

IN BRIEF ...

DIS-INFORMATION AS A TOOL OF WAR: INFORMATION AND IDENTITY WARFARE AFFECTING CHILDREN'S RIGHTS IN THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION AND TEMPORARILY OCCUPIED UKRAINIAN TERRITORIES

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- This working paper analyses how the Russian Federation deploys indoctrination, digital censorship, forced transfers, and militarized youth programming as part of a broader dis-information campaign targeting children. These practices operate both within Russia and in the temporarily occupied territories (TOTs) of Ukraine, where they are intensified and used to erase Ukrainian identity and restructure children's loyalties.
- The paper demonstrates that these mechanisms are systematic and mutually reinforcing, amounting to a coherent system of cognitive warfare directed at children. By controlling education, information access, cultural identity, and family ties, these practices raise serious concerns under international human rights law (IHRL), international humanitarian law (IHL), and international criminal law (ICL). The relevant standards under international law have been mapped throughout the paper.
- Based on UN reporting, judicial findings, NGO investigations, and legal analysis, the paper concludes that protecting children from dis-information, indoctrination, and identity erasure is not discretionary, but a binding legal obligation grounded in international law.

THE ISSUE: CHILDREN'S RIGHTS AND DIS-INFORMATION IN THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION AND OCCUPIED TERRITORIES OF UKRAINE.1

Contemporary armed conflict increasingly extends beyond kinetic violence into the information and cognitive domain. Within this landscape, children are uniquely vulnerable. Their developmental stage makes them particularly susceptible to long-term manipulation through education systems, digital environments, cultural policy, and state-directed youth structures.

Inside the Russian Federation, the paper documents how state-controlled education, cultural policy, and digital regulation promote militarized patriotism, suppress dissent, and normalize unconditional loyalty to the State from early childhood. Mandatory ideological curricula, patriotic rituals, and youth movements such as *Conversations about Important Things*, *Yunarmiya*, and *The Movement of the First* are embedded within formal schooling and extracurricular life, transforming education into a vehicle for political socialization rather than critical development.

In the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine, these practices intensify into a coercive system of occupation governance. Ukrainian-language education is dismantled; Russian curricula, textbooks, and accreditation regimes are imposed; access to Ukrainian media and online schooling is obstructed; and participation in ideological or militarized programming is often made a condition for access to education

or basic services. Teachers, parents, and children who resist face intimidation, detention, or the threat of family separation.

The paper further documents the forcible transfer and deportation of Ukrainian children, their placement in state-run “re-education” camps, passportisation, and adoption or foster placement under Russian law. These measures sever children from their families, nationality, language, and cultural heritage, while systematically obstructing tracing and reunification. The transfer of children operates not as an isolated violation, but as an entry point into a broader architecture of ideological indoctrination and identity replacement.

Furthermore, it also notes a regional dimension to these practices, identifying Belarus as a parallel and supporting context in which the transfer and ideological “re-education” of Ukrainian children has been documented, confirming that this model of child-focused cognitive warfare extends beyond the immediate theatre of occupation.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that children are not incidental victims of the conflict but direct targets of disinformation and identity-engineering strategies. The manipulation of children’s identities, loyalties, and worldviews constitutes a distinct and under-recognized form of harm with profound legal and societal consequences.

THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK²

INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS LAW (IHRL)

Under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children enjoy binding protections related to identity, nationality, language, education, freedom of expression, freedom of thought, access to information, family unity, and non-discrimination. These guarantees are reinforced by the ICCPR and ICESCR, which protect cultural life, education oriented toward dignity and critical thinking, and freedom from propaganda for war. The paper emphasizes that States have positive obligations to ensure children’s access to plural, reliable information, including in digital environments, and to prevent education from being weaponized for political or military indoctrination.

INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW (IHL)

In situations of occupation, the Fourth Geneva Convention and Additional Protocol I impose strict duties on occupying powers to facilitate the proper functioning of educational institutions, respect existing legal and educational systems, protect children from propaganda and forced allegiance, and prohibit the forcible transfer or deportation of protected persons, including children. Evacuations are permitted only temporarily and for imperative humanitarian reasons. Policies of identity alteration, assimilation, or militarized indoctrination exceed what IHL allows and may constitute grave breaches.

INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL LAW (ICL)

The paper maps how documented practices may engage international criminal responsibility under the Rome Statute, including:

- Unlawful deportation or transfer of children as war crimes
- Persecution and other inhumane acts as crimes against humanity
- Forcible transfer of children from one group to another as a potential act of genocide

The analysis clarifies that these categories may overlap depending on scale, pattern, and intent, and that identity-destructive practices targeting children are increasingly relevant to contemporary interpretations of international crimes.

OUTCOMES³

This research identifies four interlinked mechanisms that together form a coherent system of cognitive warfare targeting children:

- **Indoctrination in Education:** Russia's curricula, textbooks, and youth-organizations institutionalize patriotism, militarism, and loyalty to the State. In the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine, Ukrainian-language instruction is dismantled, and Russian ideology imposed. These measures raise concerns particularly regarding cultural identity, non-discrimination, and the use of education in contexts of occupation, with possible implications under criminal accountability.
- **Digital Censorship and Surveillance:** In Russia, the Sovereign Internet Law and school-based monitoring systems isolate children from independent information and restrict expression. In temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine, rerouted infrastructure and device checks block Ukrainian media and render online Ukrainian schooling unsafe, affecting the access to information and continuity of education.
- **Forced Transfers and "Re-Education" Camps:** Thousands of Ukrainian children have been unlawfully deported, naturalized as Russian citizens, placed in ideological "re-education" camps, or subjected to militarized youth training. These acts raise concerns under the prohibitions on forcible transfer, identity erasure, and war propaganda.
- **Militarized Youth Organizations:** Russia's youth movements - *Yunarmiya*, *The Movement of the First*, and others - operate as state-directed tools of ideological conditioning and militarized socialization. Children, some as young as 6, are drawn into training, loyalty rituals, and patriotic programs, often under coercive conditions. In occupied Ukrainian territories, these structures advance Russification and pre-recruitment preparation, with participation tied to access to education or services. All raising serious concerns particularly regarding forced participation and the militarization of children in conflict settings.
- **Regional Dimension - Belarus:** Similar strategies appear in Belarus and influence information operations in neighbouring states, confirming that Russia's model of cognitive warfare and child-focused identity manipulation extends beyond Ukraine and undermines regional human rights protections.

Russia's use of propaganda, censorship, and forced identity reconfiguration against children represents a coherent system of cognitive warfare. By erasing cultural identity, controlling information, and reshaping loyalty, these practices inflict long-term harm and raise concerns of core principles of international law. Protecting children from such manipulation is a binding legal duty essential to upholding the integrity of the international legal order.

WHY THIS MATTERS

International law protects children not only from physical violence but also from psychological manipulation, forced assimilation, and identity destruction. The practices documented in this paper directly engage core protections under the CRC, the Geneva Conventions, and the Rome Statute.

By controlling education, information, and cultural belonging, Russia's approach inflicts durable and intergenerational harm, weakens prospects for reconciliation, and risks entrenching cycles of violence and identity-based conflict.

This working paper contributes to emerging debates on hybrid and cognitive warfare by demonstrating that child-focused disinformation and indoctrination are not peripheral phenomena, but early-warning indicators of serious international crimes and long-term instability.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS⁴

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The **UN-HRC** should mandate a fact-finding mission to legally assess (IHRL, IHL and ICL) and document the forced transfer, indoctrination, systematic re-classification of citizenship and unlawful adoption of Ukrainian children in Ukrainian TOTs.
- **UNICEF** and the **CRC Committee** should develop guidelines or a General Comment on child protection during information warfare, including the psychological impact of propaganda, militarized education, and identity erasure. These guidelines should clarify the State's obligations under IHRL and IHL regarding psychological manipulation, militarized schooling, and the use of dis-information to obstruct family reunification processes.
- **Russia** should immediately cease its dis-information campaign actions, both within and outside the borders, affecting of children's rights under the CRC, ICCPR, ICESCR, Geneva Conventions and the Rome Statute. In line with the UN Special Rapporteur on the Russian Federation's recommendation 141(e), Russia should end surveillance-based punishment and repeal the July 2025 laws criminalizing VPN use and online information-seeking, which severely restrict children's access to education, information, and identity-preserving content. **Belarus** should prevent any cooperation that facilitates the unlawful transfer or re-education of Ukrainian children and ensure independent humanitarian access to relevant facilities.
- **Ukraine** should strengthen child-reunification mechanisms and expand digital tools to identify, trace, and recover children separated or unlawfully transferred. RCHR's *Way Home* framework's proposes a UNGA resolution codifying these obligations and bilateral/triangular arrangements ("Ukraine - third neutral state - Russia") enabling returns through neutral states.⁵ Additionally, an individualized "return trajectory" model and independent best-interest assessments should be adopted (which, per the policy, must exclude Russian participation due to conflict of interest under AP I and the CRC). The Inter-agency Working Group on Unaccompanied and Separated Children's Tool N. 19, of the *Toolkit on Unaccompanied And Separated Children*, offers guidance of all the sample tools and resources to support programme design.⁶
- **Third-party States** not party to the conflict should actively support Ukraine's child-recovery and reunification efforts, including through the *Bring Kids Back UA* initiative, by providing political mediation, technical assistance, and financial resources.⁷ Such support should strengthen Ukraine's capacity to counter child-targeted Russian disinformation, including deepfakes, forced-adoption narratives, and psychological operations aimed at families, and enable safe, neutral, and verifiable return pathways for unlawfully transferred or deported Ukrainian children. The RCHR's *Way Home* policy proposed triangular return pathways ("Ukraine - third neutral State - Russia") enabling returns through neutral states. They should provide political, technical, and financial support for these reunification systems, ensuring sustainable platforms for tracing, documentation, and safe return.⁸
- **International child-protection actors** as **ICRC, UNICEF, UNHCR, IOM** and **specialized child-agencies** should operationally lead the tracing, verification, psychosocial support, and reintegration of returned children, following global standards used in Sierra Leone, Uganda, Rwanda, Colombia, and the Balkans. The **ICRC** should secure humanitarian access to children unlawfully transferred or held in TOTs, and document the role of dis-information and coercive "re-education" practices.

- The **ICC** should assess whether systematic dis-information targeting Ukrainian children - including narratives on “evacuation,” adoption, indoctrination, or militarized schooling - constitutes evidence of intent for war crimes, crimes against humanity, and/or genocide, including under Articles 6(e), 7(1)(h)-(k), and 8(2)(a)(vii), (b)(viii), (b)(xxvi) of the Rome Statute and the Genocide Convention.
- **Social Media Platforms** should enhance conflict-zone content moderation, with priority given to detecting and removing dis-information that targets children, especially narratives portraying unlawful transfers as “rescue” operations.

END NOTES

1 M. Fico, *Dis-information as a Tool of War: Information and Identity Warfare Affecting Children's Rights in the Russian Federation and Temporarily Occupied Ukrainian Territories*; Introduction.

2 M. Fico, *Dis-information as a Tool of War: Information and Identity Warfare Affecting Children's Rights in the Russian Federation and Temporarily Occupied Ukrainian Territories* ch.1, 2(A)-(C), 3.

3 M. Fico, *Dis-information as a Tool of War: Information and Identity Warfare Affecting Children's Rights in the Russian Federation and Temporarily Occupied Ukrainian Territories*; Executive Summary, ch. 2, ch.3, Conclusion.

4 M. Fico, *Dis-information as a Tool of War: Information and Identity Warfare Affecting Children's Rights in the Russian Federation and Temporarily Occupied Ukrainian Territories*; Recommendations.

5 Regional Center for Human Rights, Регіональний центр прав людини, (RCHR) and others. "Way Home: Internal and External Dimension of Return, Rehabilitation and (Re)integration of Children Deported, Forcibly Transferred or Otherwise Separated from Their Families due to the Armed Aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine" (2023).

6 Inter-Agency Working Group on Unaccompanied and Separated Children, *Toolkit on Unaccompanied and Separated Children* (International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2017).

7 Bring Kids Back UA, *Bring Kids Back UA: Initiative to Return Ukrainian Children Unlawfully Transferred by the Russian Federation*. <https://www.bringkidsback.org.ua/>.

8 Above n.1

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