrenok facility in Belarus for "patriotic education" and are seen wearing military-style uniforms with the "Z" insignia.⁶²

18 Sept. 2023

A group of 48 children from Ukraine arrives in Novopolotsk, Belarus. Travel was organized by the Alyaksei Talai Foundation and demonstrates continuous removal of children from Ukraine to Belarus by the foundation.⁶³

30 Oct. 2023

A group of 37 children from Ukraine arrive in Belarus on a trip facilitated by Talai to reportedly undergo unspecified "medical evaluations" in Brest, Belarus where they are subjected to re-education.⁶⁴

III. DETAILED FINDINGS

1. At least 2,442 children from Ukraine between the ages of six and 17, including children from vulnerable groups, have been transported to 13 facilities in Belarus.

Yale HRL has found that at least 2,442 children from Ukraine between the ages of six and 17 have been transported to 13 facilities in Belarus following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022.⁶⁵ Children were transported from at least 17 cities across Ukraine as of October 2023.⁶⁶ Over 2,050 children from Ukraine were transported to the Dubrava facility in Belarus between September 2022 and May 2023.⁶⁷ The other approximately 392 children have been accommodated across the remaining 12 facilities.

Children among especially vulnerable populations have been identified for movement to Belarus. Individuals coordinating the movement of children from occupied Ukraine to Belarus, as well as various Belarusian media sources, have stated that children taken from Ukraine include orphans, children from institutional homes, children with disabilities, children of military personnel, children from low-income families, and “adopted children.”⁶⁸

The total number of children transported is likely higher, as Yale HRL only counted those whose removal from Ukraine could be confirmed with high confidence. The National Anti-Crisis Management (NAM) organization, known as a prominent Belarusian opposition group to Alyaksandr Lukashenka’s regime and self-described analytics center that submitted data to the International Criminal Court on children’s removal from Ukraine to Belarus, states that 2,150 children have been taken to Belarus as of May 2023.⁶⁹ Western media and civil society groups have largely relied on this number as the most credible estimate to date of the number of children deported to Belarus.⁷⁰ However, this report demonstrates Yale HRL’s high-confidence assessment that the total number of children from Ukraine transported to Belarus is likely higher than 2,442.

Children from Ukraine were taken to at least 13 facilities in six regions in Belarus. Yale HRL was unable to geolocate where three groups of children from Ukraine had been taken in Belarus but have confirmed they were transported to facilities located somewhere within the Minsk, Gomel, and Brest regions of Belarus.⁷¹ Because analysts were not able to establish with high confidence

the exact locations to which they were transported in the Brest, Gomel, and Minsk regions, respectively, these three facilities were not included in the 13 total facilities identified in this report.

Locations where children have been taken

Yale HRL has identified at least 13 locations in Belarus—three sanatoriums, five “health camps,” three hospitals, one hotel, and one dormitory—to which children from Ukraine have been transported since Russia’s full-scale invasion in February 2022.⁷² The 13 facilities identified by Yale HRL are listed in the figure below, and illustrate which facilities have subjected children from Ukraine to re-education and military training (*See Section 6, Military Training*).

These 13 facilities are located throughout the Minsk, Brest, Vitebsk, Mogilev, Grodno, and Gomel regions of Belarus. The figure below shows the locations of these 13 facilities as well as the approximate locations of the three groups of children transported to unconfirmed locations in Belarus.

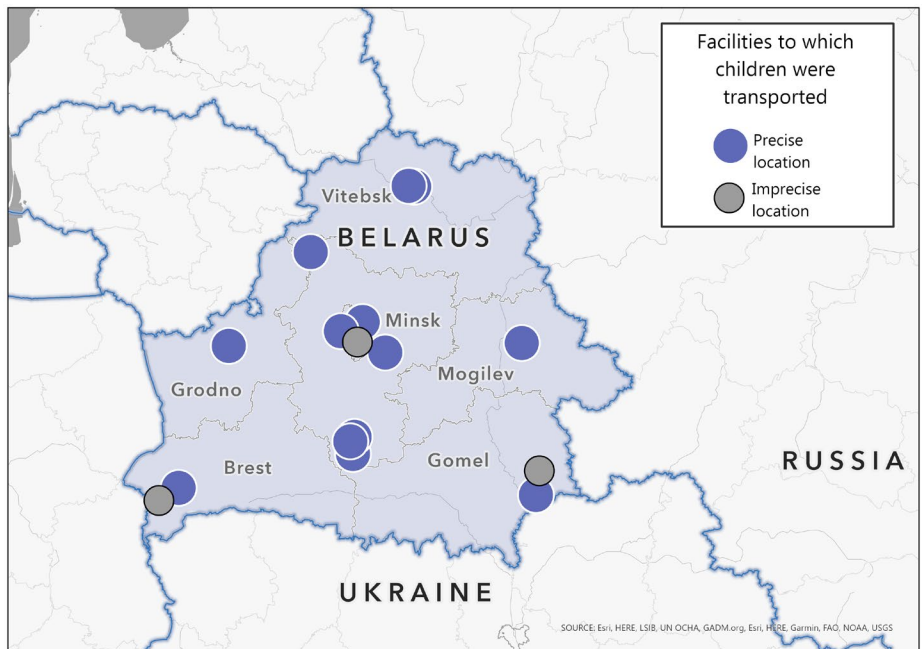


Figure 1: Thirteen facilities in Belarus to which children from Ukraine were transported following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine

Approximately 85% of the children identified in this report were taken to the DOL Dubrava facility (commonly referred to as “Dubrava”) located in the Soligorsk district of Minsk Oblast. More than 2,050 children were transported from Ukraine through Russia to this facility between September 2022 and May 2023.⁷³ This facility is owned by OSJC Belaruskali, a state-owned

Facility Name (Russian)	Facility Name (English)	Documented Activities
Гостиница “Беларусь”	Hotel Belarus	Re-education
ДОЛ Дубрава	DOL Dubrava <i>(often referred to as “Dubrava” in media and this report)</i>	Re-education and military training
Санаторий Волма	Volma sanatorium	Re-education and military training
Санаторий Зеленый бор	Green Forest/Zelenyĭ Bor sanatorium	Re-education
Санаторий Золотые пески	Golden Sands sanatorium	Activities unknown
Солигорской ЦРБ	Soligorsk Central District Hospital	Activities unknown
Старобинская городская больница	Starobinsk Hospital	Activities unknown
Лагерь Березка	Berėzka / Birch camp	Re-education and military training
Лагерь Заря	Zarya camp	Re-education and military training
Общежитие Завода Полимир	Polymir Factory Dormitory	Activities unknown
Оздоровительного центра Зубренок	Zubrenok Health Center	Re-education and military training
Реабилитационно-оздоровительный центр «Колос»	Kolos Children’s Rehabilitation and Health Center	Activities unknown
Республиканская детская больница медицинской реабилитации	Republican Children’s Hospital of Medical Rehabilitation	Activities unknown

Table 1. Facilities where Ukraine’s children have been housed in Belarus after 24 February 2022

potash company (see Section 4, OJSC Belaruskali).⁷⁴ Children from Ukraine were transported to a variety of other locations in Belarus, including the “Golden Sands sanatorium,” “Green Forest/Zelenyĭ Bor sanatorium,” “Volmasanatorium,” “Zaryacamp,” “Republican Children’s Hospital of Medical Rehabilitation, Ostroshitsky Town,” “Soligorsk Central District Hospital,” “Berėzka/Birch camp,” “Hotel Belarus,” “Starobinsk Hospital,” “Zubrenok Health Center,” “Kolos Children’s Rehabilitation and Health Center,” and the “Polymir Factory Dormitory.”⁷⁵ (See Section 6, Medical Activities subsection for more information on medical treatment and rehabilitation activities that allegedly occurred at these locations.)

Belarusian media claimed that diplomats from Mongolia, Palestine, Qatar, and Russia showed support for Belarus’ hosting of children from Ukraine and gave positive reviews of the conditions in which the children were held.⁷⁶ On 4 October 2023, foreign diplomats visited the children from Ukraine staying at the Polymir Factory Dormitory in Novopolotsk to reportedly “assess the conditions for recreation” for the children during their stay in Belarus.⁷⁷ Photographs and videos show diplomats surrounding children from Ukraine in what appears to be a school room and gym.⁷⁸ Belarusian media stated that no Western countries who have previously accused Belarus of “abducting” children were in attendance.⁷⁹

2. Russia’s systematic effort to identify, transport, and re-educate Ukraine’s children has been facilitated by Belarus.

Belarus’ regime and Russia’s federal government have been working together to coordinate and co-fund the movement of children from Russia-occupied Ukraine through Russia to Belarus. The movement of children from Russia-occupied Ukraine to Belarus is ultimately coordinated by Russia’s President Vladimir Putin and Belarus’ authoritarian leader Alyksandr Lukashenka through the Union State.⁸⁰

Formal and informal policy coordination and logistical collaboration with Russia’s President Vladimir Putin and his government makes Belarus’ campaign of targeting, transport, and re-education effectively a joint endeavor between Belarus and Russia. Russia and Belarus are co-members of the Union State, a supranational entity created in the immediate post-Soviet period through a series of formal agreements. The Union State is jointly headed by Lukashenka and Putin and executes decisions on common defense, economic, and social policies.⁸¹

Various agencies in Russia’s federal government—including Russia’s Investigative Committee and the Rostov Border Service of the Federal Security Bureau (FSB)—have played key roles in identifying and targeting

marginalized groups of children in Ukraine and facilitating their movement to Belarus.⁸²

The Role of the Russian Federation

The removal of children from Ukraine to Belarus was orchestrated at the highest levels of Russia's federal government and Belarus' regime at the behest of Lukashenka and Putin. The movement of children from Ukraine through Russia to Belarus was executed with Russia's active operational involvement in these removals at almost every stage.⁸³ Russia's federal government played an integral role in the removal of children from Ukraine; the targeting of children in Ukraine for deportation to Belarus; the signing of legal documents granting permission for children purported to be orphans to be transported to Belarus; and the passing of decrees waiving documentation requirements for children to be moved through Rostov-on-Don, a critical railway hub in Russia bordering the Russia-occupied regions in eastern Ukraine.⁸⁴

The Role of the Union State

Lukashenka's and Putin's efforts to move children from Ukraine to Belarus were coordinated via the Union State. Policies and actions implemented by the Union State are voted into law by two votes. The heads of state—Lukashenka and Putin, or a person authorized by them—each cast one vote.⁸⁵ Both states must unanimously vote to execute any actions on behalf of the Union State; as such, all decisions executed by the Union State are a joint effort coordinated by both Russia and Belarus. The highest levels of Russia's and Belarus' regimes have therefore jointly coordinated the Union State's activities to remove—and in some cases re-educate—children from Ukraine.⁸⁶ Yale HRL cannot definitively assess which party initiated this collaboration; however, Lukashenka asserts that he proposed that Union State funds be spent on children from Ukraine.⁸⁷

The Union State has allocated at least tens of millions of rubles to move children from Ukraine to Belarus, and has coordinated with the Alyaksei Talai Foundation, OJSC Belaruskali, OJSC Russian Railways, and other entities to facilitate these deportations.⁸⁸ In September 2022, the Union State's Council of Ministers adopted a resolution to host 1,050 children from Ukraine in Belarus.⁸⁹ When the Union State's Secretary of State Dmitry Mezentsev announced that this resolution was passed, Russia's state-owned media TASS news claimed that this decision “confirms the position of Russian President Vladimir Putin and President of Belarus Alyaksandr Lukashenka in support of the continuation of humanitarian assistance to children living in the Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics.”⁹⁰

At least as early as December 2022, the Union State spearheaded the project “Helping the Children from Donbass,” which formalized the Union State's

commitment to providing so-called humanitarian aid to children in Russia-occupied Ukraine.⁹¹ Yale HRL has not been able to confirm which elements of the deportation and re-education efforts were implemented under this effort.

As of June 2023, Mezentsev claimed, “according to the decision of the governing bodies of the Union State,” that more than 2,000 children from the former so-called LPR and DPR visited purported health camps in Minsk.⁹² In October 2022, Mezentsev visited the Dubrava facility, which at the time hosted over 300 children from Ukraine and has hosted more than 2,050 children from Ukraine thus far. Belarusian media published photographs in October 2022 of Mezentsev surrounded by children reportedly from Ukraine.⁹³

The removal of children from Ukraine to Belarus was orchestrated at the highest levels of Russia's federal government and Belarus' regime at the behest of Lukashenka and Putin.

During his visit to the Dubrava facility, Mezentsev stated that tens of millions of rubles had been allocated by the Union State to fund the transportation of children from Ukraine to Belarus.⁹⁴ The *Wall Street Journal* later reported OJSC Belaruskali spent millions of dollars transporting children from Ukraine to the Dubrava facility in Belarus.⁹⁵ At least three of these transportation efforts funded by the Union State routed children through Rostov-on-Don in Russia before they were sent to Belarus.⁹⁶ Mezentsev later claimed in June 2023 that the transportation of children from Ukraine to Belarus was in accordance with decisions made by the Union State, and that they would continue to do so, “no matter what anyone says.”⁹⁷

In March 2023, Mezentsev wrote a letter to Oleg Belozarov, the CEO of the Russian state-owned enterprise OJSC Russian Railways, asking for his assistance in the deportation of 2,000 children from Ukraine to Belarus under Talai's foundation in 2023, approximately 1,050 in the first half of 2023 and 950 in the second half of 2023. In this letter he reminded Belozarov that OJSC Russian Railways and Belarusian Railways provided such assistance in 2022, and that the cost of the operation was covered by the Union State budget.⁹⁸ (See *Subsection 5 on Transportation below for details on the provenance of this letter.*)

Laws and policies facilitating deportation of children from Ukraine to Belarus

A critical element of Belarus' and Russia's bilateral collaboration in the systematic deportation and re-education of children from Russia-occupied areas of Ukraine since February 2022 has been changes to laws, policies, consent practices, and educational mandates relevant to the overall program of moving Ukraine's children to Belarus.⁹⁹ These changes removed barriers that could have slowed efforts by Belarus and Russia to transport children from Ukraine to Belarus. The waiver of legal identification and documentation of parental consent can obfuscate records of the transport of people into Belarus, including children.

Belarus' regime has been facilitating the movement of people from Ukraine since Russia's invasion of Crimea in 2014. In August 2014, Lukashenka passed legislation explicitly authorizing Belarus' border service officials to waive the requirement of citizens of Ukraine to produce valid documentation upon entry to and/or exit from Belarus.¹⁰⁰

In March 2023, the governor of the Rostov region of Russia issued a decree changing the documentation requirements for people crossing into the region from

occupied areas of Ukraine.¹⁰¹ The decree issued by the governor of Rostov allows children to enter Rostov without a passport. Importantly, the Rostov decree also states that "A notarized consent form from one of the parents, legal guardians or trustees is not required for minor citizens of the Russian Federation, DPR, LPR, or minor foreign citizens to cross the administrative border of the Rostov Region."¹⁰²

Together, these provisions expedite the movement of children from Ukraine into Belarus through Russia, as they eliminate the requirement for children to have valid passports and consent from parents, guardians, or legal trustees to cross borders. Less than one month after the change of rules in Rostov, a group of children from Ukraine was transported to Belarus through Rostov-on-Don.¹⁰³ Yale HRL has not been able to establish if these children were transported through Rostov versus other border regions as a direct result of the decree issued in March 2023.

Consent

Yale HRL is unable to identify how consent was obtained—if at all—for the majority of children transported from occupied Ukraine to Belarus. As previously discussed, the Rostov region waived all documentation requirements—including passports and assignment of powers of attorney—for children from Ukraine to enter Russia via Rostov. The age of majority in Russia and Belarus is 18, meaning that parents or legal guardians are the only individuals able to grant consent on behalf of children under the age of 18.¹⁰⁴ Removing the requirement for children to have signed powers of attorney subsequently allows children to be moved from Ukraine to Rostov without the documented permission of their parents or guardians, which was not permitted before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Yale HRL has previously reported problematic instances of consent documentation as part of Russia's systematic deportation of Ukraine's children, including signed powers of attorney providing authorization to unnamed, blank entities.¹⁰⁵

This report documents a systematic targeting of vulnerable groups of children, including those purported to be orphans, disabled children, children from low-income families, and children from large families, among others.¹⁰⁶ Yale HRL was unable to identify the conditions under which consent may have been obtained, or whether such consent can be considered meaningful to a degree consistent with international standards for obtaining consent from parents or guardians for the movement of children across borders. If legal guardians had granted consent for their child to be transported to Belarus, it is unclear whether they had done so freely and without coercion. If legal guardians and parents provided meaningful consent for their children to be transported to Russia and onward to Belarus, it remains unclear what activities, medical treatment, and other measures to which consent was provided, and whether the events in Belarus were consistent with those terms.

3. Lukashenka directly oversees Belarus' efforts in coordination with Russia.

Lukashenka has mobilized the highest levels of Belarus' regime and coordinated with various individuals and non-state organizations in Belarus to contribute to Russia's deportation of children from Ukraine.¹⁰⁷ In addition to passing laws coordinating the deportation and re-education of children from Ukraine, Lukashenka has personally visited children brought to Belarus by this effort and publicized his role.¹⁰⁸

Lukashenka facilitated the movement of children from occupied Ukraine to Belarus in the months leading up to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In May 2021, Lukashenka met with Alyaksei Talai, a prominent figure in the movement of children from Ukraine, who had recently returned from a trip to Donetsk and Luhansk.¹⁰⁹ The purpose of Lukashenka's meeting with Talai was reportedly to discuss future plans regarding children from Ukraine. Talai documented the trip, stating "this is only the beginning."¹¹⁰ Talai has been a central figure in the Lukashenka regime's program of identifying children for movement to Belarus, their subsequent deportation, and in some cases, their exposure to so-called "patriotic" re-education after their arrival at facilities, including military training (*See Section 4, Alyaksei Talai and the Alyaksei Talai Charity Foundation*).

Four months later, in September 2021, Talai—through his foundation, the Alyaksei Talai Charity Foundation—transported more than 100 children from Ukraine to the Zubrenok Health Center in Belarus, which he reports was at Lukashenka's invitation.¹¹¹ Lukashenka would later suggest to Putin that the Union State fund the movement of children from Ukraine to Belarus,¹¹² after which children from Russia-occupied Ukraine were transported to Belarus.¹¹³

Lukashenka also passed legislation on immigration, coordination of movement, and other issues related to Ukrainian citizens entering Belarus. A provision of this decree—introduced in 2014 and amended in 2022—simplifies the process by which children from Ukraine can be integrated into the Belarus' education system, paving the way for re-education efforts.¹¹⁴ Lukashenka also "personally oversees" the national youth policy, which includes the Belarusian Republican Youth Union, a pro-regime group that has subjected children from Ukraine to re-education efforts (*See Section 6, Re-education*)¹¹⁵ (*See Section 6, Re-education*)

Lukashenka has been personally and publicly involved with the program of deportation and re-education of children from Ukraine following Russia's full-scale invasion: in March 2022, children from Ukraine sent to Belarus were taken to watch a match played by Lukashenka's hockey team.¹¹⁶ Video footage shows Lukashenka handing out toys to the children from Ukraine, saying "this is all

for you!" in Russian.¹¹⁷ On at least one other occasion, products from Lukashenka's personal farmstead were distributed to children from Donetsk and Luhansk who had been taken to the Dubrava facility.¹¹⁸ Lukashenka also reportedly spoke at an event in December 2022 at which children transported from Ukraine were in attendance.¹¹⁹ Additionally, Lukashenka's elite armed forces group, special forces (Spetsnaz) Unit 3214, subjected children from Ukraine to military training.¹²⁰ Lukashenka has close ties with Spetsnaz, including Unit 3214, the same unit that subjected children from Ukraine to weaponry training (*see section 4*).¹²¹

Multiple organizations and media outlets identify Lukashenka as a primary figure in the removal of children from occupied Ukraine to Belarus.¹²² Members of Lukashenka's government, as well as official Union State social media channels, have also publicly praised Lukashenka for his involvement in these efforts.¹²³ Talai and Olga Volkova, whose involvement is detailed in later sections, personally thanked Lukashenka in May 2023 for his support in these efforts and claimed that the "visit" of thousands of children from occupied Ukraine to Belarus was a "great merit to [Lukashenka]."¹²⁴ In May 2023, a pro-Russia regime collaborationist organization located in the Russia-occupied Zaporizhzhia region, "We Are Together with United Russia," stated that the "trip" for children from Ukraine to Belarus was orchestrated under personal agreements between Lukashenka and Putin.¹²⁵

Lukashenka's coordination with Putin is evidenced by statements published on the official website of the Office of the President of Belarus, which note that Putin reportedly thanked Lukashenka for undertaking the so-called "assistance" for children from Ukraine.¹²⁶ He did so after Lukashenka signed a decree authorizing the provision of "humanitarian assistance at the expense of the Union State budget to students and educational institutions of the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic."¹²⁷

On 11 August 2023, Lukashenka stated that, in collaboration with Putin, the Union State had funded the transportation of children from occupied Ukraine to Belarus, claiming, "We have done this and will continue to do this, regardless of any reproaches."¹²⁸

4. Russia's Investigative Committee, the Ministries of Education of the former so-called Luhansk People's Republic and Donetsk People's Republic, and regime-aligned organizations from both countries have facilitated the movement of children from occupied Ukraine to Belarus.

Belarus' program of identification, transportation, and so-called "patriotic" re-education of children from Ukraine has been facilitated by both the security services of Belarus and Russia, as well as the Ministries of

Education in the former so-called DPR and LPR.¹²⁹ Russia's Investigative Committee—a federal state agency reporting to President Vladimir Putin and responsible for criminal investigations—has played a significant role in targeting children in Ukraine for movement to Belarus.¹³⁰ The Internal Troops of Belarus (hereafter, “Internal Troops”) have subjected children from Ukraine to military training.¹³¹ Russia's Border Service of the Federal Security Bureau (FSB) for the Rostov Oblast has been acknowledged by Talai as facilitating transportation of children to Belarus, though the full nature of the FSB's support for the program is unknown.¹³²

Internal Troops of Belarus

In at least two instances, children from Ukraine were taken to visit the 3rd Separate Special-Purpose Brigade (Military Unit No. 3214) of the Internal Troops, a militarized internal security apparatus within Belarus' Ministry of Internal Affairs that is under United States sanctions.¹³³ At these locations, children were subjected to military training, demonstrations of weaponry, military parades, and tours of the brigade's headquarters.¹³⁴ In December 2022, Belarus' Ministry of Internal Affairs published photographs of young children from Ukraine

undergoing military training with Military Unit No. 3214 of the Internal Troops, in which they can be seen wearing tactical gear and holding guns (*see Section 6, Military Training subsection*).¹³⁵

The special forces (Spetsnaz) Unit 3214 is a special rapid response unit with riot control function subordinate to the Ministry of Internal Affairs.¹³⁶ Spetsnaz has direct and close ties to Lukashenka: The Ministry of Internal Affairs, to which Unit 3214 is subordinate, and the State Security Committee's “Al'fa group” jointly form the basis of the President's Security Service.¹³⁷ Lukashenka visited the unit in Uruchie on 28 July 2020, 12 days before the 9 August presidential elections that year, and identified “preserving the country” and “not allowing destabilization” as the “most important and primary task” before both the president and law enforcement.¹³⁸ On this visit, Lukashenka watched as Unit 3214 carried out a life-scale demonstration of suppressing street protests.¹³⁹ The unit participated in the violent crackdowns against pro-democracy protests following the 9 August 2020 elections.¹⁴⁰ Before 2020, there is evidence of this unit acting to protect the specific political interests of Lukashenka himself, independently of other government organs, and of

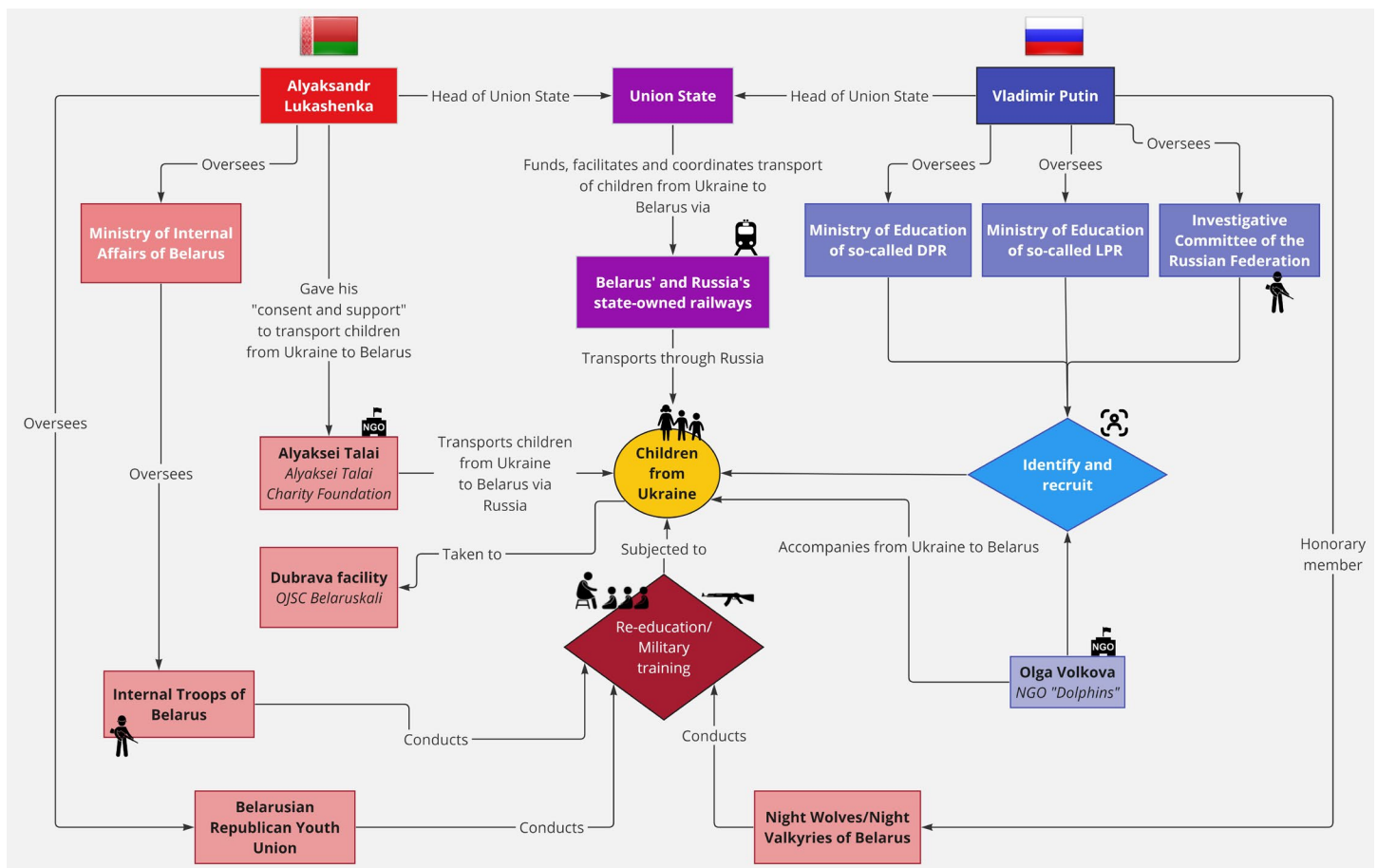


Figure 2: Network of main actors and organizations involved in organizing the removal of children from Ukraine to Belarus

Lukashenka protecting the leadership of this unit from other Belarusian law enforcement. In November 2000, Belarus' then-prosecutor general Oleg Bozhelko issued an arrest warrant for the then-commander of Unit 3214, Dmitry Pavlichenko, on suspicion of having founded a "death squad" that assassinated political opponents of Lukashenka from 1999 through 2000. Pavlichenko returned to his post days later, following Lukashenka's personal request that he be released from prison.¹⁴¹

Russia's Investigative Committee

Russia's Investigative Committee has identified and targeted children in occupied areas of Ukraine for removal to Belarus. The agency was nominally established in 2010 as an anti-corruption unit and conducts criminal investigations.¹⁴² Members of the Investigative Committee have visited schools, hospitals, and orphanages in Ukraine since the full-scale invasion in February 2022.¹⁴³ The Committee itself claims to have transported 323 children from Ukraine to Russia since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.¹⁴⁴

Russia's federal agencies, especially the Investigative Committee, have coordinated with Belarus to identify and target children from Russia-occupied Ukraine to be specifically enrolled in military training in Belarus.¹⁴⁵ In December 2022, Russia's Investigative Committee created a specialized cadet class in Luhansk specifically for children from Ukraine at a Luhansk educational complex named after pilot-cosmonaut Georgy Beregovoy.¹⁴⁶ This specialized cadet corps class represents a concerted effort to militarize Ukrainian children, which is further emphasized with a name that refers to Russia's national heroes in Ukraine. It is unknown where and how often similar Russian cadet corps are being formed in occupied areas of Ukraine by Russia's occupation officials. In June 2023, advisors from the Investigative Committee recruited students from this school to the Artek facility in Russia and the Zubrenok Health Center in Belarus.¹⁴⁷ In August the Investigative Committee reported that nine children from this school had been transported to Artek and five children had been transported to Zubrenok for "patriotic education," where they are seen wearing military uniforms with the "Z" insignia.¹⁴⁸ On 31 August 2023, the Investigative Committee claimed that the "Luhansk cadets became part of the Russian cadet movement."¹⁴⁹

Ministries of Education of the former so-called DPR and LPR

Russia's regional Ministries of Education have been integral in moving children from Ukraine to Belarus.¹⁵⁰ According to the Union State and various media outlets in Russia and Belarus, the Ministry of Education of the former so-called LPR prepared powers of attorney for 30 purported orphans to be moved from Ukraine to Belarus through Russia.¹⁵¹ The Union State's Secretary of State Mezentsev claimed the purported orphans

had a "guaranteed return"; their status remains under investigation by Yale HRL.¹⁵² Yale HRL was unable to verify the family details of the 30 children purported to be orphans. Furthermore, Yale HRL was unable to identify what role the Ministry of Education of the former so-called LPR played in additional removals, if any, of children from Ukraine to Belarus.

The Ministry of Education and Science of the former so-called DPR addressed a letter to the director of the RBOU "School 4 – Cadet Corps" in Donetsk requesting the school submit applications for children from "preferential categories"—including those with disabilities, orphans, and those from low-income families—to be sent to the Dubrava facility.¹⁵³ The letter listed the documentation required for the children to be eligible and claimed that their school had a "quota" of 32 children from the preferential categories that would be sent to Dubrava.¹⁵⁴ Belarus' news media claimed that children from this school attended the Dubrava facility in September 2023.¹⁵⁵

Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB)

The extent of the FSB's involvement in the removal of children from Ukraine to Belarus is unclear. However, Yale HRL has identified data suggesting the FSB was involved in transporting children from Ukraine to Belarus. On 11 December 2022, during a period when children from occupied Ukraine had been transported to Minsk, Talai thanked various individuals and entities from Russia and Belarus, including Lukashenka, Putin, the Union State, Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Belarus, and the Border Service of the FSB for their "assistance and support."¹⁵⁶

The FSB has allegedly been involved in previous efforts to move children from occupied areas of Ukraine to Russia. In March 2022, Russia's state FSB Rostov Border Force shared information pertaining to the simplification of rules related to cross-border movement of minors between Ukraine and Rostov Oblast.¹⁵⁷ Additionally, the governor of Rostov removed pre-existing policy and legal barriers to the rapid and undocumented movement across the frontier of the oblast bordering Russia in March 2023, as the next section will explore in depth.¹⁵⁸

Key private individuals and non-governmental organizations involved in program

Non-state actors have had a notable role in this system, including in identifying, transporting and re-educating children from Ukraine. Some entities, including Talai and his foundation, play a significant and public role in facilitating the transportation of children from Ukraine to facilities across Belarus. These entities align strongly with pro-regime views and are closely associated with state actors. For example, the Night Wolves, an ultranationalist militant extremist motorcycle club that has branches in both Belarus and Russia, is heavily aligned

with Vladimir Putin. Members of the club welcome Putin as an honorary member of their group and actively defend his policies to the point of violence to “suppress any uprising against Vladimir Putin.”¹⁵⁹

Alyaksei Talai and the Alyaksei Talai Charity Foundation

Alyaksei Talai is a prominent Paralympian from Belarus who, along with his eponymous foundation, plays a central role in the formation and implementation of the campaign to transport children from Ukraine to Belarus.¹⁶⁰ Talai and his foundation have helped organize and facilitate the movement of at least 2,375 children from Ukraine to at least eight facilities in Belarus and has coordinated with members of Belarus’ regime to facilitate the movement of children from Ukraine to Russia prior to transporting them to Belarus.¹⁶¹ Talai began coordinating the transport of children from Ukraine to Belarus through his foundation approximately five months prior to the full-scale invasion.¹⁶² Talai and his foundation have orchestrated the transport of multiple groups of children from Ukraine to the Dubrava facility, and the Alyaksei Talai Charity Foundation has made at least one fundraising call specifically for the movement of children from Ukraine to Belarus, indicating that they have also funded these efforts.¹⁶³

Talai has visited Russia-occupied areas of Ukraine on several occasions; his earliest reported trip took place in May 2021, and he has continued to visit Russia-occupied Ukraine in 2023.¹⁶⁴ Talai also targeted at least one group of children in Zaporizhzhia for movement to Belarus at the request of Vladimir Rogov, a former representative of the main council of the Zaporizhzhia Region’s military civil-administration and now head of the pro-Russia “We are together with Russia” movement.¹⁶⁵ Talai’s efforts have focused on transporting children from especially vulnerable groups; he claimed that he intended to “focus [his] attention precisely on children with disabilities.”¹⁶⁶

Talai has personally met at least eight groups of children from Ukraine upon their arrival to Belarus and has knowingly allowed children to be subjected to military training and re-education programs.¹⁶⁷ He has coordinated with the Belarusian Republican Youth Union, the Night Valkyries and Night Wolves, and the Internal Troops of Belarus on re-education and military training programs.¹⁶⁸ His foundation has also collaborated with the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Belarus, the Minsk City Executive Committee, and the Internal Troops of Belarus to organize a trip for children from Donetsk, during which children were subjected to military training, demonstrations of weaponry, military parades, and tours of an Internal Troops unit’s headquarters.¹⁶⁹

Talai has collaborated with officials from Russia, Belarus, and the Union State to coordinate deportations of children from Ukraine to Belarus. The official Union State website acknowledges his involvement: “The

Alyaksei Talai Charitable Foundation, with the support of the President of Belarus, the President of the Russian Federation, as well as the Standing Committee of the Union State, continues to implement a large-scale project, under which children from Donbas and the liberated territories come to Belarusian sanatoriums for rehabilitation.”¹⁷⁰ Talai claimed in June 2023 that he had received Lukashenka’s “consent and support” to move children from Ukraine to Belarus,¹⁷¹ and Lukashenka’s official website claims that Talai approached Lukashenka ten times about the effort to move children from Ukraine to Belarus and now coordinates their “rehabilitation.”¹⁷² Russian politician and Secretary of the Union State, Dmitry Mezentsev, confirmed Talai’s involvement in deportations,¹⁷³ and the two visited a facility to which over 300 children had been deported in October 2022.¹⁷⁴ Talai also met with Russia’s ambassador to Belarus in April 2023 to discuss the removal of children from Ukraine to Belarus under the “initiative of the Alyaksei Talai Foundation.”¹⁷⁵ Additionally, Sergey Afonin—an adviser to the Russian embassy in Belarus who visited children from Ukraine sent to the Dubrava facility—lauded Talai for his role in coordinating for children from Ukraine to be sent to the Dubrava facility and invited the children to visit Russia and Belarus.¹⁷⁶ In January 2023, the occupation administration of a city in the former so-called DPR gave Talai an award for his role in the movement of children from Ukraine to Belarus.¹⁷⁷

Talai has advertised his own involvement in transporting children from Belarus on social media. He maintains that all movements of children from Ukraine to Belarus were legal and that all children transported from Ukraine have returned home to Ukraine, although both claims are made without supporting evidence and have not been confirmed.¹⁷⁸ In response to recent accusations of his complicity in the removals, Talai asserted that he “is not afraid of anyone, no international courts, no international structures.”¹⁷⁹

Belarusian Red Cross Society Secretary General Dmitry Shevtsov

Yale HRL has documented the involvement of the Belarusian Red Cross Society’s Secretary General, Dmitry Shevtsov, who visited children from Ukraine in both Belarus and Russia-occupied Ukraine. Shevtsov has been vocal about his involvement, claiming that he “participated, is participating and will actively participate” in the movement of children from Ukraine to Belarus.¹⁸⁰

In December 2022, Alyaksei Talai organized the movement of a group of 43 children from Lysychansk, Ukraine, to Novopolotsk, Belarus.¹⁸¹ The group was met by several members of the Novopolotsk City Executive Committee, as well as Dmitry Shevtsov.¹⁸² On 12 July 2023, Talai reported on a visit he made to Lysychansk School No. 27 in Russia-occupied Luhansk with Shevtsov.¹⁸³ Individuals in pro-Russia military apparel were also

present, but Yale HRL was unable to determine whether these individuals were a part of Russia's military forces. Shevtsov was seen wearing pro-Russia military apparel with the "Z" insignia on his sleeve.¹⁸⁴ Yale HRL was unable to assess the contours of the relationship between Talai and the Secretary General Shevtsov, and why they were visiting children in Russia-occupied Luhansk.

The activities described above attributed to Dmitry Shevtsov contravene the stated values of the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement, which require members of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies to act with impartiality, neutrality, and independence from the agendas of state actors and non-humanitarian entities.¹⁸⁵ Yale HRL has not assessed that the actions of Dmitry Shevtsov represent the views of the Belarusian Red Cross Society.

In response to the activities of the Belarusian Red Cross Society Secretary General, the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) stated that Shevtsov's visit and associated activities implicate the Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and they referred this case to the Compliance and Mediation Committee.¹⁸⁶ All National Society members of the IFRC are held to the standards according to the Fundamental Principles of the Movement.¹⁸⁷ National Society members are also fully independent organizations, and while IFRC's Governing Board (which is comprised of the leadership of multiple National Societies) can sanction or exclude National Societies from the Federation, they have no direct control over National Societies' personnel or operations.¹⁸⁸ In October 2023, the IFRC Compliance and Mediation Committee (CMC) found that the current Belarus Red Cross Secretary General breached the Red Cross Red Crescent Fundamental Principles, misused the emblem, and breached the IFRC integrity policy. However, the investigation found that the movement of children from Russia-occupied territories to Belarus was not led nor funded by the Belarusian Red Cross Society. The IFRC announced that the Belarusian Red Cross Society has until 30 November 2023 to dismiss the Secretary General, Dmitry Shevtsov, or else the International Federation will suspend the branch.¹⁸⁹ This disciplinary action is in response to Shevtsov's apparent violations of the organization's principles of neutrality and integrity.¹⁹⁰

OJSC Belaruskali

Yale HRL has assessed that the Belarusian state-owned enterprise OJSC Belaruskali, an entity under sanctions from the United States Department of Treasury for being owned or controlled by the Government of Belarus, plays a pivotal role in the movement of children from Ukraine arriving in Belarus.¹⁹¹ Pavel Latushka, a Belarusian opposition figure who has provided evidence of the forced relocation of children from Ukraine to the International Criminal Court, has claimed that the head of

OJSC Belaruskali, Ivan Halavaty, was directly involved in the removal of Ukraine's children to Belarus.¹⁹² Halavaty is also a member of the Council of the Republic, the upper house of the Belarusian Parliament.¹⁹³ Latushka also alleged that Halavaty personally ordered that the Dubrava facility be prepared to accommodate children from Ukraine.¹⁹⁴ Children were transported from Minsk to facilities throughout Belarus on buses belonging to Shakhtyor Soligorsk, a soccer team owned by Halavaty.¹⁹⁵ Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Dubrava facility, which is owned by OJSC Belaruskali, has held more than 2,050 children from Ukraine across six sessions between September 2022 and May 2023.¹⁹⁶ As of October 2022, Halavaty stated that more than 1,000 children had stayed at Dubrava, and that the facility "will continue to receive children."¹⁹⁷

Belarus' and Russia's state media have reported that OJSC Belaruskali has organized transportation for children from Ukraine both across "the border" (which border specifically was not clarified) and within Belarus and has subjected children to re-education and medical treatment.¹⁹⁸ Yale HRL was unable to determine whether the children's guardians had consented to any medical treatment to which children may have been subjected. OJSC Belaruskali also subjected children from Ukraine to re-education at their facility, where members of pro-regime nationalist and militarist organizations visited children from Ukraine.¹⁹⁹

Olga Volkova and the Dolphins

Yale HRL has assessed that the Donetsk-based organization called "Dolphins," an NGO that provides swimming lessons to individuals with disabilities, has also played a key role in the deportation of children from Ukraine to Belarus.²⁰⁰ The Dolphins organization, which is led by Olga Volkova according to Russian and Belarusian media outlets, has coordinated the movement of multiple groups of children from Ukraine to Belarus and been involved in subjecting children to re-education and military training.²⁰¹ Volkova and the Dolphins organization play an instrumental role as one of Talai's key partners in Russia-occupied Donetsk.²⁰²

After a meeting in Donetsk with Volkova in May 2021, Talai contacted Lukashenka to begin transporting children from Ukraine to Belarus.²⁰³ Between March 2022 and July 2023, Volkova accompanied at least six groups of children from Ukraine to Belarus.²⁰⁴ The Dolphins and the Alyaksei Talai Charity Foundation reportedly have a "longstanding" cooperation, and Volkova has openly discussed working with Talai, his foundation, and OJSC Belaruskali.²⁰⁵ In one instance in September 2022, Volkova and the Dolphins coordinated with the Alyaksei Talai Charity Foundation and OJSC Belaruskali to transport a group of six- to ten-year-old children from Ukraine to the Dubrava facility in Belarus.²⁰⁶ While a group of children from Ukraine was reportedly taken to Soligorsk

Central District Hospital in September 2022, Belarusian news media reported that Volkova was staying with the children “around the clock.”²⁰⁷ The Dolphins and Volkova also collaborated with the Alyaksei Talai Charity Foundation to organize a military training program for children from Ukraine in June 2022.²⁰⁸ Children, including some with disabilities, were taken to a training base of the Internal Troops of Belarus, where they were exposed to firearms and hand to hand combat.²⁰⁹ (See *Section 6, Military Training.*)

Belarusian Republican Youth Union

The Belarusian Republican Youth Union, an ultranationalist organization aimed at promoting “civic and patriotic education,” has played a key role in the re-education and indoctrination of children from Ukraine.²¹⁰ The Belarusian Republican Youth Union is supported by Lukashenka, who “personally oversees” national youth policy and claims that a unified youth union should be one of the primary pillars of Belarus’ society.²¹¹ The organization was involved in the re-education and indoctrination of at least two groups of children who had been deported from Ukraine to Belarus.²¹² The organization was also reportedly involved in coordinating train travel for children transported from Ukraine to Belarus.²¹³ The Belarusian Republican Youth Union met children arriving at the train station in Minsk on at least two separate occasions, in April and September 2023, and children from Ukraine were photographed holding the organization’s flag in both instances.²¹⁴ The Belarusian Republican Youth Union also facilitated re-education programs for children from Ukraine (see *Section 6, Re-education*). Additionally, the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Belarusian Republican Youth Union, Alexander Lukyanov, a well-known promoter of Lukashenka’s program of “patriotic” re-education, reportedly spoke at the closing ceremony of the Dubrava facility’s first shift, which included children from Ukraine, and distributed packets of stationery purchased by the Belarusian Republican Youth Union.²¹⁵ In July 2023, Alexander Saxonov, a representative of the Belarusian Republican Youth Union’s Mogilev branch, visited the Zarya facility, where at least 12 children from Ukraine had been moved for a purported educational program.²¹⁶ Saxonov reportedly discussed the Belarusian Republican Youth Union’s activities and proposed creating “opportunities” for the creative development of the children.²¹⁷ Yale HRL was not able to determine what opportunities were discussed.

Night Wolves & Night Valkyries

Members of the Belarusian branches of Russia-based nationalist organizations, including the all-male ultranationalist militant group the Night Wolves and their female counterpart, the Night Valkyries, have facilitated programs for children deported from Ukraine to Belarus.

The Night Wolves is an extremist group that actively supports Russia’s state propaganda, denies Ukraine’s right to statehood, and supports calls to “de-nazify” Ukraine.²¹⁸ The group is led by Alexander Zaldastanov, a vocal supporter of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and has been a designated sanctioned entity by the US Department of Treasury since 2014.²¹⁹ The Night Wolves has been closely tied to Russia’s special services.²²⁰ In 2022, the group helped recruit separatist fighters in Donetsk and Luhansk and dispatched a volunteer contingent that identifies as “Night Wolves,” to fight on the front lines of Donetsk.²²¹ This volunteer contingent received public support and combat equipment from the Russian state entity Roscosmos, a state corporation in Russia specializing in aerospace research.²²² Members of the Night Wolves were involved in the “Crimean self-defense forces” as early as February 2014, which staged resistance against the government of Ukraine.²²³

The Night Wolves and Night Valkyries have been involved in various programs in Belarus to which children moved from Ukraine were subjected. In April 2023, the Night Wolves and Night Valkyries met children transported from Ukraine at the Minsk train station in Belarus.²²⁴ Upon meeting, children arriving from Ukraine were photographed holding flags of Belarus and the former so-called DPR.²²⁵ The Night Wolves and Night Valkyries of Belarus have met children from Ukraine arriving in Belarus on at least three prior occasions, in September, October, and December 2022.²²⁶ The Night Valkyries of Belarus also accompanied children from Ukraine to a Belarusian Orthodox church in September 2022 on a trip orchestrated by Talai and Volkova.²²⁷ In October 2022, the Night Wolves and Night Valkyries of Belarus posted photos on their social media accounts with children from Ukraine sitting on Night Wolves’ and Night Valkyries members’ motorcycles and wearing helmets.²²⁸ The Night Valkyries have publicly supported the Alyaksei Talai Charity Foundation, sharing the Foundation’s calls for donations for children from Ukraine through his foundation on the Night Valkyries’ social media accounts on 22 November 2022.²²⁹

5. Children from occupied Ukraine have been transported to Belarus through Russia.

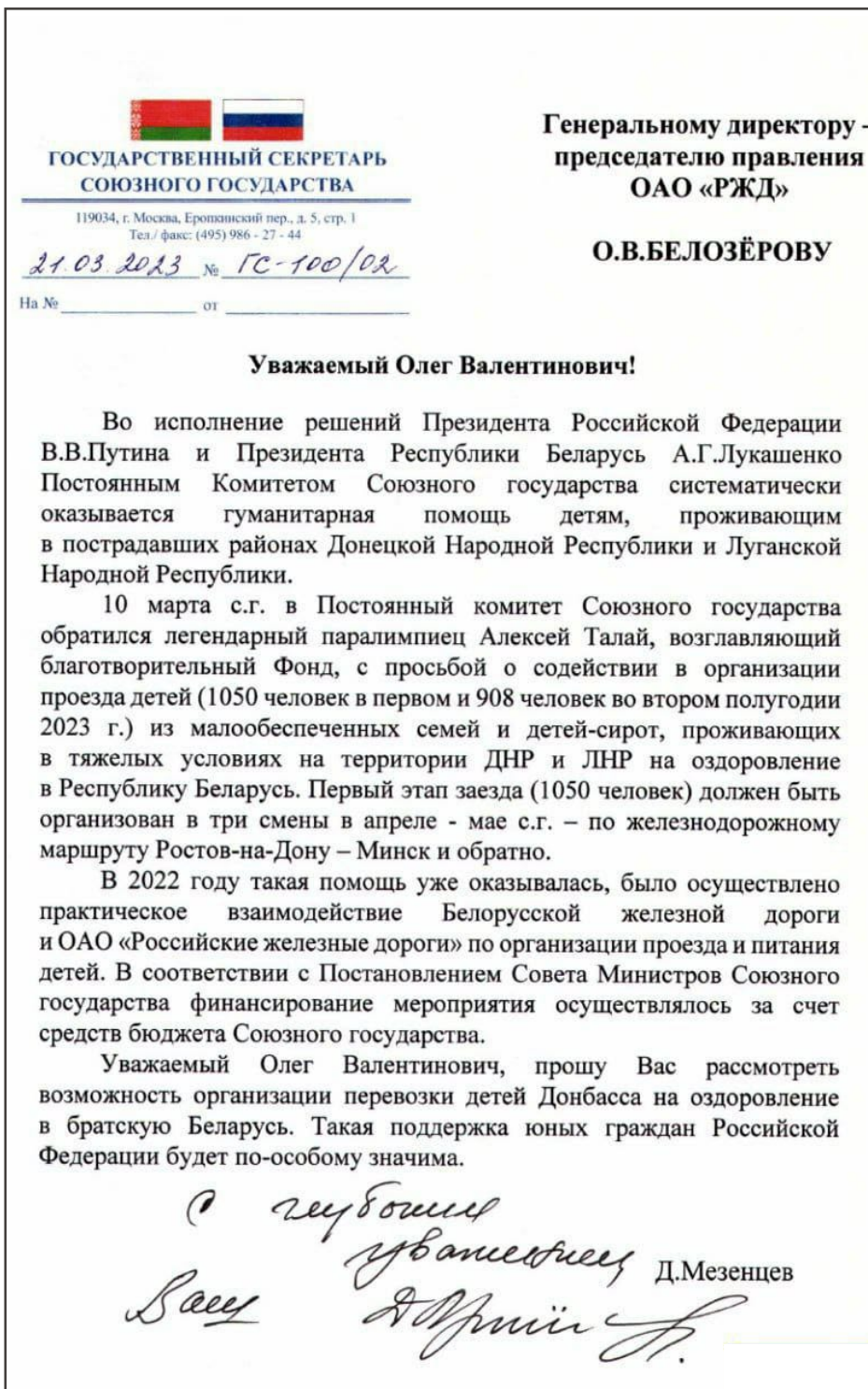
Yale HRL assesses that it is highly likely that the majority of children from Ukraine transported to Belarus traveled largely by rail via the city of Rostov-on-Don in Russia’s Rostov oblast.²³⁰ This finding is significant because it shows Russia’s integral operational involvement and political participation at both the local and national level in the logistics of transporting children from Russia-occupied areas in eastern Ukraine, through Russia, to Belarus.

Yale HRL has confirmed that at least three groups of children have specifically been transported from Russia-occupied Ukraine to facilities in Belarus through

Rostov-on-Don. These transports occurred between September 2022 and September 2023. Children came from the Zaporizhzhia region; Mariupol, Volnovakha, Ilovaisk, Berdyansk, Makiivka, and the city of Donetsk in the Donetsk region; and Lysychansk and Severodonetsk in the Luhansk region. They were transported to two locations in Belarus: the Dubrava facility in Soligorsk and the Polymir Factory Dormitory in Novopolotsk.²³¹

A from March 2023 signed by Dmitry Mezentsev confirmed that children would be transported from Ukraine through Rostov-on-Don to Belarus in 2023, and claimed that Russia and Belarus, in cooperation with various organizations in Russia and Belarus, coordinated the movement of children from Ukraine to Belarus in 2022 and planned to move thousands of additional children from Ukraine to Belarus in 2023.²³² The letter, reportedly obtained by a Belarusian hacker organization, was released by the Belarusian Investigative Centre, a collective of investigative journalists who investigate corruption within Belarus' regime.²³³ Yale HRL was unable to verify the authenticity of the letter firsthand. This letter, which was addressed to Oleg Belozerov, the CEO of OJSC Russian Railways, claimed that Belarusian Railways and OJSC Russian Railways coordinated to transport children from Ukraine to Belarus in 2022, which was financed from the budget of the Union State. This finding is corroborated by Mezentsev's October 2022 statement that the Union State spent millions of rubles to transport children from Ukraine through Rostov-on-Don to Belarus.²³⁴

Figure 3: Letter from Dimitry Mezentsev to Oleg Belozеров, CEO of Russian Railways. The letter was released by the Belarusian Investigative Centre, a collective of investigative journalists who investigate corruption within Belarus' regime. Yale HRL was unable to verify the authenticity of the letter firsthand.²³⁵



Translation by Yale HRL

Dear Oleg Valentinovich!

In pursuance of the decisions of the President of the Russian Federation V.V. Putin and the President of the Republic of Belarus A.G. Lukashenka, the *Postoyanni Komitet* [Standing Committee] of the Union State systematically provides humanitarian assistance to children living in the affected areas of the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic.

On March 10 this year, Aleksey Talai, the legendary Paralympian, who heads the charitable foundation, appealed to the *Postoyanni Komitet* of the Union State with a request for co-action in organizing the travel of children (1,050 people in the first half [of 2023] and 950 people in the second half of 2023) from low-income families and orphans living in difficult conditions on the territory of the DPR and LPR for rehabilitation in the Republic of Belarus. The first group's arrival (1050 people) should be organized in three shifts in April - May this year - along the railway route Rostov-on-Don - Minsk and back.

In 2022, such assistance had already been provided, practical cooperation of the Belarusian Railway and Russian Railway OJSC was carried out to organize travel and meals for children. In accordance with the Decree of the Council of Ministers of the Union State, the event was carried out at the expense of the budget of the Union State.

Dear Oleg Valentinovich, I ask you to consider the possibility of organizing the transportation of children from Donbass to brotherly Belarus for rehabilitation. Such support for young citizens of the Russian Federation will be especially significant.

(Handwritten note – with [inc.] sincere wishes, yours, [signature])

D. Mezentsev

Additionally, the letter details the organizations involved in the transportation of children from Ukraine to Belarus. For example, on 10 March 2023, Talai requested assistance for the transport of “children (...) from low-income families and orphans living in difficult conditions on the territory of the DPR and LPR for rehabilitation in the Republic of Belarus.”²³⁶ The letter also claims that Talai and the Union State intended to send 2,000 children from Ukraine to Belarus in 2023—1,050 people were to be transported to a facility in Minsk across three “camp” sessions between April-May 2023—and refers to children from Ukraine as “citizens of the Russian Federation.”²³⁷

The proposed movement of children from Ukraine detailed in the letter was executed within weeks. One month after Mezentsev signed this letter, children from Ukraine were transported through Rostov-on-Don to the Dubrava facility in Minsk, after which two more groups of children from Ukraine were transported to the same facility.²³⁸ In total, more than 1,000 children from Ukraine were transported to the Dubrava facility across three sessions between April and May 2023.

Yale HRL has identified routes by which children were transported from Ukraine through Rostov-on-Don to Belarus. Yale HRL used satellite imagery to assess that there are multiple rail lines and bus stations in operation in Donetsk that have routes into Rostov-on-Don in Russia which were active between March 2023 and July 2023. While satellite imagery was not available for the specific dates that children were allegedly transported from Ukraine to Belarus, rail car traffic is visible and facilities appear operational during the timeframe documented in this report. These observable indicators suggest this area’s railway infrastructure could support the transport of children during this time between Donetsk and Rostov-on-Don.

Additionally, according to a decree issued on 10 March 2023 by the Governor of Rostov, populations moving from Donetsk to Rostov-on-Don are required to pass through one of six checkpoints on the border of Donetsk and Rostov.²³⁹ According to the Ministry of Education and Science of the former so-called DPR, children transported by the Ministry to facilities “outside of the region” are taken by bus to the Uspenskaya checkpoint as of June 2023.²⁴⁰ The Uspenskaya checkpoint is one of

the six checkpoints through which residents can move from Donetsk to the Rostov region. Satellite imagery of the checkpoint area was not available for the month in which children from Ukraine were taken through this checkpoint and on to Belarus.

Furthermore, it is not currently possible to travel via ground or air between Russia-occupied Ukraine and Belarus without crossing through Russia or the frontlines of the war. Yale HRL has not identified a route available for the transportation of children to Belarus exclusively through Russia-occupied territory of Ukraine into Belarus. These findings, compounded by the verified documentation of at least three groups of children taken through Rostov-on-Don and the letter detailed above, has led Yale HRL to assess that most children were highly likely transported to Belarus through Russia.²⁴¹ Children appear to be transported first from Ukraine by bus to Rostov-on-Don in western Russia, followed by a train journey

from Rostov to Belarus, after which they are transported by bus to their final destination.²⁴² Their journeys require up to three days of travel before arrival at the train station in Minsk, Belarus.²⁴³



Figure 4: Map depicting the confirmed trajectory of at least three groups of children taken from Ukraine to Belarus via Rostov-on-Don in Russia

Belarus and Russia have recently invested resources to expand the transportation infrastructure likely used for the deportation of children from Ukraine to Belarus. In June 2023, a commercial bus route by the Belarus-based organization “Bus Express LLC” was established from Donetsk to Minsk.²⁴⁴ Additionally, bus routes between Mariupol, Donetsk and Rostov-on-Don were recently opened by a Russian state-owned enterprise called “Bus Stations of Donbass.”²⁴⁵ Plans to integrate Donetsk’s railway system into the Russian Railways System commenced in January 2023, according to the Deputy Prime Minister of the former so-called DPR, a Russia-appointed occupation official.²⁴⁶ Yale HRL has been unable to confirm whether children from Ukraine have been transported through Rostov-on-Don to Belarus using these specific bus and railway networks.

Children from Ukraine were transported from Minsk to facilities throughout Belarus on buses belonging to Shakhtyor Soligorsk, a soccer team owned by Ivan Halavaty, head of OJSC Belaruskali.²⁴⁷ In September 2023, children transported from Russia-occupied Ukraine to Belarus stopped at the Gomel train station in Belarus on their way to the Minsk station.²⁴⁸ In an article post about this movement of children from Ukraine, Belarusian media states that this stop was “tradition.”²⁴⁹ Yale HRL was unable to verify whether all children taken from Ukraine to Belarus were routed to arrive in Minsk, nor whether several groups of children who were taken to Minsk first stopped at the Gomel station.

Russia and Belarus continue to transport children from Ukraine to Belarus with the help of various pro-Russia and pro-regime organizations as of the publication of this report. Additionally, according to the letter from Mezentsev previously identified in this report, the Union State intends to transport more than 950 children from Ukraine to Belarus in the latter half of 2023.²⁵⁰

6. More than half of the facilities have been involved in re-education or purported medical activities.

Re-Education

Yale HRL defines re-education as the promotion of cultural, historical, societal, and patriotic messages or ideas that serve the political interests of Belarus’ regime. Among the 13 facilities identified in this report, at least eight facilities subjected children to re-education.²⁵¹ At least nine groups of children from Ukraine have passed through re-education programs at the eight facilities confirmed by this report to be engaged in these activities. Because this number relies primarily on self-reporting by officials and program facilitators, the true number may be higher. Yale HRL has confirmed that at least one group of the children staying at the Dubrava facility, to which more than 2,050 children were transported between September 2022 and May 2023, were subjected to re-education. Various ultranationalist extremist groups and

pro-regime organizations coordinated or participated in exposing children transported from Ukraine to the re-education efforts detailed below.

Re-education activities promote a narrow version of history, culture, and world events aligned with the political prerogatives of the regimes in Belarus and Russia, and in some instances, include military training. Re-education in this report includes—but is not limited to—lectures on history and geopolitics, visits to museums and historical sights, and speeches given by government figures and members of extremist organizations. Many of the 50 children in this group are reported to have disabilities; some appear in wheelchairs in photos.

In 2022, Lukashenka “ordered historians to devise a single, unified ‘correct interpretation of history’ to be taught in Belarus, and enacted legislation criminalizing any deviation from the approved historical narrative.”²⁵² Lukashenka expressly directed this so-called “patriotic education” in January 2022 and it was formally implemented in September 2022.²⁵³ An amendment to Article 15 of Belarus’ constitution, made via a referendum held three days after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, notes, “the State shall ensure the preservation of the historical truth and the memory of the heroic deed of the Belarusian people during the Great Patriotic War.”²⁵⁴

In April 2023, Talai and Russia’s ambassador to Belarus met to discuss the removal of children from Ukraine to Belarus under the “initiative of the Alyaksei Talai Foundation.”²⁵⁵ During the meeting, Talai allegedly presented several initiatives aimed at “preserving the historical memory and the truth” about Belarus’ historical interpretation of World War II.²⁵⁶ Talai’s pro-Belarus and pro-Russia regime views were further elucidated by a statement he made during an interview in March 2023, during which he claimed that “[Ukraine] should be demilitarized, denazified, and sane, loyal, good forces should come to power there.”²⁵⁷

Between December 2022 and January 2023, Talai organized for children from Luhansk to be sent to Novopolotsk over the New Year holiday.²⁵⁸ Upon their arrival in Belarus, children attended schools in the region.²⁵⁹ Parents and teachers in Belarus reportedly “wished to ‘host’” the children for the New Year holidays while they were in Belarus.²⁶⁰ It is unclear what this entailed, and whether children were transported from the Novopolotsk facility to additional locations while families “hosted” children from Ukraine for New Years. A second group of children from Ukraine attended local schools in Belarus in September 2023. Belarusian media and Talai advertised that a group of 48 children were brought over to Belarus from Lysychansk and Severodonetsk via Rostov-on-Don on 18 September 2023.²⁶¹ These children have been said to be staying at the Polymir Factory Dormitory for three weeks and attending Middle School No. 7 in Novopolotsk.²⁶²

One facility subjected a group of children to history education through the Republican Campaign *Dreams are Born—Dreams Come True*, a pro-regime program implemented by Belarus' Ministry of Education that aims to instill “fundamental values...that reflect the essence of Belarusian statehood.”²⁶³ This campaign promotes the “continuation of work on the formation in children of a responsible attitude to a reasonable combination of work and rest, the need to increase labor activity as a condition for social and personal success.”²⁶⁴ According to the Campaign's official website, it is a pro-regime nationalist program whose goals are to “[instill] in the younger generation fundamental values, ideas, beliefs that reflect the essence of Belarusian statehood” and to help children develop “a respectful attitude towards state symbols (coat of arms, flag, anthem) [and] state authorities of the country.”²⁶⁵ Yale HRL verified that children from Ukraine were in attendance at the time the facility subjected children to the Republican Campaign *Dreams are Born—Dreams Come True* program and assesses that children from Ukraine were likely exposed to these re-education programs during their time at the facility. The Belarusian Red Cross Society also publicized their involvement with this facility, though Yale HRL has not assessed whether they were involved in any re-education activities.²⁶⁶

Another group of children from Ukraine were met at the Minsk station by members of the Belarusian Republican Youth Union and photographed holding the organizational flag, an event which was subsequently shared on the organization's social media.²⁶⁷ Additionally, prior to meeting a group of children from Donetsk and Belarus, First Secretary of the Central Committee of the ultranationalist Belarusian Republican Youth Union Alexander Lukyanov declared that preserving the system of former so-called “patriotic education” instills a “sense of responsibility for the future of their country” in children.²⁶⁸ This “patriotic education” refers to the pro-regime curricula of propaganda mandated by Lukashenka in 2022.²⁶⁹ The Belarusian Republican Youth Union, with Lukyanov, Alyksandr Shpakovsky, the current Minister-Counselor of the Belarusian Embassy in the Russian Federation, and the military-patriotic group “Rodnik,” all visited a group of children at Dubrava to lecture them about “friendship and mutual assistance.”²⁷⁰ The Rodnik organization, based in Soligorsk, also visited a group of children at Dubrava facility, gave combat demonstrations, and allowed children to handle firearms.²⁷¹

The Night Wolves and Night Valkyries, both extremist groups, have also been involved in various programs to which children from Ukraine were subjected. In April 2023, the Night Wolves and Night Valkyries met children transported from Ukraine at the Minsk train station in Belarus.²⁷² Upon meeting the members, children arriving from Ukraine were photographed holding flags of Belarus and the former so-called DPR.²⁷³

Military Training

Yale HRL has identified at least six instances of military training that have occurred at facilities in Belarus holding children from Ukraine. At least two groups of children deported from Ukraine were brought to bases of the Internal Troops of Belarus.²⁷⁴ The unit was involved in the violent suppression of pro-democracy protests in Belarus in 2020 and has been placed under sanctions by the United States, Canada, and Switzerland, among other countries.²⁷⁵ Members of the Internal Troops subjected children to military training that included handling firearms, wearing body armor, and viewing military parades, lectures, and combat demonstrations.

In December 2022, one group of children from Donetsk was brought to a base of the Internal Troops 3rd Separate Special-Purpose Brigade (Military Unit No. 3214), a prominent unit of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Belarus and a designated entity since June 2021.²⁷⁶ Children from Ukraine were given a tour of the base, a military parade, and a weapons exhibition. The children were taken to a military base after being taken to Belarus at the behest of Alyaksei Talai and his eponymous foundation.²⁷⁷ One additional group of children visited this unit, but no additional information about the nature of the military training they received is available.²⁷⁸

Another group of children from Donetsk visited a base of an unidentified unit of the Internal Troops of Belarus in June 2022, where they were also given combat demonstrations and posed for pictures holding firearms.²⁷⁹ Many of the 50 children in this group are reported to have disabilities; some appear in photos in wheelchairs.²⁸⁰ No explicit measures to ensure appropriate standards of safe handling of firearms appear evident in the available pictures.²⁸¹ The firearms (as seen in Figure 5) appear to be pointed at both small children and adults while being held by children. Belarusian media claims that some of the children were accompanied by their parents, but Yale HRL has not been able to establish the identity of the adults pictured with the children.²⁸² This facility's program was organized by the Alyaksei Talai Charity Foundation, the Dolphins organization, and the purported director of the Dolphins, Volkova.²⁸³

Children at other facilities were subjected to military-style training as well. Representatives of Belarus' fire and police units visited one group of children at the Berëzka facility.²⁸⁴ Children attending the facility at the time were photographed posing with firearms and wearing body armor.²⁸⁵

Medical Activities

At least 67 children from Ukraine, in at least five groups, were transported to three different hospitals in Belarus between March 2022 and April 2023 for alleged medical treatment and what is referred to as “rehabilitation” by officials in the Lukashenka regime.²⁸⁶ Three groups of

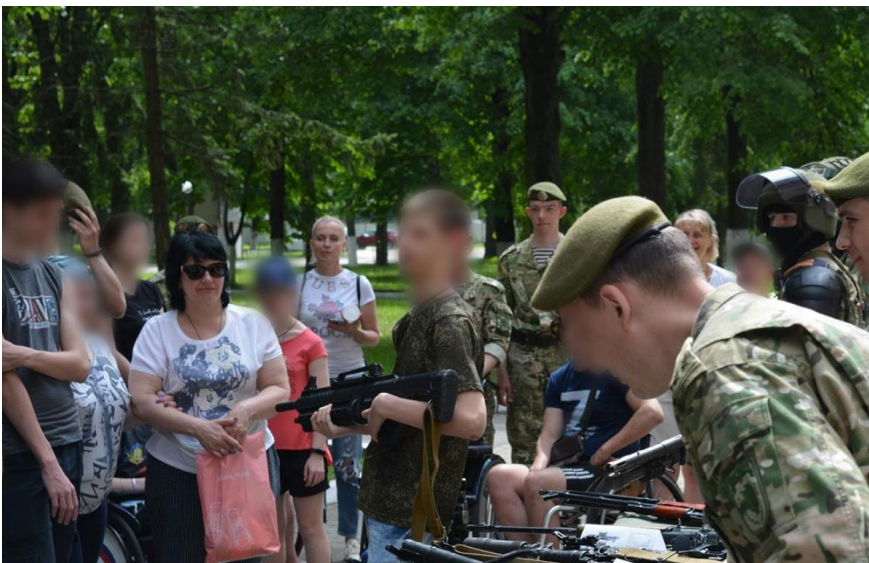


Figure 5: First photo shows a young child handling what appears to be an unidentified firearm alongside military personnel. The second photo shows a child handling a Shayka shotgun in front of a group of military personnel and reportedly disabled children.²⁸⁴ In both images, children handling weapons demonstrate an absence of basic safe handling procedures, pointing weapons towards other people.

children were transported to the Republican Children’s Hospital for Medical Rehabilitation, Ostroshitsky Town for “injuries and traumas” or “disabilities” including cerebral palsy, autism, and complex brain diseases.²⁸⁷ Media aligned with Belarus’ regime claim that some children transported to hospitals in Belarus were accompanied by their parents; Yale HRL was unable to verify this claim.²⁸⁸

In many instances, Yale HRL was unable to confirm what type of medical treatments or procedures were performed at these facilities. In one instance, however, the Children’s Republican Hospital for Medical Rehabilitation, Ostroshitsky Town, reported that

children from Ukraine were subjected to “exercise therapy classes and group psychological correction, massage and halotherapy, water and electrotherapy.”²⁸⁹ Children from this group reportedly had neurological and congenital diseases as well as autism.²⁹⁰ In another instance, at least two groups of children originally set to be transported to Dubrava were taken to two hospitals in the Minsk region; these children were placed in the skin and venereological dispensary of the Soligorsk Central District Hospital and in an unknown ward of the Starobinsk Hospital.²⁹¹ Reporting from late 2021 suggests that the Soligorsk Central District Hospital accepted only COVID-19 patients since late 2020, but it is unclear if it was still used in that manner when the children from Ukraine arrived.²⁹² Yale HRL was unable to identify the medical treatment received but observed possible puncture marks on children’s arms in photos, which may be consistent with intravenous (IV) treatment.²⁹³ A news outlet from Russia reported that some children “will be discharged,” but Yale HRL was unable to validate this claim or confirm whether the children ever left the hospital, went to Dubrava, or are currently in another location.²⁹⁴ It is unknown if parents gave consent to have their children sent to these medical facilities, whether parents had provided consent for their children to receive medical treatment, or whether the parents were informed of this change in location.

Yale HRL was unable to verify how many children described in this report—if any—were held in Belarus after supposedly receiving medical treatment. An OSCE report published in June 2023 claimed that at least one child evacuated to Belarus for medical reasons had their stay extended for non-medical reasons; according to the OSCE report, this constitutes a violation of Article 78 of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions.²⁹⁵

7. The number of children taken from occupied Ukraine and currently located in Belarus is unknown.

Yale HRL cannot, through analysis of available open source information, adequately assess at this time how many children have been returned to Ukraine from Belarus, nor can Yale HRL assess how many children transported from Ukraine to the 13 locations identified in this report remain in Belarus. Key figures involved in the removal of children from Ukraine to Belarus have claimed that all children have been returned to Russia-

occupied Ukraine.²⁹⁶ For example, a letter to the CEO of OJSC Russian Railways from the Union State Secretary Mezentsev dated March 2023 requests the company's assistance in transporting children from Rostov-on-Don to Minsk "and back."²⁹⁷ Yale HRL has not yet been able to independently confirm whether all return trips have occurred. Talai himself asserted in June 2023 that all children have been returned to Ukraine, claiming he possesses photographic and video data of their return.²⁹⁸ Yale HRL has not yet been able to identify what data Talai is referring to in his statements, and it is presently unknown if this data exists. In a video posted by Belarus state media in July 2023, Talai and the Secretary General of the Belarusian Red Cross Dmitry Shevtsov reportedly visited children at their school in Lysychansk, Luhansk.²⁹⁹ According to the video, this group of children had previously gone to Novopolotsk, Belarus in December 2022 and then returned. Yale HRL is unable to confirm this claim.

Yale HRL analysts identified and monitored the online presence of individuals and organizations involved in the movement of children from Ukraine to Belarus for any information related to children's movements, including but not limited to transportation to secondary facilities, other locations, or return journeys to the children's points of origin in Russia-occupied Ukraine. Yale HRL conducted forensic analysis of images and videos purporting to report on children who returned to occupied Ukraine from Belarus, verifying their authenticity, accuracy, and additional components based on principles established by the Berkeley Protocol on Digital Open Source Investigations. Video and image metadata availability was limited or unavailable in most cases, leading to inconclusive results. Additionally, analysts identified Ukrainian institutions attended by children who had been taken to Belarus and performed searches for information on school websites and associated media accounts pertaining to whether the children that had been taken to Belarus had returned to Ukraine. Yale HRL searched for any public statements from parents confirming the return of their children from Belarus in various Ukrainian news outlets and attempted to identify user-generated media by parents and guardians confirming the return of their children. Yale HRL also attempted to identify children taken to Belarus via media purporting to show returned groups of children, comparing photos of the children in Belarus to photos of children who had allegedly returned to Russia-occupied Ukraine. For each group of children identified in this report, Yale HRL was unable to identify clear, consistent, and corroborative data that confirm 1) that specific groups of children had remained in the identified facilities in Belarus, or 2) that the identified children had returned to Russia-occupied Ukraine from Belarus.

Yale HRL identified multiple Belarusian and Russian sources claiming that children had returned to Ukraine after being taken to Belarus. In contrast to the significant amount of information corroborating children's journeys from Ukraine to Belarus across multiple sources, there was not substantial information on children's purported returns from Belarus to occupied Ukraine. Sources claiming that children had returned from Belarus to occupied Ukraine did not detail how many children were returning, their transportation route, where in occupied Ukraine they were returned to, or to whom the children were released upon their alleged arrivals. Additionally, few sources provided photographic or video documentation of children's purported returns, in contrast to data available about transports to Belarus. In two instances, Belarus state-affiliated media sources claimed that two separate groups of children were returning home and included photographs of children on the platform of a Belarusian train station, with one outlet stating that children were "returning to the front line."³⁰⁰ However, Yale HRL was unable to verify that children had boarded these respective trains, and if so, where the train was routed to or whether the children had returned to Ukraine. Later, in July 2023, Talai posted a video of himself and the Secretary General of the Belarusian Red Cross Society, Dmitry Shevtsov, visiting schoolchildren in Russia-occupied Luhansk who had reportedly returned to Ukraine after being taken to Belarus in December 2022.³⁰¹ Using the methodology detailed above, Yale HRL was unable to confirm that the group of children who had been taken to Belarus in December 2022 was the same group of children depicted in Talai's video.

Using available open source information, Yale HRL is unable to corroborate claims that children have returned from Belarus to Russia-occupied Ukraine or adequately assess how many children transported from Ukraine to the facilities identified in this report may remain in Belarus.

IV. CONCLUSION

This report documents Belarus and Russia's joint effort to target children from Ukraine for removal and re-education in Belarus. It builds on research published by Yale HRL in February 2023 describing Russia's program of deporting children from occupied areas of Ukraine to facilities in Russia where they were subjected to re-education. This report expands on the scope of that reporting, showing the central involvement of political, security, civil society, and business figures in Belarus involved in the systematic deportation and re-education of thousands of children from Ukraine.. It also demonstrates the collaborative relationship in which Russia targets vulnerable children, including children from low-income families, orphans, and children living in institutional settings for deportation to Belarus, where they are subjected to re-education. The true number of children deported to Belarus is likely higher than the 2,442 documented here.

This program of deportation and re-education is demonstrative of Russia's broader effort to assimilate occupied regions of Ukraine, and highlights Russia's continued close relationship and coordination with Belarus throughout the conflict. This program of deportation mirrors other instances that Yale HRL has documented of efforts to pacify and assimilate the areas of Ukraine which Russia has sought to occupy in contravention of international law, including through mass deportation of civilians, detention and

disappearance of perceived opponents, and forcing Ukrainian civilians in occupied territory to acquire Russian passports. As with the program for deporting Ukraine's children to Russia, this system of deportation and re-education in Belarus is designed to instill a belief in political and historical narratives that align with the goals of the regimes of Russia and Belarus. Based on the available data through open source materials, Yale HRL cannot confirm the current status of the 2,442 children who have been taken to Belarus, nor can Yale HRL confirm that they have returned to Ukraine.

V. CORRECTIONS

This edition contains corrections to the report issued on 16 November 2022. The following summary encapsulates the corrections made to this edition:

- A small number of citations (endnotes 58, 69, 70, 72, 74, 75, 81, 82, 91, 96, 230, 275, 288) have been unredacted in the interest of ongoing research into these areas of interest. Any credible accountability entity, journalist, or research entity with a humanitarian objective may connect with the Yale Humanitarian Research Lab at hrf@yale.edu to obtain the full, unredacted citation list.
- Updates have been made to endnotes 112-301; the alignment of sources to text is now correct. In some cases, in-line source references have been replaced with endnotes. Researchers should make reference to the updated and revised edition.
- Minor changes have been made to correct mis-aligned text between pages and help the reader's eye. Full justification is used to visually distinguish this edition from the previous.

VI. ENDNOTES

1. All statements in this key finding represent an aggregate total based on Yale HRL's analytic synthesis of findings.
2. Khoshnood, Kaveh, Nathaniel A. Raymond and Caitlin N. Howarth et al., "Russia's Systematic Program for the Re-education and Adoption of Ukraine's Children," February 14, 2023, Humanitarian Research Lab at Yale School of Public Health: New Haven, <https://hub.conflictobservatory.org/portal/sharing/rest/content/items/97f919ccfe524d31a241b53ca44076b8/data>.
3. International Criminal Court, "Situation in Ukraine: ICC judges issue arrest warrants against Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin and Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova," March 17, 2023, <https://perma.cc/3BYX-RPF5>, <https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/situation-ukraine-icc-judges-issue-arrest-warrants-against-vladimir-vladimirovich-putin-and>.
4. International Humanitarian Law Databases, "Article 49 - Deportations, transfers, evacuations," ICRC, <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/gciv-1949/article-49?activeTab=default>, <https://perma.cc/BQ9S-WZ26>.
5. Khoshnood, Kaveh, Nathaniel A. Raymond and Caitlin N. Howarth et al., "Russia's Systematic Program for the Re-education and Adoption of Ukraine's Children," February 14, 2023, Humanitarian Research Lab at Yale School of Public Health: New Haven, <https://hub.conflictobservatory.org/portal/sharing/rest/content/items/97f919ccfe524d31a241b53ca44076b8/data> ; International Criminal Court, "Situation in Ukraine: ICC judges issue arrest warrants against Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin and Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova," March 17, 2023, <https://perma.cc/3BYX-RPF5>, <https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/situation-ukraine-icc-judges-issue-arrest-warrants-against-vladimir-vladimirovich-putin-and>.
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7. All statements in this key finding represent an aggregate total based on Yale HRL's analytic synthesis of findings
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