

GCKN RUNNING ESTIMATE

Kremlin Konditioning: Russification of Ukrainian Children



In This Running Estimate...

- Russian domestic support for Putin and the Special Military Operation (SMO) rose slightly since September, but support for a negotiated end to the war is also at its highest level (56%).
- Systemic Russification of Ukrainian children includes forced Russian curriculum in the Temporarily Occupied Territories (TOT), patriotic-military camps in Russia and the TOT, and the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia and Belarus followed by their subsequent adoption by Russian families. The International Criminal Court has declared that the deportation and adoption of Ukrainian children is a war crime.



SOURCE: Halya Coynash, "29 thousand Crimean 'Youth Army' recruits taught to hate Ukraine and be ready to die for Russia," Human Rights in Ukraine, February 2, 2022, <https://khpg.org/en/1608810007>.¹

DOMESTIC RUSSIAN PERCEPTIONS

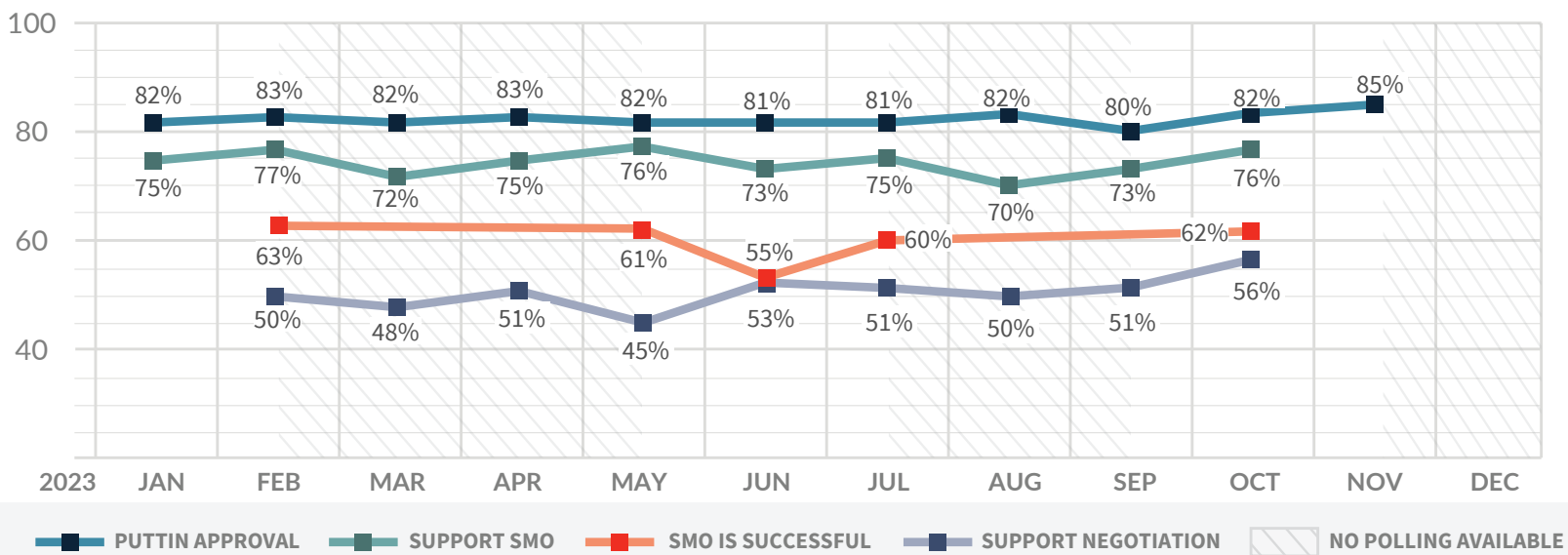


Figure 1: Domestic Russian Perceptions, GCKN.²

NOTE: Russian opinion polls are immediately instrumentalized by the Kremlin, repeated by the Russian media, and used to claim that the invasion is supported by the Russian public and conducted in its name.

PUTIN APPROVAL

Russian President Vladimir Putin’s popularity surged by five percent from September (80%) to November (85%), continuing a sustained approval rating above 80% since July. This boost, despite rising casualties and economic challenges caused by Putin’s policies, is likely due to his control over the media narrative. Portraying the Ukraine invasion as a defense of Russian civilization, Putin’s strongman image remains intact, demonstrating his adept handling of public opinion amid ongoing conflict.

SUPPORT SMO

Support for the SMO rose three percent to 76% in October—its highest point since May 2023. This surge is largely fueled by patriotic sentiments, amplified by Kremlin-led propaganda that frames the conflict as essential for Russia’s sovereignty and regional stability. The Kremlin’s stringent response to dissent also significantly shapes public opinion. Notably, support for the SMO varies with age and information sources: it is higher among those aged 55 and older (82%) and state TV news viewers (88%), while it is lower among the 18-24 demographic (62%), YouTube users (63%), and those disapproving of Putin’s performance (25%).³

SMO IS SUCCESSFUL

In October, public trust in the success of the SMO rose to 62%. This small increase is partly due to fewer respondents struggling to answer compared to July. The absence of polling data in August and September underscores the difficulties in gathering reliable information on Russian public opinion about sensitive national security matters.⁴

SUPPORT NEGOTIATION

The October increase to 56% support for a negotiated end to the war reflects a growing desire for a resolution to the conflict. This trend, which began in June, is particularly pronounced among younger Russians (69% of 18-24-year-olds) and women (62%), who are more inclined towards negotiation than older age groups and men. Unexpectedly, most Putin supporters prefer negotiation (51%) to continued fighting (42%). This divergence can be attributed to several factors:

- **Generational Perspectives:** Younger Russians are most supportive of a negotiated solution to end the war likely because they are the generation most prone to conscription/mobilization and suffering resultant casualties. They are also more exposed to diverse information sources and potentially less influenced by traditional state narratives than older generations who have higher trust in narratives purveyed by state-controlled media (see number 3, below).
- **Gender Differences:** Women, traditionally seen as more averse to conflict, might prefer negotiations to avoid further escalation and casualties.
- **Media Influence:** Trust in different media sources plays a crucial role. Those relying on television and Telegram are more likely to echo official government positions and lean toward continued fighting. In contrast, social media users, who might access a broader range of viewpoints, strongly prefer negotiation.
- **Putin Supporters:** The fact that more Putin supporters favor negotiation could indicate a nuanced understanding of the conflict’s complexities and long-term implications. It suggests that there is a recognition of the costs of continued military engagement and a desire for a diplomatic solution, even for those who approve of Putin’s leadership.⁵

The shift toward negotiation indicates Russian society’s growing awareness of the conflict’s prolonged nature and its impact, both domestically and internationally. It underscores a desire for a return to stability and normalcy, transcending political loyalties and media influences.⁶

RUSSKIY MIR (“RUSSIAN WORLD”)

Putin championed the concept of *Russkiy Mir*, which states that all ethnic Russians, and by extension Russian speakers, are part of a grand Russian society because of their “Russianness.” Putin stresses the idea of ‘Russian’ unity throughout the world, particularly in regions once ruled by Russia, the Russian Empire, and the Soviet Union—in other words, a ‘Greater Russia.’ *Russkiy Mir* was developed at the turn of the 21st century by Russian “intellectuals, academics, and journalists close to the Kremlin” before Putin introduced it to the public in 2001. Russia has used the concept of *Russkiy Mir* to justify multiple incursions in its Near Abroad during the Putin Regime by invoking the need for Russia to protect ‘Russians’ outside of Russia proper from oppression. *Russkiy Mir* came to the forefront during the 2014 seizure of Crimea and subsequent ‘separatist’ conflict in the Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine.⁷



Children stand holding Russian flags in the children’s center Artek, run by the Russian government in occupied Crimea, Ukraine, in February 2023.
PHOTO CREDIT: Artek Press Center (RU)

SOURCE: Martin Fornusek, “Expert: Russia sent over 8,300 Ukrainian children to ‘re-education camps’ in 2023,” *The Kyiv Independent*, October 30, 2023, <https://kyivindependent.com/expert-russia-sent-over-8-300-ukrainian-children-to-re-education-camps-in-2023/>

RUSSIFICATION OF UKRAINE THROUGH UKRAINIAN YOUTH

“Russians and Ukrainians [are] one people – a single whole. ...modern Ukraine is entirely the product of the Soviet era. We know well and remember well that it was shaped – for a significant part – on the lands of historical Russia. ...The leaders of modern Ukraine and their external “patrons” prefer to overlook these facts.”

-Russian President Vladimir Putin⁸

RUSSIFICATION OF UKRAINIAN CHILDREN: RE-EDUCATION IN RUSSIA

Putin has leveraged historical tactics to instill loyalty among Ukrainian children by subjecting them to indoctrination in schools and “summer camps” within Russia and Belarus. The “patriotic education” and “integration” programs promote Russian culture, nationalism, and militarism.⁹ Reports indicate that there are 43 to 70 re-education camps in Russia and Belarus for deported Ukrainian children.¹⁰ While the Russian government claims these efforts are humanitarian and provide aid to war-traumatized orphans,¹¹ the Permanent Representative of Ukraine to the United Nations asserts that deported Ukrainian children are subjected to anti-Ukrainian indoctrination and propaganda, fostering animosity toward Ukraine, its language, culture, and history.¹²

- Reported re-education locations span across Belarus,¹³ Chechnya,¹⁴ Crimea, Magadan Oblast in Russia’s Far East,¹⁵ the city of Naryshkino and Lipetsk Oblast in Southwest Russia, a military-patriotic camp in Penza Oblast, patriotic excursions in Saransk, Republic of Mordovia, Kuban State University in Krasnodar Krai, and the Medvezhonok children’s health complex in Gelendzhik, Krasnodar Krai.¹⁶

- The Russian deportation, re-education, and adoption of Ukrainian ‘orphans’ bear similarities to the Nazi Lebensborn (“Spring of Life”) Society. Founded in 1935 as an adoption agency for unwed German women with preferred ‘Aryan’ genetic traits, it evolved into a breeding program between young German women chosen for their genetics and SS officers. Following Germany’s 1939 conquest of Poland, the Lebensborn Society established orphanages and facilitated adoption of “orphans” with desirable pedigrees from Poland and other occupied countries by Nazi families, raising them as loyal German Nazis.¹⁷
- Putin’s tactics with Ukrainian children, while showing elements akin to past totalitarian methods like those of the Nazi Lebensborn Society, present distinct differences in context and intent. While the Lebensborn Society focused on increasing “Aryan” births, Putin’s approach involves abducting and forcibly indoctrinating Ukrainian children as Russians. This comparison requires careful consideration of the distinct historical and current nuances.¹⁸

“Denazification [of Ukraine] means they all need to be killed, all adult population of Ukraine, who resists, physically destroyed. And their children raised in a Russian spirit.”

-Russian Journalist Anna Dolgareva, February 2023¹⁹



Mariupol school 'opens' under Russian occupation

PHOTO CREDIT: Hromadske Radio

SOURCE: Halya Coynash, "Russia's use of 'education' to destroy Ukrainian identity in occupied Ukraine is cultural genocide, study finds," Human Rights in Ukraine, June 6, 2023, <https://khp.org/en/1608812336>

RUSSIFICATION OF UKRAINIAN CHILDREN: RE-EDUCATION IN THE TOT

Russia has implemented a Russification campaign in Crimea and the Donbas, particularly through the education system, since its 2014 occupation of the Ukrainian territories.^a This effort involves teaching Russian history, citizenship, patriotism, language, and culture and promoting the concept of *Russkiy Mir*. Ukrainian curriculum is banned and parents educating their children using Ukrainian curriculum face punishment. Russian documents found by Ukrainian police in Kharkiv reveal plans by the Russian Ministry of Education to teach Ukrainian students exclusively in accordance with Russian higher educational institutions. This includes issuing Russian diplomas, importing Russian teachers, and providing "patriotic education."²⁰

- The Ukrainian National Resistance Center reports that Russia plans to establish around 200 "Movement of the First" centers in TOT schools. This initiative mirrors the *Komsomol*, the historical Soviet youth organization used for political mobilization and indoctrination.²¹ The goal appears to be to cultivate loyalty and a pro-Russian mindset among the youth in these regions.
- Russia is introducing new textbooks in TOT schools. These books recast the narrative of the conflict and portray Russian forces as liberators from a purported Nazi regime in Kyiv. This is part of a broader strategy to reshape historical and cultural perspectives in line

with Kremlin-centric views, including the introduction of Russian language textbooks and literature, which has been a consistent feature in the Donbas and Crimea since their occupation in 2014.²²

- The occupation authorities have outlawed Ukrainian online and home-school curriculums. Enforcement includes home searches for Ukrainian courseware and targeting families with school-aged children not attending Russian-sponsored schools. Parents found utilizing or teaching the Ukrainian curriculum are subject to fines,²³ a tactic to suppress Ukrainian cultural and national identity and promote Russification among the younger population.

^a See "GCKN Running Estimate - Update 7," Global Cultural Knowledge Network, September 2022, <https://community.apan.org/wg/gckn/m/running-estimateproducts/423637>

RUSSIFICATION OF UKRAINIAN CHILDREN: ADOPTION

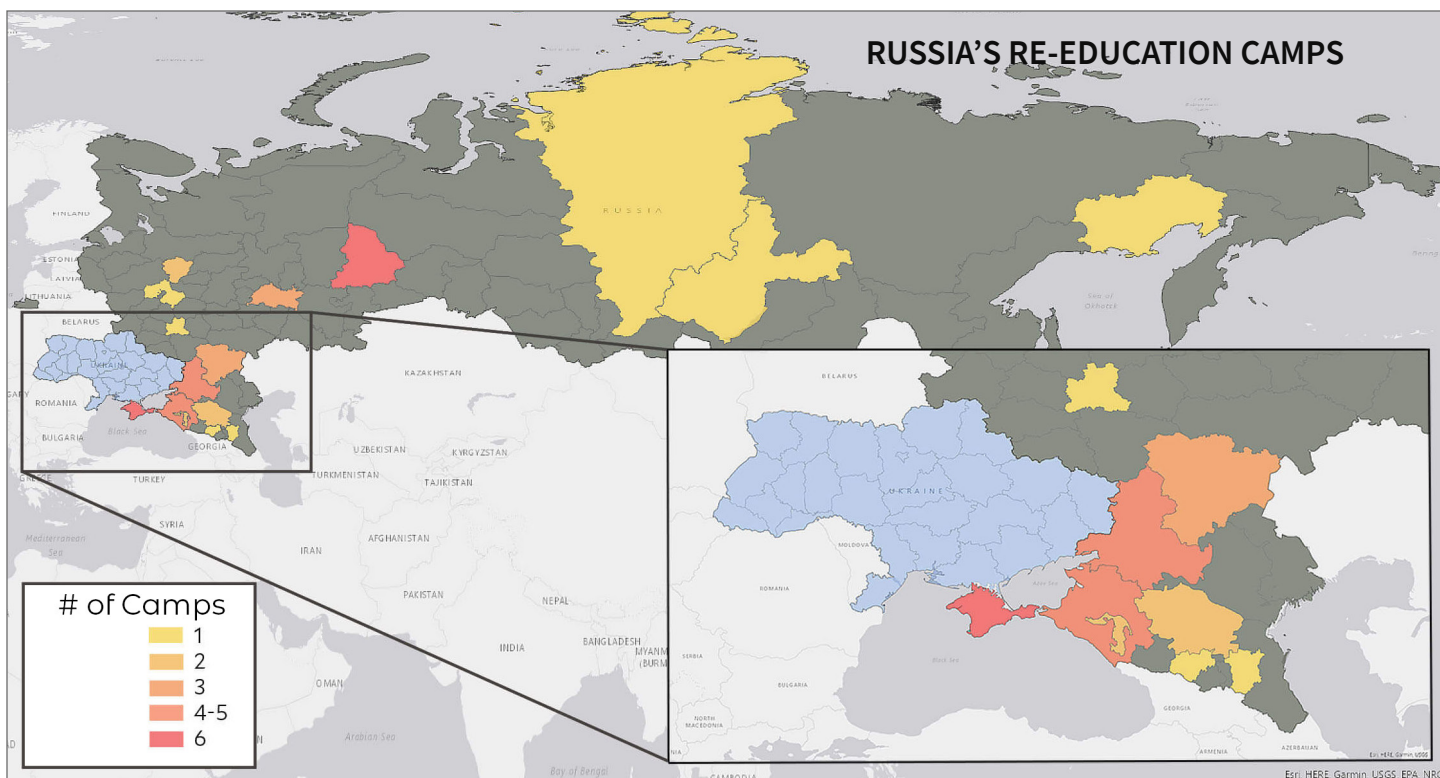
The international community views Russia’s forcible deportation of Ukrainian children to the Russian Federation and Belarus—where they are adopted by Russian families, granted Russian citizenship, and raised as Russians—as acts of cultural genocide. This process, part of Russia’s broader Russification strategy, has escalated since the 2022 invasion, following its initiation during the earlier occupation of Crimea and the Donbas. Reports indicate a systematic effort to erase Ukrainian identity in children and integrate them into Russian society, aligning with the broader aim of cultural and national assimilation of Ukrainian territories into Russia.^b

- According to reports, the number of Ukrainian children removed from Ukraine by Russian authorities since February 2022 may exceed 700,000.^c Russian state media often label these children as “orphans”

b Ibid.

c Remarkably, the high number of 700,000 Ukrainian children removed to the Russia and Belarus comes from the Russian Commissioner on Children’s Rights. SOURCE: Brendan Cole, “Russia Admits the Truth on Deporting Ukrainian Children,” *Newsweek*, 11 March 2023, <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-ukraine-putin-lvova-belova-deporting-1787084>.

d In March 2022, Putin amended Russian law to simplify the adoption of Ukrainian children. Ukrainian children in the TOT were designated citizens of the so-called Donetsk People’s Republic and the Luhansk People’s Republic which granted parental rights to Russians under an alleged agreement between the Russia and the so-called republics. SOURCE: Sergej Sumlenny, “How the West Tolerated Russia’s Kidnapping of Ukrainian Children,” European Resilience Initiative Center, 27 March 2023, <https://european-resilience.org/analytics/how-west-tolerated-russias-kidnapping-ukrainian-children>.



SOURCE: Humanitarian Research Lab, “Russia’s Systematic Program for the Re-Education & Adoption of Ukraine’s Children,” Yale School of Public Health Conflict Observatory Report, February 14, 2023, <https://hub.conflictobservatory.org/portal/apps/sites/#/home/pages/children-camps-1>.

RUSSIA'S SYSTEMS FOR RE-EDUCATION, DEPORTATION, AND ADOPTION

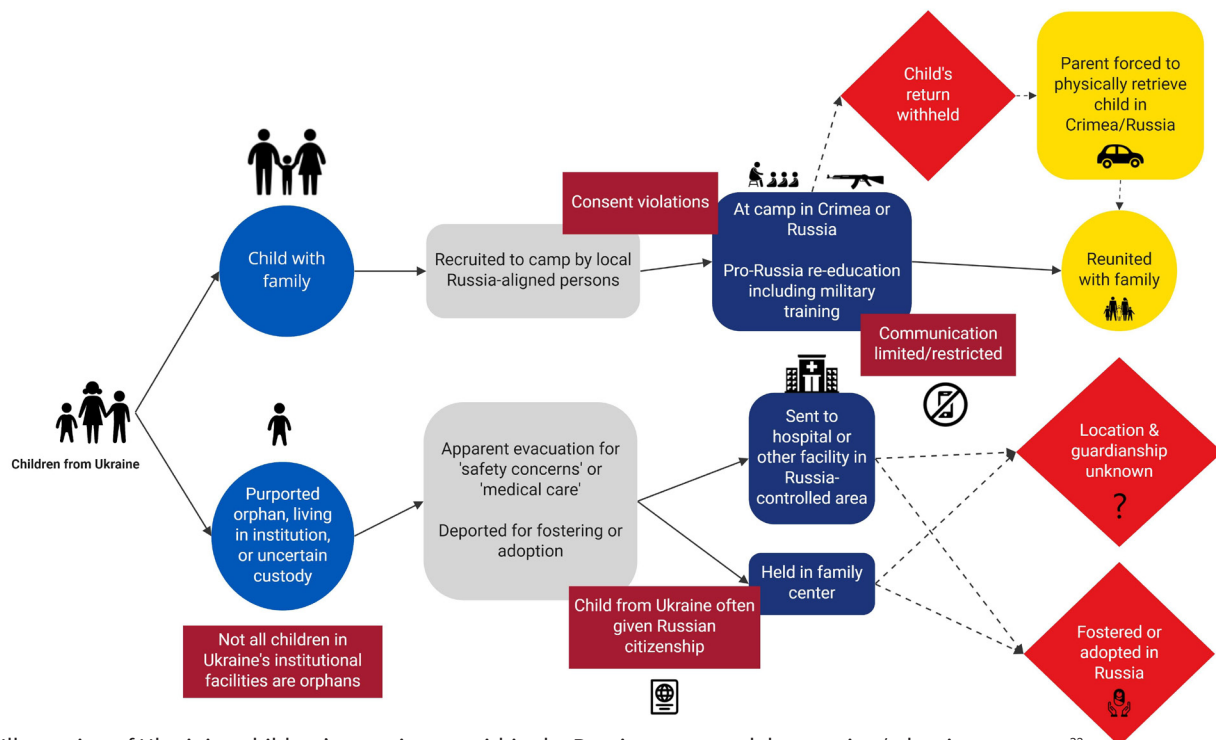


Figure 2: Illustration of Ukrainian children's experiences within the Russian camp and deportation/adoption systems.³²

where they face barriers to returning.^e

- During a UN Security Council debate, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres cited evidence of Russia's forced deportation of Ukrainian children. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov suggested these children, considered likely orphans, were taken to Russia for safety. He further invited parents to retrieve them.²⁷ Russia's UN representative claimed their actions

protected vulnerable groups against Ukrainian and Western violations of the Minsk agreements. Ukraine accused Russia of abducting and brainwashing children since 2014 to erase their national identity, in line with the *Russkiy Mir* ideology.²⁸

According to Article II of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, the forcible transfer of children of one group to another is an act of genocide if that deportation is “committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group.”²⁹ The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe declared the deportation of Ukrainian children to the Russian Federation and Belarus and “their subsequent absorption into Russian citizenship, identity and culture” to be “genocide.”³⁰ In March 2023 the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued arrest warrants for Putin and Russian Commissioner for Children’s Rights Maria Lvova-Belova for alleged illegal deportation of children from Ukraine since February 2022. The ICC signed a cooperation agreement with Kyiv in March to investigate war crimes against children, including forced deportations, and in September 2022 the ICC opened a war crimes office in Kyiv.³¹



^e In 2015 at the request of Yelizaveta Glinka, a member of the Russian Presidential Council for Human Rights, Putin amended Russian law to allow relocations of Ukrainian children to Russia for medical care. This furthered the narrative of Russia “rescuing” Ukrainian children from the Donbas, which Glinka heavily championed in press interviews. According to TASS, in 2014 Glinka had founded *Spravedlivaya Pomoshch* (“A Just Help”), a charity that facilitates the transfer of Ukrainian children from the Donbas to Russia. One year later she assisted in the deportation of 500 Ukrainian children to Russia. According to the European Resilience Initiative Center, the network Glinka set up in 2015 is being used by the current Commissioner for Children’s Rights. SOURCE: Sergej Sumlenny, “How the West Tolerated Russia’s Kidnapping of Ukrainian Children,” European Resilience Initiative Center, 27 March 2023, <https://european-resilience.org/analytics/how-west-tolerated-russias-kidnapping-ukrainian-children>.

RESEARCH TEAM

Robert W. Kurz
Director of GCKN, Editor
Nicole M. Laster-Loucks, Ph.D.
Research Analyst

Andrew M. Johnson, LTC (Ret), USA
Research Analyst
Susan L. Littleton
Graphic and Visual Designer

Benjamin A. Okonofua, Ph.D.
Research Analyst
Cindy A. Hurst
Editor

ENDNOTES

- 1 Children at Yunarmia oath ceremony in Sevastopol, 25.10.2019, image, PHOTO CREDIT: sevlakon.ru; SOURCE: Halya Coynash, “29 thousand Crimean ‘Youth Army’ recruits taught to hate Ukraine and be ready to die for Russia,” Human Rights in Ukraine, February 2, 2022, <https://khp.org/en/1608810007>
- 2 Figure 1: Susan Littleton, Domestic Russian Perceptions, infographic, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.
- 3 The Levada Center, 2023. “Conflict with Ukraine: October 2023 Estimates.” The Levada center, 31 October 2023, <https://www.levada.ru/en/ratings>.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Wilfried Jilge, “Russkiy Mir: ‘Russian World,’” German Council on Foreign Relations, 3 May 2016, <https://dgap.org/en/events/russkiy-mir-russian-world>.
- 8 Valdimir Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” Kremlin, 12 July 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.
- 9 Nicole Wolkov, et al, “Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment,” Institute for the Study of War, 9 August 2023, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-august-9-2023>; “Three Thousand Ukrainian Children Taken to Belarus Under the Guise of ‘Rehabilitation’ – Kyslytsia to the UN,” Ukrinform, 2 October 2023, <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-society/3740833-do-bilorusi-pid-vigladom-ozdorovlenna-vivezli-tri-tisaci-ukrainskih-ditej-kislica-v-oon.html>; Humanitarian Research Lab, “Russia’s Systematic Program for the Re-Education & Adoption of Ukraine’s Children,” Yale School of Public Health Conflict Observatory Report, 14 February 2023, <https://hub.conflictobservatory.org/portal/apps/sites/#/home/pages/children-camps-1>.
- 10 “Invaders Deport Almost 20,000 Ukrainian Children, It’s Known About More Than 70 Camps Of Their Re-education in Russia - Verkhovna Rada,” Interfax, 24 April 2023, <https://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/905913.html>; Humanitarian Research Lab, “Russia’s Systematic Program for the Re-Education & Adoption of Ukraine’s Children.”
- 11 Brendan Cole, “Russia admits the Truth on Deporting Ukrainian Children,” Newsweek, 11 March 2023, <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-ukraine-putin-lvova-belova-deporting-1787084>.
- 12 “Three Thousand Ukrainian Children,” Ukrinform.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Alona Mazurenko, “Russians Take Children from Occupied Luhansk Oblast to Chechnya for ‘Re-education,’” Ukrainska Pravda, 7 December 2022, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2022/12/7/7379658/>.
- 15 Humanitarian Research Lab, “Russia’s Systematic Program for the Re-Education & Adoption of Ukraine’s Children.”
- 16 Wolkov, “Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.”
- 17 United States Holocaust Museum, “Lebensborn Program,” Holocaust Encyclopedia, Last modified 29 September 2020, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/lebensborn-program>.
- 18 Christopher C. Harmon, “A Disturbing Parallel: Putin’s Aggression and German Actions in the Late 1930’s,” Institute of World Politics, 28 January 2022, <https://www.iwp.edu/articles/2022/01/28/a-disturbing-parallel-putins-aggression-and-german-actions-in-the-late-1930s/>.
- 19 Sergej Sumlenny, “How the West Tolerated Russia’s Kidnapping of Ukrainian Children,” European Resilience Initiative Center, 27 March 2023, <https://european-resilience.org/analytics/how-west-tolerated-russias-kidnapping-ukrainian-children>; https://twitter.com/Gerashchenko_en/status/1626266991739666434.
- 20 “Captured Documents Reveal Russian Plans to ‘Re-educate’ Ukrainian Children,” New Voice of Ukraine, 8 November 2023, <https://english.nv.ua/nation/captured-documents-reveal-russian-plans-to-re-educate-ukrainian-children-news-50282626.html>.
- 21 “Russians Have Created a New Movement to Brainwash Children into TOT,” National Resistance Center, 20 December 2022, <https://sprotyv.mod.gov.ua/en/russians-have-created-a-new-movement-to-brainwash-children-into-tot/>; “Occupiers plan to spend 18.5 billion rubles on brainwashing Ukrainian children,” National Resistance Center, 21 March 2023, <https://sprotyv.mod.gov.ua/en/occupiers-plan-to-spend-18-5-billion-rubles-on-brainwashing-ukrainian-children/>; “Komsomol,” Britannica, 14 February 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Komsomol>.
- 22 Wolkov, “Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.” Sumlenny, “How the West Tolerated Russia’s Kidnapping of Ukrainian Children.”
- 23 Ivan Nosalskyi, “In the Kherson Region, the Occupiers Forbid Children to Study Online in Ukrainian Schools,” RBC Ukraine, 20 November 2022, <https://www.rbc.ua/rus/news/hersonskiy-oblasti-okupanti-zaboronyayut-1668970030.html>; “In Berdyansk, the Occupiers Raided Families Who Did Not Send Their Children to Russian Schools,” National Resistance Center, 8 March 2023, <https://sprotyv.mod.gov.ua/en/in-berdyansk-the->

occupiers-raided-families-who-do-not-send-their-children-to-russian-schools/.

- 24 Kelsey Vlamis, “Ukrainian Children Say They Were Taken Against Their Will by Russian Forces and Placed up for Adoption in Russia, Where the Process Has Been Expedited,” Business Insider, 23 October 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.com/ukrainian-kids-taken-by-russian-forces-placed-for-adoption-reports-2022-10>; “PACE Recognizes Deportation of Ukrainian Children to Russia as Genocide,” Ukrinform, 27 April 2023, <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-polytics/3701668-pace-recognizes-deportation-of-ukrainian-children-to-russia-as-genocide.html>; “Abduction of Ukrainian Children as a Sign of Genocide,” National Resistance Center, 2 September 2023, <https://sprotyv.mod.gov.ua/en/abduction-of-ukrainian-children-as-a-sign-of-genocide>; Dmytro Mikhailov, “Lvova-Belova said that since the beginning of the war, the Russian Federation has accepted more than 700,000 Ukrainian children,” Sispilne, 31 July 2023, <https://suspilne.media/540681-lvova-belova-zaavila-so-vid-pocatku-vijni-do-rf-vivezli-ponad-700-tisac-ukrainskih-ditej/>; Olesia Bida, “Stolen Generation. Russia Systematically Abducts Children from Ukraine, Gives Them to Russian Families,” The Kyiv Independent, 21 July 2023, <https://kyivindependent.com/stolen-generation-russia-systematically-abducts-children-from-ukraine-gives-them-to-russian-families/>.
- 25 Cole, “Russia Admits the Truth on Deporting Ukrainian Children.”
- 26 Олена Барсукова, “Путін підписав указ про спрощене набуття громадянства РФ дітьми-сиротами з України,” Ukrainska Pravda, 30 May 2022, <https://life.pravda.com.ua/society/2022/05/30/248879>.
- 27 Adam Schrader, “Ukrainian Parents Invited to ‘Collect Their Children’ From Russia,” UPI, 23 September 2023, https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2023/09/23/ukraine-parents-invited-collect-children-lavrov/6571695514390/.
- 28 “Deportation, Treatment of Ukraine’s Children by Russian Federations Takes Centre Stage by Many Delegates at Security Council Briefing,” United Nations Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, August 24, 2023, <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15395.doc.htm>; Sumlenny, “How the West Tolerated Russia’s Kidnapping of Ukrainian Children.”
- 29 “Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide,” United Nations General Assembly, 12 January 1951, https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocity-crimes/Doc.1_Convention%20on%20the%20Prevention%20and%20Punishment%20of%20the%20Crime%20of%20Genocide.pdf.
- 30 “PACE Recognizes Deportation of Ukrainian Children to Russia as Genocide,” Ukrinform.
- 31 Vlamis, “Ukrainian Children Say They Were Taken Against Their Will.” “PACE Recognizes Deportation of Ukrainian Children to Russia as Genocide,” Ukrinform.
- 32 Figure 2: Russia’s Systems for Re-Education, Deportation, and Adoption, illustration, SOURCE: Humanitarian Research Lab, “Russia’s Systematic Program for the Re-Education & Adoption of Ukraine’s Children,” Yale School of Public Health Conflict Observatory Report, February 14, 2023, <https://hub.conflictobservatory.org/portal/apps/sites/#/home/pages.children-camps-1>.