



United States Mission to the OSCE
U.S. Statement for the
Forum for Security Cooperation:
Agenda Item 1: Children and Armed Conflict

As delivered by Arms Control Delegate Daniel Wartko
September 14, 2022

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for raising this topic in this forum, and thanks to today's guests for their thoughtful and informative presentations.

The United States remains staunchly committed to protecting and aiding children affected by armed conflict, and fully supports this topic being elevated, enhanced, and better integrated into all the work of the FSC.

In different times, discussion of this topic has focused more on issues such as concern about the use of child soldiers, and it may have been assumed in this forum that no civilized country would intentionally wage war upon children. But these are not normal times. Russia's illegal, immoral, and unprovoked war in Ukraine continues its devastating toll on the children of Ukraine. During this war, we have seen Russian forces destroy homes, schools, playgrounds, and hospitals across Ukraine. Children have become casualties in the very places where they should be the safest. And ask yourself if this can antiseptically be called "collateral damage," or if instead these are deliberate attacks against Ukrainian children, against civilians.

During Secretary Blinken's recent trip to Ukraine, he visited a children's hospital and met some of the youngest victims of Russia's aggression who quite literally represent the future of their country. While there, he met Marina, a six-year-old, who had her left leg amputated below the knee as a result of the Russian strike on Kherson. On his visit to the pediatric surgical ward, he met with other children undergoing rehabilitation after being injured in attacks by Russian forces. Secretary Blinken said he found those children's bravery and courage incredibly inspiring, and he noted that it is clear "that Ukrainians both young and old have extraordinary resolve, [and] so does the United States."

Russia's war has displaced more than 4 million of Ukraine's 7 million children, including over 2 million who sought refuge outside of Ukraine's borders.

Families were forced apart as mothers or grandparents took children to safety in neighboring lands while fathers and older siblings stayed to defend their homeland. Chilling reports also indicate cases of Russian authorities attempting to erase children's Ukrainian identities by forcibly separating them from their parents and transferring them for adoption inside Russia. The United States has information that over the course of July alone, more than eighteen hundred children were reported to have been transferred from Russian-controlled areas of Ukraine to Russia.

Once in Russia, some reports indicate that children undergo psychological "rehabilitation" or are forced to complete unspecified "educational projects." Some of the children have been transferred from Mariupol to other Russian-controlled areas of Ukraine, and then to Russia. Some children lack identity documents or any information on the location or whereabouts of their parents. And to facilitate the forced deportation and relocation of children, officials in Russia-controlled areas of Ukraine are developing administrative arrangements to place Ukrainian national orphans with Russian families, in collaboration with Russian executive agencies.

We remember the destruction of Mariupol's municipal theater, where hundreds of women and children were huddled for shelter – a theater with the word "ДЕТИ" (CHILDREN) – written in very huge Russian letters, clearly visible from the sky. This safe-haven was destroyed by Russian bombardments with the loss of hundreds of lives. Throughout areas under Russia's control, hundreds of schools have been damaged or destroyed. There are also credible reports – meticulously documented in the wake of Russia's hasty withdrawal from Bucha and other towns – of fathers killed in front of their families, of mothers raped and murdered in front of their children, and children killed or raped or kidnapped by Russian soldiers and their proxies. This violence against children and other civilians is not an aberration – it is pervasive, and it is intentional.

These children, even after being rescued from imminent physical harm, suffer from psychological trauma that needs immediate attention. Later, they will inevitably suffer post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that will continue to reverberate throughout Ukraine or through whatever country these children find themselves. The international community must prepare a broad, holistic range of interventions to support their long-term health and well-being.

What else can we do about this? First, Russia needs to stop the abuse of children and other members of the civilian population, and it needs to withdraw its forces from Ukraine. The United States will continue to help Ukraine defend itself against Russia's aggression and protect its people, especially its children; We need to identify the needs of the surviving children and their families and help them rebuild their shattered lives and communities. We need Ukraine's children to be returned to their families and to their country; And finally, we need to ensure a just and swift accountability for the abuses perpetrated against children and accountability for anyone who carried out or gave orders to destroy schools, to shell maternity hospitals, or to bomb buildings sheltering civilians, including those clearly labeled "ДЕТИ." We must have accountability for the members of Russian forces and proxy groups who kill, rape, kidnap, and traumatize children, and those in charge who permit or direct it to happen. There must be accountability.

Mr. Chair, the United States and other donors will continue to expand the scope of humanitarian work to meet this challenge. We continue to leverage every tool within the OSCE to expand our humanitarian support to the people of Ukraine and to enhance our support for humanitarian partners providing support to uprooted families as they desperately seek safety and security amid Russia's continuing onslaught. Our support funds the operation of mobile medical teams to provide continued primary health services, psychological support, trauma care, and vaccinations in Ukraine to ensure that vulnerable populations have access to services and are protected from risks, including child-trafficking. We must continue to work to ensure the delivery of essential services to children and their families sheltering in besieged cities.

Thank you, Mr. Chair. I request this statement be attached to the Journal of the Day.