

BRIEF

THE COALITION FOR UKRAINIAN CHILDREN: COORDINATING COMMITMENTS AND CONFRONTING CHALLENGES

| TETIANA FEDOSIUK |

In a war, there is no lesser evil among crimes. But it is no accident that the International Criminal Court (ICC) has issued the first arrest warrants for President Vladimir Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova, his Children's Rights Commissioner, specifically for the crime of deportation of Ukrainian children.

Kyiv has verified at least 20 000 minors, and Yale's Humanitarian Research Lab (HRL) estimates the number could be at least 35 000.¹ Moscow claims to have 'welcomed' over 740 000 Ukrainian minors, accompanied and unaccompanied. Meanwhile, 1.6 mn remain in occupation and thus at constant risk of separation from families, deportation, and disappearing into Russia.

Kyiv insists that any peace deal must provide for the unconditional return of all deported children. While the deal remains elusive, practical work to locate and repatriate them continues—with the bulk of it carried out by *ad hoc* coalitions of government and private actors. For all the successes—nearly 2 500 children returned, that is—the effort has been set back. Since the US administration has reassessed its priorities and defunded the HRL programme, pivotal to both investigation and prosecution, here too, the burden-sharing (if not yet shifting) is moving to another coalition of the willing: the International Coalition for the Return of Ukrainian Children.²

THE COALESCING OF THE WILLING

The Coalition, co-chaired by Ukraine and Canada, was launched in Kyiv in February 2024 to

coordinate joint efforts between Ukraine and foreign partners.³ As of August 2026, it had 50 members: 47 states, plus the Council of Europe, the EU, and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. Created with the ultimate goal of reunifying the deported children with their families and communities, it works on (1) timely, accurate, and ethical sharing of information and case details, creation of robust statistics, and response mechanisms; (2) synchronising the diverse capacities, expertise, and financial resources; (3) advocacy, awareness raising, and (4) communication in international forums via high-level diplomatic engagements. The Coalition serves as a primary platform to introduce new forms of tailored support and to translate commitments into tangible assistance.⁴

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In September 2025, the Coalition convened its first leader-level meeting, co-chaired by Prime Minister Carney and President Zelensky, during the 80th session of the UN General Assembly.⁵ It endorsed a pilot tracing mechanism, practical support for returns, such as mediation, and expanded investment in reintegration, housing, foster family support, and psychosocial rehabilitation. The Coalition met again in Brussels in May 2026 for a summit co-hosted by the EU, Ukraine, and Canada that drew 63 delegations: member and guest countries alongside international organisations; over 20 foreign ministers attended in person.⁶ The west was, predictably, well represented: nearly the whole of Europe except Serbia and Türkiye,

alongside traditional allies such as Japan. Yet over two-thirds of the world's map—including some of the world's largest countries, such as China, India, Brazil, Indonesia, and Nigeria—did not participate, underscoring the challenge in appealing to the 'global south'. The US kept a lower profile, represented only at assistant-secretary level; the First Lady was invited but did not attend.

PLEDGES

Beyond representation and advocacy, this summit produced tangible outcomes. The EU will mobilise an additional €50 mn to strengthen Ukraine's child protection system, including child-centred justice and digital capacities.⁷ Canada pledged \$2.5 mn for the United Nations Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (HRMMU) and signed the Convention establishing an International Claims Commission for Ukraine—a future-money mechanism for compensation, including a category for forcible transfer/deportation of children.⁸

More initiatives were unveiled, though some had been announced earlier. The Netherlands set aside €2 mn to support identifying and returning abducted children, and providing psychosocial care.⁹ In particular, it donated DNA kits to prove family ties and trace children who had been taken from state child-care institutions in occupied territories through genetic material from personal items, as well as to enable the Ukrainian police to build an evidence database for war-crime prosecution.¹⁰ The UK committed £600 000 for the Verification Centre, which locates the children and supplies evidence for the UN Commission of Inquiry, and £600 000 for the Ukrainian-led Tracing Mechanism.¹¹

The effort to coordinate sanctions has been one of the Coalition's main accomplishments

Ukrainian and Lithuanian foreign ministers signed a joint declaration allocating €10 mn towards repatriation and rehabilitation.¹² (It is, however, likely that the announcement only reconfirmed the earlier donation within the Ukraine Facility.¹³) The Ukrainian MFA also touted €1.4 million from Germany for social and psychological support.¹⁴ Slovenia, Croatia, and

Georgia plan to offer rehabilitation programmes and summer camps.¹⁵ Separately, in March, the US announced \$25 mn "in new assistance" to support the identification, return, and rehabilitation.¹⁶ The next step will be a ministerial conference in Toronto in September 2026, co-organised by Canada, Ukraine, and Norway.

In cases like this, intent is measurable in numbers. The scale and range of donors and their contributions are nothing short of impressive. But they can only be accurately assessed against what Russia allocates to youth policies, indoctrination chief among them: up by 84% since 2022 to roughly \$1 bn in 2026.¹⁷ This is what the Coalition has to compete with.

This must not breed defeatism, for the quality and efficiency of programmes matter more. So, coordination comes into focus, or rather, the lack of a unified coordination mechanism to manage multiple assistance programmes and funding lines. To tackle that, the International Coalition, through Ukraine's national "Bring Kids Back UA" initiative, attempts to match donors, aid providers, and recipients to meet needs on the ground and avoid duplication. Yet the Regional Center for Human Rights (RCHR) points out that insufficient baseline data and weak monitoring systems make it difficult to evaluate, audit, and improve.¹⁸ The proposed solution is a "single coordination hub" giving policymakers and donors an overview of projects and gaps, and potential recipients a basis to plan accordingly.

SANCTIONS

In cases like this, sanctions are among the very few available tools for responding to international crimes. They are not just declarative condemnations: Lvova-Belova has complained that sanctions make her work harder and make people less willing to cooperate.¹⁹ But their effectiveness suffers from the multiplicity of legislative regimes and jurisdictions, which by default creates loopholes and hinders coordination. The RCHR estimates 267 individuals and 68 legal entities have been involved in the abduction and re-education of Ukrainian children.²⁰ But of those, only 5% are

sanctioned simultaneously by Ukraine, the US, Canada, the UK, the EU, Switzerland, and Japan.

Naturally, Ukraine has the most exhaustive "child kidnappers" list, a searchable database of 351 individuals and 171 legal entities, as of August 2026.²¹ Kyiv is usually ahead of its partners on this track: it enacted the first dedicated package in February 2023, predating the ICC warrants, and has expanded sanctions several times, with the latest children-specific tranche in April 2026, ahead of the Coalition's summit.²² Ukraine's designation logic is also the most granular: it names the full supply chain (commissioners' offices, transporters, receiving regional officials, camps and 'charities', indoctrination bodies, and even personas lending legitimacy), whereas partners tend to focus on the top layer—but gradually catch up. The government is instructed to inform the EU, US, and others of Ukraine's sanctions as a feedstock for their designations.²³

Despite the push for synchronisation, listings are national decisions that are not automatically mirrored, but the effort to coordinate sanctions has been one of the Coalition's main accomplishments.

The EU's omnibus 20th sanctions package of 23 April already listed 5 individuals and 1 entity "for enabling the abduction, forced transfer and indoctrination of Ukrainian children."²⁴ In a separate sanctions wave that hit on 11 May 2026, the EU adopted restrictive measures on 16 more individuals and 7 entities, including Russian state institutions, bringing the EU's total to over 130.²⁵ The listed are subject to asset freezes and travel bans, while EU citizens and companies are forbidden from making financial resources available to them. Canada announced new sanctions targeting 23 persons and 5 entities; its own count currently stands at over 100.²⁶ The UK's latest package includes 29 targets linked to Russia's "systematic campaign to forcibly deport and militarise Ukrainian children."²⁷ Switzerland doesn't design its own listings but adopts EU ones—such as the 20th package of April 2026, with child-specific designations—case by case; it synchronised 16 individuals and 7 organisations following the Coalition summit designations.²⁸

The most important asymmetry is that of the US, whose sanctions bite the hardest. Although it used to be the most proactive of Ukraine's allies—Lvova-Belova was sanctioned in September 2022, well before her ICC warrant—Washington sat out the May 2026 sanctions wave.²⁹ As of August, the most recent child-specific package dates back to the Biden administration.³⁰

SUSTAINED ALLIED ACTION

Since the full-scale invasion began and since the first reports of child deportation began to surface, a great deal of goodwill has been generated, much of it backed with resources. Coordination, however, has lagged, and achievements have been twinned with challenges. While *ad hoc* arrangements allow for flexibility, creativity in approaches, and freedom of action, they may come at the cost of transparency and long-term planning—essential for stakeholders, particularly at the government level. The Coalition, as a formalised platform, has been (re)configuring the instruments to enhance coordination, not least with NGO, private, and volunteer efforts.

The Russia has a system; Ukraine and its Coalition partners do not have one yet

Moving forward (including towards the international tribunals), monitoring funds, actors, priorities, and progress will become central not only to securing justice but also to steering support towards initiatives with a track record. Limited resources should be aligned, too. Division of labour has already emerged quite naturally: some nations offer their recreational facilities for rehabilitation; others contribute unique tools and skills they excel at.

With recovery in mind and—hopefully—in sight, trusted actors in psychological, medical, and social assistance will move to the forefront. So will special training for educators, healthcare and social workers in Ukraine who will carry this crisis for years to come. This local community capacity is critical and merits investments. But engaging the 'global south' countries with lived histories of conflict (and recovery) and utilising their experience is an opportunity the Coalition could tap into.

Recognising the scope of the challenge, as well as the severe trauma the nation has endured, the collective efforts—on all of the Coalition's tracks—will have to continue long after war is over, and will be foundational for Ukraine's recovery and resilience. Russia has a system; Ukraine and its Coalition partners do not have one yet. For this reason, ahead of the last

summit, NGOs called for a coordinated Road Map with benchmarks against which progress can be measured.³¹ The next summit will show whether they have been heard. The crime is organised, and the response should be too.

ENDNOTES

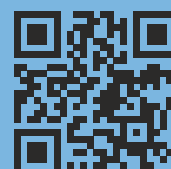
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