



United States Mission to the OSCE

The Russian Federation's Ongoing Aggression Against Ukraine

As delivered by Ambassador Michael R. Carpenter
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
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On November 20th, the international community will commemorate World Children's Day. While most children around the world will mark this day with their families and classmates in school, Ukrainian children will continue to face the psychological stress of airstrikes on playgrounds and supermarkets, relatives gone missing, and the unbearable anguish of parents and other family members killed by Russian troops.

To give a sense of the scale of this horror, Russia's forces have damaged a total of 3,428 Ukrainian educational facilities and destroyed another 365, according to a Human Rights Watch report. One more was added to this list last Monday after Russia's forces reportedly struck the Honchar Library in Ukraine's city of Kherson. The report notes, "most of the damage that schools incurred, and that Human Rights Watch documented, was from aerial attacks, artillery shelling, and rocket strikes." The report also indicates that Russia has used schools and kindergartens for military purposes, including for the encampment of its soldiers.

As Ukraine successfully evicts Russia's forces from its land and lifts the veil of secrecy on Russia's system of occupation, we see with great detail what Ukrainian schoolchildren have endured. Inna Romaniuk, the director of Borodianka School Number 1, described in vivid detail her experience returning to her school. Romaniuk said, "[it] was extremely upsetting. It was impossible to hold back tears. What they left behind when they left-- it was horrible... In a room, there was blood on the walls. A sniper had set up in a school bathroom. They broke all the computers, ripped out the components and filled everything with dirt. They simply stole the laptops. Everything was looted, broken. They tore the interactive whiteboards off the walls and used them [as shields] to cover the windows... The windows are all smashed. The desks are all broken. Everywhere [there is] a burned smell, feces everywhere. They drew swastikas on the walls. They had a field kitchen, and they used the school desks [as firewood] to heat their stove."

It's not just that these schools and classrooms were destroyed, but that they were defiled in such a crude and brutal way, with the filth and stench of aggression destroying the tranquility and warmth that is meant to nurture hope and friendship among children.

Unfortunately, the damage from Russia's war extends well beyond the physical walls of Ukrainian schools. Take the experience of 18-year-old Viacheslav, who lived through Russia's shelling. In his words, "the first shell fell just steps from us. I saw it falling. Mom laid down... She was just next to me. When I opened my eyes, I saw mom lying on her side. Her last words were, 'I am alright'." Viacheslav ran to get help for his mother but when he returned, she was already dead. In an instant, Viacheslav was an orphan and the sole caretaker for his four younger siblings.

Too many similar tragedies have taken place since February 24, 2022. I've previously talked about 14-year-old Vitalii who was apprehended, beaten, and starved by Russia's forces. We've heard about Yulia and Anna Aksenchenko, twin 14-year-old sisters out for pizza on a Sunday night in Kramatorsk when they were killed by a Russian Iskander missile. We've also heard about 16-year-old Tihiran Ohannisian from Berdiansk who was reportedly taken from his home and tortured, and later shot dead by Russia's forces.

While we've been able to hear testimonials from children living in free Ukraine, understanding the many dangers children face in Russian-occupied Ukraine and in Russia is difficult. However, we're learning more.

Take, for example, the experience of 17-year-old Bohdan Yermokhin who Russia took last year from Mariupol. Bohdan had made clear on social media his opposition to Russia's war and desire to go home to Ukraine. Yet, despite this, a Russian Federation Military Commissariat sent Bohdan a letter directing him to register for military service to fight against his own country. Thankfully, due to the work of Ukrainian Ombudsman Dmytro Lubinets, Bohdan is due to return home soon. But how many other children from Ukraine, like Bohdan, face a similar situation? How many thousands of Ukrainian children remain in Russia living in silence and fear of what will happen next?

Mr. Chair, UNICEF Executive Director Cathy Russell said, "millions of children [in Ukraine] are going to sleep cold and scared and waking up hoping for an end to this brutal war. Children have been killed and injured, and many have lost parents and siblings, their homes, schools, and playgrounds. No child should ever have to bear that kind of suffering." Tragically, this suffering will continue until Russia ends its war against Ukraine. Until that time, we will continue to spotlight and document the plight of Ukrainian children. And we will continue to work with Ukraine and international partners, like the OSCE's Support Program for Ukraine, to help Ukraine's children overcome the traumas of this war.

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