



**KINGDOM OF BELGIUM**

**KINGDOM OF BELGIUM**

Intervention at

**High-level event "*Gross human rights violations due to the aggression against Ukraine*"**

***Panel Discussion II : Violations of the Rights of the Child***

New York, 22/02/2023

---

Chair,

Dear Colleagues,

One year of Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine has brought intolerable suffering to the people of Ukraine, and especially to the most vulnerable: children.

According to the latest UN figures, every day at least 4 children are killed or injured in Ukraine. Millions of children have had to flee the violence. Schools are bombed, family homes destroyed. Countless children suffer from hunger or cold due to the deliberate targeting of Ukrainian energy infrastructure by Russia.

Yet what I want to focus on today is the particularly difficult situation of thousands of Ukrainian children who were moved from Ukraine to Russia since the start of the war.

Precise and verified numbers about these unaccompanied and separated children are hard to obtain. Conservative estimates range between 2.000 and 16.000 children.

The circumstances in which these children were moved differ: some seem to have been forcibly transferred to Russia without the consent of their parents or legal guardians. Some children were separated from their parents during the filtration process conducted by Russia or Non-state Armed Groups backed by Russia. Other children may have travelled willingly to so called Summer camps in Russia but have not been able to return home. Still other children were deemed to be orphans by the Russian occupying force.

Colleagues,

It is not a clear-cut situation. Yet amidst all this uncertainty and lack of cohesive data, one thing is indisputable: we must prioritize the rights of these children and act in their best interest.

We must identify and locate all unaccompanied and separated Ukrainian children in Russia. And we must find solutions to protect the children and restore family ties.

For this to happen, we need more and better cooperation between all those involved. This may not be easy, but as the Black Sea Grain Initiative or the exchange of prisoners

have demonstrated: it is not impossible. And there are reports about a very limited number of cases in which children have already been returned to their families.

Belgium calls on all parties to the conflict to exchange up-to-date information on the whereabouts of unaccompanied and separated children and to proactively support the tracing of parents or relatives of separated children, in cooperation with mandated international organisations.

Russia bears the prime responsibility. Its actions should comply with its international obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Fourth Geneva Convention. Right now, they don't.

We call on Russia to halt and prevent the separation of Ukrainian children from their families and to ensure that children's personal status, like nationality, is not changed after a transfer to Russia. As rightly pointed out by the High Commissioner for Refugees, adoption is not an appropriate response under international law to the issue of unaccompanied and separated children. Children separated from their parents in a situation of war cannot be assumed to be orphans.

The international community can fund child protection tracing and reunification activities and support organisations, including from civil society, that help families to locate their children and bring them home.

My country Belgium has contributed half a million euros to UNICEF's work on monitoring, reporting and responding to the grave violations committed against children in Ukraine.

Colleagues,

Few issues are more tragic and painful than the forced separation of children from their loved ones. I speak to you as Minister for Foreign Affairs, but also as a parent: let us not shy away from discussing this sensitive issue and step up efforts to support the reunification of Ukrainian children in Russia with their families back home.

Thank you.