

## LUKASHENKO'S REGIME COMPLICITY IN WAR CRIMES - CHILD DEPORTATIONS FROM UKRAINE

In a significant development that gained widespread attention in March of this year, the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued arrest warrants for Russian President Vladimir Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova, the authorized Representative for Children's Rights. These warrants were issued in connection with the illegal deportation of children from occupied Ukrainian territories.<sup>1</sup> According to international law, Russia's actions amount to a war crime comparable to genocide. However, it is important to note that deportations of Ukrainian children are not solely attributable to Russia. A lesser-known fact is the direct involvement of the Alexander Lukashenko regime and Belaruskali, one of Belarus's largest state-owned enterprises, in facilitating the removal of children from Ukraine. Despite being subject to European Union sanctions that severely restrict its expansion into the export markets, discussions within the European Union have arisen regarding the potential lifting of sanctions on Belaruskali. This article aims to examine the role played by Belaruskali and Lukashenko's regime in supporting the deportations of Ukrainian children in light of the ongoing discussions surrounding the possible relaxation of sanctions on Belarus.

### Russia's child deportation policy

According to a report by Yale University published this year, Russian authorities oversee a network of camps and similar institutions in Russia and the occupied Crimean Peninsula. These camps, which number at least 43, house Ukrainian children from Russian-occupied areas and subject them to "re-education" process<sup>2</sup>. The children are forced participate in educational programs that focus on academic, cultural, and military-patriotic upbringing aligned with a pro-Russian perspective. Topics include the history of Russia and the Soviet Union, downplaying the significance of Ukraine's history and identity, and daily recitation of the Russia's anthem<sup>3</sup>.

In many cases, the removal of children from Ukraine requires formal parental consent, but obtaining this consent is often done by coercion or with significant violations of the initial consent conditions. Additionally, there have been documented instances of occupant forces arbitrarily removing children from Ukraine without their parents' knowledge.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, some Ukrainian children do not return to Ukraine after their

<sup>1</sup>International Criminal Court (2023) Situation in Ukraine: ICC Judges issue Arrest warrants against Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin and Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova. Available: <https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/situation-ukraine-icc-judges-issue-arrest-warrants-against-vladimir-vladimirovich-putin-and>

<sup>2</sup> Conflict observatory (2023) Russia's Systematic Program for the Re-education and Adoption of Ukraine's Children. Available: <https://hub.conflictobservatory.org/portal/apps/sites/#/home/pages/children-camps->

<sup>3</sup>The Guardian (2023) Thousands of Ukrainian children put through Russian "re-education" camps, US report finds. Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/feb/15/ukraine-children-sent-russia-re-education-camps>

<sup>4</sup> TVNET (2023) "Tēt, tev ir piecas dienas!" Tēva mīlestība, kas stiprāka par Putina varu. Available: [https://klik.tvnet.lv/7719223/tet-tev-ir-piecas-dienas-teva-milestiba-kas-stipraka-par-putina-varu?\\_gl=1\\*1uo0dvm\\*\\_gcl\\_au\\*MTY50Tk1OTQzOS4xNjg0OTE4Mzcy\\*\\_ga\\*NDA1NTc1Mjc4LjE2ODQ5MTgzNzI.\\*\\_ga\\_8R8GMZF5MW\\*MTY4NjU1OTAwMy4zLjEuMTY4NjU1OTAyNC4wLjAuMA..&\\_ga=2.179852259.657219075.1686559003-405575278.1684918372](https://klik.tvnet.lv/7719223/tet-tev-ir-piecas-dienas-teva-milestiba-kas-stipraka-par-putina-varu?_gl=1*1uo0dvm*_gcl_au*MTY50Tk1OTQzOS4xNjg0OTE4Mzcy*_ga*NDA1NTc1Mjc4LjE2ODQ5MTgzNzI.*_ga_8R8GMZF5MW*MTY4NjU1OTAwMy4zLjEuMTY4NjU1OTAyNC4wLjAuMA..&_ga=2.179852259.657219075.1686559003-405575278.1684918372)

time in camp – they are forcibly placed in Russian foster families or placed for adoption in Russia.

These facts show that Russia's activities are not rooted in humanitarian concern for the safety of children but rather is an instrument of Russian psychological warfare that seeks to influence Ukrainian society and undermine its resistance. In many respects, it can be seen as a modern policy of forced “russification”, carried out on the broadest scale directly in Russian-occupied territories in Ukraine.

However, the forced removal of Ukrainian children is not limited to Russia alone. Recent revelations indicate that Alexander Lukashenko's regime in Belarus has also played a direct role in supporting the transfer of children. Several sanatoriums and camps located within Belarus have been identified as places where children removed from Ukraine are being placed.

### **Participation of the Belarusian regime in the deportation of Ukrainian children**

The initial reports of Ukrainian children being brought to camps in Belarus surfaced in September 2022 when Belarusian state media, "Belta", announced that three groups of Ukrainian children, each consisting of around 350 children, would be sent to the Dubrava camp in the Salihorsk area. Subsequently, the reception of Ukrainian children in Belarusian camps resumed in April 2023. Along with children from Donetsk Oblast, another 100 children from the Russian-occupied Zaporizhzhia area of Ukraine were brought to Belarus this spring. In total, more than 2,150 Ukrainian children have been brought to Belarus since 2022. The official statement reads that children from “children from low-income families or from families that lost their breadwinner, as well as those harmed as a result of active hostilities”, are given priority for relocation to Belarus. Additionally, it is likely that Ukrainian orphans, including those from Antratsyt orphanage in Luhansk Oblast, have also been brought to Belarus<sup>5</sup>, as supported by a public statement released by Belaruskali last September.<sup>6</sup>

So far, two sanatoriums and one camp in Belarus have been identified as locations where Ukrainian children are brought. The largest and most prominent camp, where a significant number of Ukrainian children are likely placed, is the “Dubrava” camp in the Salihorsk area. The camp is owned by Belaruskali, and Belarusian propaganda and media channels indicate the active involvement of the company, namely, it supports the placement of Ukrainian children in Belarus.<sup>7</sup> Belaruskali has been publicly acknowledged by one of the key organizers of the forced child displacement, Aleksei Talai, who is an active supporter of Lukashenko's regime. In addition, Ukrainian children who arrived in Minsk in April of this year were transported to Camp Dubrava

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<sup>5</sup>Belt (2023) Первая весенняя из 350 детей Донбасса приехала в на оздоровление. Available: <https://www.belta.by/society/view/pervaja-vesennjaja-smena-iz-350-detej-donbassa-priehala-na-ozdorovlenie-v-belarus-559090-2023//?>

<sup>6</sup>Belaruskali (2022) Помощь детям Украины. Available: <https://www.belaruskali.by/news/21021/>

<sup>7</sup>Belaruskali, website, section - Детский оздоровительный лагерь “Дубрава”. Available: <https://belaruskali.info/ozdorovlenie/dol-dubrava-1/>

with buses owned by Belaruskali's subsidiary company Kaliyspetstrans and the football club Shakhter.<sup>8</sup> A smaller number of children have also been placed in the sanatoriums "Golden Sands" in Gomel County and "Astrashicki Haradok" in Minsk County.

Children are not transported directly from Ukraine to camps and sanatoriums in Belarus. Instead, they are taken through territory of Russia. The process involves transporting children by bus from Russian-occupied Ukrainian territories to a Russian city. From there, they are transported by train to Belarus and further by bus to the camps (for example, from Horlivka by bus to Rostov, from there by train to Gomel<sup>9</sup>). Unfortunately, no additional information is available regarding the circumstances that children face during these transfers.

However, it is evident that children in camps and sanatoriums not only undergo "rehabilitation" but also are subjected to aggressive indoctrination. Multiple sources indicate that individuals like Aleksei Talai, who has openly expressed a pro-Russian stance, have visited the children to promote ideas such as the need to "demilitarize and denazify" Ukraine. Additionally, children are involved in various propaganda programs and lectures that are delivered by well-known Russian propaganda distributors like Alexander Shpakovsky, a commentator on public affairs, and Alexander Lukyanov, the leader of the Youth Union of the Republic of Belarus and a public proponent of Lukashenko's regime.

Meetings with Belarusian paramilitary organizations such as "Spring" ("Родник") and "Lynx" ("Рысь") have also been arranged for children, of which the latter has been associated with the 3214th unit of the Belarusian Ministry of the Interior troops, which were involved in the suppressing's of the 2020 Belarusian protests. These organizations share a characteristic of fostering animosity towards Ukrainians and Poles. Additionally, in some instances, the children were greeted in Minsk by representatives of the Night Wolves motor club and they have been forced to meet representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Most prominent figure involved in the transportation of children is Aleksei Talai, who gained visibility through his leadership of the "Aleksei Talai Foundation." This foundation actively participated in the transfer of children from Ukraine to Belarus<sup>10</sup>. Talai is widely recognized in Belarus as a former Paralympic champion and an outspoken supporter of Mr. Lukashenko's regime. The "Aleksei Talai Foundation" is also actively engaged in providing "humanitarian assistance" to children in Russian-

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<sup>8</sup> Belta.by (2022) Дети Донбасса на оздоровление Беларусь в. Available: <https://www.belta.by/society/view/deti-donbassa-priehali-na-ozdorovlenie-v-belarus-522163-2022/>

<sup>9</sup> Sozhnews (2022) Санаторий «Золотые пески» радушно принял детей и взрослых из Донецкой Народной Республики Текст взят с сайта. Available: <https://sozhnews.by/zhizn-rajona/sanatorij-zoloty-peski-radushno-prinyal-detej-i-vzroslykh-iz-donetskoj-narodnoj-respubliki>

<sup>10</sup> Svidomi (2023) Belarusian opposition reports Lukashenko regime's involvement in deportation of Ukrainian children from temporarily occupied territories. Available: <https://svidomi.in.ua/en/page/belarusian-opposition-reports-lukashenko-regimes-involvement-in-deportation-of-ukrainian-children-from-temporarily-occupied-territories>

occupied areas of Ukraine.<sup>11</sup> Notably, as of May this year, Talai has been included in Poland's list of sanctions.<sup>12</sup> Publicly available information reveals that Talai's foundation has received direct support not only from President Lukashenko but also from his son, Dmitry Lukashenko, as well as various public organizations such as the Presidents Sports Club and the Youth Alliance of the Republic of Belarus. Similarly, Olga Volkova and the Donetsk-based public organization "Dolphins", that operates in close cooperation with Russian organizations conducting humanitarian activities in the occupied territories, is also involved in the transportation of children.<sup>13</sup>

Talai consistently emphasizes that the transfer of children is made possible because of the support provided by Lukashenko. Additionally, support is also extended within the framework of Union State of Russia and Belarus. The Resolution of the Council of Ministers of the Union State, dated September 16, 2022, states that the transfer of Ukrainian children, including transportation by rail, is also financed by the Union's State budget. It further highlights the allocation of up to 29 million rubles to the residents of the so-called Luhansk and Donetsk people's Republics. State Secretary of Union State, Dmitry Mezentsev, has indicated that both Putin and Lukashenko endorse the provision of "humanitarian assistance" to the residents of the Luhansk and Donetsk people's Republics, including the program for "rehabilitation" of children.<sup>14</sup>

## Belaruskali sanctions back on European political agenda

Belaruskali has been included in the European Union list of sanctions since June of last year<sup>15</sup>. Given its significant role in the Belarusian economy, representatives from Belarus have long been lobbying for the easing of sanctions, arguing that restricting the export of fertilizer (potash) poses a threat to the global food market. In March of this year, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres also mentioned the possibility of relaxing sanctions, but the proposal faced strong opposition, particularly from Poland and the Baltic states, notably Lithuania.<sup>16</sup>

However, expert analysis indicates that the global fertilizer market has not experienced a significant shock even with the sanctions imposed on Belaruskali. Despite the fact that Belaruskali used to account for around 20% of global fertilizer production before the sanctions, the current situation allows for the compensation of the missing part

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<sup>11</sup>Vkontakte - Благотворительный фонд Талая (2022) Available: [https://vk.com/wall-79875268\\_625](https://vk.com/wall-79875268_625)

<sup>12</sup>Poland Ministry of the Interior, website, section - List of persons and entities subject to their sanctions. Available: <https://www.gov.pl/web/mswia/lista-osob-i-podmiotow-objetych-sankcjami>

<sup>13</sup>Belt (2022) Украинка из Донецка: война для детей реальностью стала. Available: <https://www.belta.by/society/view/ukrainka-iz-donetska-vojna-dlja-nashih-detej-stala-realnostju-506055-2022/>

<sup>14</sup>The Union State's national website (2022) Председатель СФ провела Матвиенко встречу Дмитрием Мезенцевым с государства Союзного Государственным секретарем. Available: <https://xn-c1anggbdpdf.xn-p1ai/activities/events/233155/>

<sup>15</sup> Official Journal of the European Union, L 153, 3 June 2022. Available: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ%3AL%3A2022%3A153%3ATOC>

<sup>16</sup>Politico (2023) UN's Guterres wants EU to ease Belarus sanctions. The EU isn't so sure. Available: <https://www.politico.eu/article/united-nations-antonio-guterres-ease-belarus-sanctions-eu-fertilizers-world-hunger/>

through the alignment of supply networks.<sup>17</sup> For example, Africa alone produces approximately 30 million tons of fertilizer annually, which is twice its annual consumption, with the majority (90%) of the fertilizer imported from other regions of the world.

The Belarusian opposition organization, National Anti-Crisis Management, has also voiced opposition to the potential relaxation of sanctions. According to their calculations, lifting the sanctions on Belaruskali would generate an additional revenue of 1.5 billion dollars for Belarus, which could further incentivize its active support for Russia's waged war in Ukraine.<sup>18</sup> The Belarusian opposition has actively documented the involvement of the Lukashenko regime in the deportation of Ukrainian children and has submitted the collected evidence to several international organisations and partners.<sup>19</sup>

These facts unequivocally demonstrate that any concessions granted to Belarus regarding sanctions are unwarranted and likely to be strategically flawed. Such a move would send a misguided signal that the European Union is willing to succumb to the coercion of repressive regimes, disregarding their complicity in the perpetration of war crimes.

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<sup>17</sup> Politico (2023) UN's Guterres wants EU to ease Belarus sanctions. The EU isn't so sure. Available: <https://www.politico.eu/article/united-nations-antonio-guterres-ease-belarus-sanctions-eu-fertilizers-world-hunger/>

<sup>18</sup> AP News (2023) Belarus Opposition Group Urges EU to Maintain sanctions on Belarus State companies. Available: <https://apnews.com/article/poland-belarus-lukashenko-deportations-eu-sanctions-2187968c8529b0988827298ff1bf7f8e>

<sup>19</sup> National Anti-crisis Management (2023) Lukashenko personal proven the forced Relocation of Ukrainian children, Says oppositionist. Available: <https://www.belarus-nau.org/en/post/lukashenko-personally-approved-the-forced-relocation-of-ukrainian-children-says-oppositionist>

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