



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 038

Tuesday, November 7, 2023



Chair: Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury

Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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• (1110)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Good morning, everyone. Welcome to meeting number 38 of the House of Commons Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

[*Translation*]

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

[*English*]

I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of the witnesses and the members.

[*Translation*]

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those participating by videoconference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mic and please mute yourself when you are not speaking.

[*English*]

For interpretation for those on Zoom, you have the choice at the bottom of your screen of either floor, English or French. Those in the room can use the earpiece and select the desired channel.

[*Translation*]

For members in the room, if you wish to speak, please raise your hand. For members on Zoom, please use the raise hand function. The clerk and I will manage the speaking order as best we can. We appreciate your patience and understanding in this regard.

[*English*]

In accordance with the committee's routine motion concerning connection tests for witnesses, I am informing the committee that all witnesses have completed their required connection tests in advance of the meeting.

[*Translation*]

Before we start, I want to stress that today's meeting is on the unlawful transfer of Ukrainian children to Russia. Some of the discussion could be difficult for witnesses, people watching at home, members of the subcommittee and members in general.

Anyone experiencing distress or in need of assistance can contact the clerk for information on support services offered by the House of Commons Administration.

[*English*]

Now it's my pleasure to welcome the witnesses who have joined us this morning, all of them appearing by video conference.

From Save Ukraine—we would like to save Ukraine—we have Mykola Kuleba, Chief Executive Officer.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Kuleba, you have the floor for five minutes.

[*English*]

Mr. Mykola Kuleba (Chief Executive Officer, Save Ukraine): Dear ladies and gentlemen, it is indeed an honour to be standing before you today.

I'm Mykola Kuleba, and my work in children's advocacy spans more than 25 years. I served as a presidential commissioner for children's rights under two presidents of Ukraine, and now I lead the Save Ukraine rescue network, a charitable organization that rescues Ukraine's most vulnerable from combat zones and helps them restore their lives through a suite of social services. I'm deeply grateful for the opportunity to speak before you.

I'm here to speak about Ukraine's children. My main message is simple: The Russian Federation is committing genocide of the Ukrainian nation by forcibly transferring our children to Russia and annihilating their Ukrainian identity.

Both words and actions of Russian officials indicate an intent to separate Ukrainian children permanently from their families and their national and ethnic groups, thereby annihilating their Ukrainian identity. Maria Lvova-Belova has bragged about 750,000 Ukrainian children being forcibly transferred. Russian officials openly expressed their intent to have the transferred Ukrainian children educated in the Russian language, adopted into Russian families and turned into Russian citizens.

Save Ukraine has rescued 200 forcibly transferred children. We not only returned these children to Ukraine but also provided both physical and psychological support to help them heal from their traumas. Though each child's story is unique, we have heard several common themes from the experiences that tell us about life for hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian children living in Russian-controlled territories or Russia itself.

We don't know how many of these children are unaccompanied, but we know that unaccompanied children are the most vulnerable to total identity erasure. We have heard again and again about the clear and systematic extraction of Ukrainian identity. Children are forced to listen to Russian propaganda and false narratives about Ukraine. Children are not allowed to speak the Ukrainian language. They are forced to attend Russian language, literature and history classes. Children are forced to listen to the Russian anthem regularly. Teenagers are recruited into Russia's youth military movements, and we have evidence that thousands of these kids are now soldiers fighting against Ukraine.

We know that just wearing blue or yellow or even close to blue and yellow is grounds for punishment. One boy was punished for wearing purple and yellow socks. A girl in a Russian re-education camp was punished for wearing a t-shirt with a Ukrainian flag, just a Ukrainian flag. A camp director cut the t-shirt into pieces while making a propaganda film.

How I'd like to hear from the children themselves. You will hear them soon.

I am a father. I have four children and I know that many of you are fathers and mothers and that you have hopes and dreams for your children's future. I know how to work to foster your children's identity. Ukrainian parents have this same dream for their children. We dream of having a safe, peaceful, prosperous country governed by the rule of law, a country where our children can thrive. Russia launched their full-scale invasion, but we haven't lost this dream.

• (1115)

We have a war to win. We have to win—

The Chair: You have 10 more seconds.

Mr. Mykola Kuleba: With your support, we will win. We must win, because we know it's our children's right to be in Ukraine without fear of being persecuted and killed.

I am finishing.

I appeal to you today to use your voices to condemn the Russian forcible transfer of Ukrainian children as genocide and to pursue accountability for the perpetrators of this devastating crime.

Thank you so much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kuleba.

I would like suspend the meeting for a few seconds in order to do a test for another witness who was late and just arrived.

Now I would like to invite Ms. Kateryna Lytvynenko to take the floor for five minutes. Please go ahead.

• (1120)

Ms. Kateryna Lytvynenko (Humanitarian Policy and Advocacy Manager, Save the Children): Honourable chairman, vice-chairman and members of the subcommittee, members of Parliament and the international community, and colleagues, thank you for inviting Save the Children to speak today on such an important and complex issue as the forcible transfer of children from Ukraine to Russia.

The best place for children is with their families and their communities. In a humanitarian crisis, there is so much upheaval and uncertainty for children that it can be difficult to know if a child has an existing family, and even if they don't, it could be traumatic to move them out of the country and culture that they are familiar with.

That is why Save the Children believes efforts must be made to reunite unaccompanied children with their family members. All means should be used to trace and unite unaccompanied children with their families and local communities, accounting for their best interests.

We don't know the exact number of children affected by the forced transfers from Ukraine to Russia since February 2022. A range of numbers have been provided by the officials in Russia and Ukraine, who reference from 2,000 children to 20,000 confirmed cases respectively.

We know that some of these children are in Russia. Some of them are in non-government-controlled areas of Ukraine. Some of the children have come from institutions and some not, which complicates the understanding of the guardianship of these children and the reunification mechanisms.

This is a complex situation that requires complex solutions and clear prioritization of the needs of the children in line with the principle of their best interests.

Although we cannot say for certain the scale of the issue and how many children have been affected, we do know that as time passes, the situation becomes increasingly complex for every single child. Canada can play a big role in finding a solution. The cases of many of these children may be complicated, but that does not absolve anyone of the responsibility. It is crucial to support accountability efforts and ensure that all accountability mechanisms include child expertise.

As accountability processes continue, diplomatic efforts must be directed towards finding solutions and protection for these children in the meantime. To date, the most effective way to reunite children with their families in Ukraine has been through the grassroots efforts of civil society organizations. They help families trace their children and help the parents and legal guardians to take a long and dangerous journey to Russia or to non-government-controlled territories of Ukraine to bring back children themselves. We know how long, difficult and sometimes unsuccessful these processes can be, since Save the Children supports such initiatives through our partners on the ground.

Given the absence of political dialogue between Ukraine and Russia, the mechanism of transferring children cannot be regulated, and legal measures for the return of children deported will remain ad hoc and limited in effectiveness and skill. Technical dialogue between ombuds institutions and relevant ministries in Ukraine and Russia needs to be established as a matter of urgency to fulfill children's rights and facilitate reunification with their legal guardians.

However, we understand that there may be a long wait for Ukraine and Russia to establish direct dialogue on this issue, and this is time that children don't have. Canada can play a role in finding a third country to facilitate the reunification process. We need to help find the states that would be able to promote further dialogue on this issue. We have seen successful cases of negotiating prisoner-of-war exchanges by third parties as well as the recent return of several children from Russia to Ukraine facilitated by Qatar.

I would like to again stress the importance of accounting for the best interests of the child during the processes of return and reunification. Serving the best interests of the child is only possible when we examine every single case. In order to do that, a centralized tracking and information management system is needed to ensure the whereabouts, guardianship status and well-being of each child.

International donors can prioritize funding child protection and tracing to support the restoration of family ties.

In closing, I would like to again thank you for the opportunity to address you today. I welcome any future opportunities to speak on this issue.

Thank you.

● (1125)

The Chair: Thank you.

Now I would like to invite Kseniia Koldin, Denys Bereznyi, Anastasiia Motychak and Vladyslav Rudenko to speak. All together, you have 15 minutes to share.

The floor is yours.

Ms. Kseniia Koldin (As an Individual): [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

Greetings.

I am Kseniia. I'm 19 years old. I have a younger brother, Serhiy. He is 12 years old. We are children without parents.

Two years ago, we were in a foster family. That's when the aggression began. We were in one of the first cities—Vovchans'k—where Russian troops arrived. We lived in conditions of military action. We had to take cover. We had to hide. There was constant shelling in the streets. There were Russian patrols and Russian military machinery. Our lives changed.

In the summer of 2022, our teacher recommended persuasively and intensely that we had to go and study in Russia. Most parents agreed to those proposals because they didn't want to have conflicts with occupational authorities. That's how we arrived in Russia.

At the same time, my brother was taken to a camp in the Krasnodar region with the pretext of a health scan. It was to be for a brief period, but it actually was a very long period.

After two months, I was expelled for my pro-Ukrainian position from a housing facility at the college where I was studying. I didn't want to take a Russian passport. I didn't take a proposal for free housing. After all this happened, I met someone and I stayed with that person.

At this time, my brother stayed in Russia. He was eventually placed with a foster family. During that time, I knew where he was. At the end of the winter, I was in a tough psychological place or mental place, and I knew that I wanted to go back to Ukraine, but I didn't know how to achieve that. I started to look at the possibilities for how to get back to Ukraine. I promised myself that I would go back only with my brother.

With a person I knew from my hometown, I contacted the social services of my city, and I found out about the Save Ukraine organization. They started to help me plan the process of getting back to my homeland. I understood that they were the people who would help me to come back. When I had all the papers and I was able to come, and when my brother had the papers, Russians started to pressure him, saying that he should not go back to Ukraine, that there was a war and that Ukrainians are Nazis and that he would be better off in Russia.

I was told that my brother did not want to go back, which really surprised me. I was really worried that I would not be able to take him with me, but I got myself collected and I went to where he was. Once I was there, I understood that he really did not want to go back. We spent three hours talking to each other. I was trying to explain to him that if he did not go, then we would not see each other and we would not be able to be together as a family. Then he was asked whether or not he wanted to go with me and he said yes.

After a few days at the borders of Russia and Belarus, we were not allowed to say that we were going back to Ukraine, because we would not be allowed to return. We had a few days of an exhausting trip. We were worried that we would not get back, that we would have to stay in Russia, but we still managed to come back to Ukraine. Then we were in a Save Ukraine centre, where we were provided with medical and psychological assistance.

Right now, my brother is in foster care with a great Ukrainian family. He has his own room, which he's really happy about. I work in the Save Ukraine organization and I try to work on saving the children who were forcibly transferred to Russia and had to live under occupational Russian authorities.

I know that Ukraine will triumph in the war and that Russia will be punished for all of its crimes. I hope that no more children will be forced to become Russian.

● (1130)

Thank you.

Mr. Denys Bereznyi (As an Individual): [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you.

My name is Denys. I am 18 years old now. During the occupation of my city of Kherson, I was taken to Crimea against my will.

Military officers came to my apartment and said, "We don't care whether you want to go or not, but you will still go." My parents were shocked. They could not argue with armed officers.

We were then taken on a school bus to the Kherson river port. They were saying we were going to a camp for two weeks and then we'd come back. We were taken to Oleshky, where we waited for a bus for three and a half hours.

The camp leader was formerly in the Ukrainian special forces. His name is Valery Astakhov and he fled in 2014. He kept saying that Russia was better than Ukraine. He was saying that here in the camp, if you said something bad, you would have to walk back to your home.

I am a diabetic. I went to the infirmary and said, "I'm almost out of insulin." I was told, "Come back when you are completely out of insulin." After a month, I was really feeling bad because I had no more insulin, and an ambulance took me to an ICU in Yevpatoria. It took several hours to transport me there. I spent two or three days in the intensive care unit, and then I was taken to Simferopol for three weeks so that I could get insulin and medical care.

In February 2023, all students had to be sent to study in Crimea. I was sent to study a year earlier as a machinery operator. I did not want to study, but I was forced to. I ended up in the naval technological college in the city of Kerch. I studied there until the end of the school year.

I was constantly told to get a Russian passport. I kept saying I didn't want a Russian passport. I didn't want to receive one.

A friend of mine called me and said there was an opportunity to go back home, that there was an organization called Save Ukraine that helps children go back home.

I called the hotline from a Russian number. I called Save Ukraine and I provided them with all the information I had to be able to go back home. I said that my parents couldn't come and pick me up. Together with Save Ukraine, we started to arrange power of attorney for the mother of a friend of mine. When I knew someone was coming to pick me up, I was so happy. I didn't even know what to do.

At the border checkpoints, we were interrogated by the Russian security services. They were checking our phones. When I saw the word "Ukraine", I just picked up my heavy bag and shouted, "Glory to Ukraine", because I understood I was finally home.

Thank you.

Ms. Anastasiia Motychak (As an Individual): [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

Hello. My name is Anastasiia. I am 16 years old, and I'm from the city of Kherson. I had to spend four months in temporarily occupied Crimea without my family and without the opportunity to go home.

How did that happen? During the Russian occupation of Kherson, we were actively offered a so-called holiday in the camps in Crimea. My mom did not want to let me go, but a teacher in the college where I was studying insisted. She said, "It's nice there. There's no war there." Of course, when you're under shelling every

day, you're worried and afraid every minute of every day, and we were told everything was quiet over there, so my mom ended up agreeing.

We were told that the conditions in the camp were nice. When we came to the camp, there were cockroaches everywhere, in our closets and in the canteen. We had to sleep on dirty, smelly sheets and pillows. Apart from that, it looked like a regular summer camp, but then it changed after a few weeks. We were forced to learn and sing the Russian national anthem each week at a certain time. If we refused, we were admonished for it, and we were told that we were ungrateful.

We were forbidden to speak Ukrainian and show our identity. If we showed that we were from Ukraine, we were harassed. At each event, children from temporarily occupied Crimea had to shout "Glory to Russia", while Ukrainians were told they had Nazis in their homeland and that it was the Ukrainian armed forces that were shelling peaceful cities.

It was really intolerable, and after my mother asked Ukrainian volunteers for help, she said that she would come and pick me up. I was extremely happy. I was very hopeful that I would see my mom.

It took her 15 days to get to me. She had to go through Poland, Belarus and Moscow, and we went back the same way.

Right now, I live in the Hope and Healing Center. I go to school and I dream of the day the war ends.

Thank you.

• (1135)

Mr. Vladyslav Rudenko (As an Individual): [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

Hello. My name is Vladyslav and I'm 17 years old.

Today my mom, Tetiana, is here. She went through all the horrors with me, and she can tell you a lot.

I was taken on October 7 to Yevpatoriya, to the camp called Druzhba, or "Friendship". They imposed a pro-Russian position on me, and I was annoyed by it. At some point, I took the Russian flag off the flagpole, and I was put in a punishment cell for a week. I spent a week with no communication and no phone. Nobody was allowed to go in and speak with me. I had suicidal thoughts in there.

After that, I was taken to the Kherson region, to the Lazurne village. I spent six months there. I was playing soccer with the other boys, and a Chechen officer came up and said, "Where are the girls?" I told him where they were. He went back. He spoke with the girls. Then he came up to me, because at one point I said, "Our girls are not suitable for you." When he tried to approach me... I did sports, so I tried to resolve everything peacefully. He started moving towards me, and I understood he had more advantages than I did. He was stronger. He could even kill me and say it was due to my pro-Ukrainian position. After that, I fled home.

My friend was supposed to go home in two days. His mom was coming to pick him up, so he asked me to give him a tattoo. When his mom came, they took everybody in the camp into a room and videotaped us. They made us take off all our clothing except for the underwear. They made us videotape apologies for this tattoo.

Then they found a message on my phone where my sister jokingly called me a separatist. I was taken away to an unknown location. I spent 20 minutes there. He said that if I ever wrote anything in Ukrainian or to Ukrainians, he would speak to me in a whole different manner. I heard screams. After that, he showed me a photo of my father. My father is a soldier in the armed forces of Ukraine. He said I cannot write to my father at all.

When you're in Russia in the occupied territory, you have no rights. You can't do what you want. You can't do the right thing. You cannot admit you're Ukrainian. You cannot say you love Ukraine.

Right now, I want to do professional sports.

Thank you for listening to me.

● (1140)

The Chair: Now I would like to invite Mr. Yevgen Mezhevoj to take the floor for five minutes, please.

Mr. Yevhen Mezhevoi (As an Individual): [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

Hello. My name is Yehgen Mezhevoj. I was born in Ukraine and grew up in Ukraine, in Mariupol. I'm 40 years old.

At the beginning of 2016, I went to Chernivtsi, because things were not very safe in my hometown. I joined the armed forces of Ukraine. Until 2019, I was a serviceman in the armed forces of Ukraine.

Then, after a while, my wife left me alone with three children. After that, I stayed in Yavoriv.

After my contract was done, I returned to Mariupol and continued to work at the metal plant. I also branched out into a small business. On February 24, I was still working at the plant. I went to my children and I saw the situation at home. We packed up and we went to take shelter.

Until April 7, we went from one bomb shelter to another. We had to drink water from radiators and fire hydrants or anything that we could use to get some water. I did have a small business that was linked to catering, so I had some food left over.

On April 7, near the number 4 hospital in Mariupol, Russian military came to our bomb shelter and said that we had to evacuate because Chechen units were coming to clear the area and that this clearing process would be extremely rough.

I decided that, yes, we had to evacuate. We did evacuate to the town of Vynohradne. The children were fed there. They said that we had to keep moving further because this displaced persons camp was over capacity. They told us to move further. Everybody was indignant because many people were wounded. Some were elderly and some had heavy bags.

They took us to a checkpoint. Then they started to search our things, our documents, and everything was checked. No place was left unturned. They saw my papers and understood that I was formerly in the military. I was told to find someone who would pick up my children. They told me that I would be there, and I asked how long I would be there. They said that I could be there for two hours or I could be there for seven years.

I found someone to watch my children. They were placed on a bus, and they left to some place I didn't know.

Then I was interrogated and I was taken to various detention places. I ended up in Olenivka. I was beaten in Olenivka very roughly. In a one-person cell, there were 20 people. The cells were overflowing. Then, at the end of May, I was called to the warden, and I was told that I would be freed. On May 26, I was freed at 6 p.m. There were no buses, so I walked to Donetsk on foot, because Donetsk is where my documents were, including my passports and my children's passports. I walked through the night. I was in Donetsk the following morning.

I was told that my children had gone to Moscow on June 26 to a special camp for rest and recreation that was run by the office of the president. I was very nervous and anxious. I was stressed. I demanded that they give me a telephone number so I could communicate with my children.

● (1145)

I was able to speak with them. On June 15, my son called me. He said that two women were there, saying their camp stay was almost over and they have to place them somewhere. They were told two options, which were either go to a foster family or go to an orphanage—a residential school. He asked what they should do.

I said that I had to talk to him before making a decision. I said that maybe it's better to go to a residential school. I asked how many days it would be before they would be placed. They told me five days.

I had no money. Then, through friends, I saw a website of volunteers who helped with going back to Ukraine. I called the volunteers and told them about my situation. They started to help me remotely to go to my children. They paid for all my trips. They helped me resolve the issues that arose.

Once I was three or four hours from Moscow, we wrote an official letter to the office of the president of Russia, demanding that my children be returned to me.

Yes, there were issues. We were solving them remotely with the team of volunteers—

The Chair: Excuse me; I gave you an extra minute and a half. Please wrap it up.

Go ahead.

Ms. Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): I'm just wondering if it's possible for us to let our witnesses have as much time as they need.

The Chair: Does the committee agree?

Go ahead.

Mr. Yevhen Mezhevoi: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

Then we were in Latvia. Now I'm with my children and everything is okay.

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: I thank all the witnesses for their comments.

We will now go to questions from members of the subcommittee.

[*English*]

I would like to invite Madam Rosemarie Falk to take the floor for seven minutes.

The floor is yours, please.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk (Battlefords—Lloydminster, CPC): Thank you very much, Chair.

I would like to thank each of our witnesses, not only for being willing to share their stories today but also for their resilience and for bravery in coming forward to expose the realities of the war in Ukraine. I want to thank you so much for that.

I am a mother as well. It is difficult for me to even imagine the suffering of being forcibly separated from your children. Just from listening here, I'm incredibly grateful for the work that Save Ukraine and Save the Children are doing to help reunite families.

I also just want to say that I'm so sorry. I am so sorry for the hardships and the evil that you each have had to endure throughout this whole process.

Again, thank you for sharing your vulnerability and the reality you each have experienced in these situations.

I would like to focus on the parents, if that's okay for right now.

I would like to ask this of Tetiana, if possible.

How did you find out that your son was taken to Russia?

• (1150)

Ms. Tetiana Bodak (As an Individual): [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

My son called me and told me that he had been taken from his home and that he was in Oleshky, which was formerly Tsiurupynsk. It's on the left bank of the Kherson region. They were waiting for buses to take them to Crimea.

It was a scandal. I asked how they could do it without even my knowledge. Who took him from the house? How did he end up on the left bank, leaving for Crimea?

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Were you able to communicate with him regularly, or was there a lag in communication from that initial time?

Ms. Tetiana Bodak: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

While he was on the road, there was still an ability to talk to him, but then there were interruptions in communication for about two

months and I had no idea what was happening with him. After two months, he contacted me and he told me that he was in Crimea and that he was in a detention facility. He didn't tell me the reason he was in a detention facility; only later did I find out the reason.

From that point on, we were able to communicate and to write to each other every day, checking with each other on how things were and looking to the possibility of bringing him home.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: I can't even put the words to that. I think you really speak to the determination of a mom to be reunited. It is just so wonderful.

I understand that you travelled to be reunited. Do you feel comfortable in speaking about some of the fears you had when travelling?

Ms. Tetiana Bodak: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

The scariest thing was when I arrived to pick up my son. It was in the village of Lazurne, on the left bank of the city of Kherson. It was the most difficult part, because I was taken to a basement for interrogation. They were putting me through a lie detector. I was detained for 24 hours and I had no idea what was going to happen to me or whether I was going to see my son again. I didn't know whether I would be able to return or whether I would be able to see him again.

Also, it was scary when they told me that they would take me to my son. I was afraid to go and sit with them in their car, because they placed a hood on my head so I wouldn't be able to see where they were taking me. They told me to bend my head so I wouldn't see the street. They were all carrying weapons. I knew that they could do anything they wanted, but thank God, they took me to my son.

For five days, they wouldn't allow us to leave. For five days, we stayed in the village of Lazurne. We were lucky because there was a very nice family we were able to stay with during that period, and they were helping us.

After that five-day period, they allowed us to leave, but only after we made a video where I was supposed to say that Save Ukraine was a very bad organization and that they were stealing children and that Russia is a wonderful country. Only after I made that video did they let us go.

We didn't tell them that we were going back to Ukraine. We told them that we were going to Poland, that our final destination was Poland, that we were not returning to Ukraine.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Thank you very much for sharing that.

I know that my time is running out, but I just want to say to Vladyslav—he doesn't have his headpiece on right now—that you are very courageous and you are very loved. I am so glad to hear of your reunification story with your mother. You are strong and courageous.

Thank you so much, again, for just being vulnerable and sharing with us here in Canada what is going on in the kidnapping of Ukrainian children by Russia.

Thank you.

• (1155)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Falk.

Now I would like to invite Mr. Baker to take the floor for seven minutes.

The floor is yours.

Mr. Yvan Baker (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

May I speak in Ukrainian? Would that be appropriate to speak in Ukrainian if my colleagues would allow?

The Chair: Yes. Go ahead.

Mr. Yvan Baker: [*Member spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

First of all, I would like to say thank you. My name is Yvan Baker. I am a member of Parliament. I am grateful for your bravery and courage, that you are today with us, that you shared what you suffered through. Please know that we will work to help you, to help Ukraine.

I would like to ask Vladyslav, Anastasiia and Kseniia this: What would you like? What are you asking us as members of Parliament? What would you like us, as politicians in Canada, to know? What would you like us to do to help children who are now in Russia or in Russian-occupied Ukrainian territories?

Mr. Denys Berezhnyi: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

I would like the Canadian Parliament to help the Save Ukraine organizations and help in their work to return children back to Ukraine. I know some people who ended up in Russia, and I want those who want to return to Ukraine to be able to do so to. If you could help these organizations, that would be great.

Ms. Kseniia Koldin: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

I would like add that I want more people to find out about those crimes that Russia commits against Ukrainian children—that it forcibly transfers them to Russia, that it tries to make Ukrainians become Russians—so that more people know what's going on. It was a horrible time for me to live through this, to live under their occupation, to live in Russia. I can't even compare it to anything. Thank you for listening to my story, and I'm hoping for your help and support.

Mr. Yvan Baker: [*Member spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you.

Is there anyone else who would like to add something to this?

Mr. Mykola Kuleba: If I may, I can add something.

Thank you for your questions, but it's very hard for children who have been hugely traumatized by Russians to now witness about these crimes. You've seen with Vladyslav that it's very hard for him and his mother, but they are very brave. You have to know that they are very brave, and they want to be voices for the hundreds of thou-

sands of Ukrainian children who live under the Russians. We really want to free them, to return them. These brave children, really... We can see the huge trauma that they received. Thank God that they can live now in Ukraine and can rebuild their lives.

I want to share one thing. I'm always asking them what the highlight of their story is, what the most important emotional thing that happened to them is, and all of them tell me that it is when they crossed the Ukrainian border.

Thank you.

• (1200)

Mr. Yvan Baker: Thank you, Mykola.

Mykola, I would like to come back to you, if I may.

I see that Kateryna has her hand up.

Do you want to speak, Kateryna? Please go ahead if you would like.

Ms. Kateryna Rashevskva (Legal Expert, Regional Center for Human Rights, Save Ukraine): Thank you.

Distinguished audience, thank you for having me here.

I can add something as per the role of Canada in this process of the repatriation and rehabilitation of the Ukrainian children and of restoring justice. Canada is the head of the Group of Friends on Children and Armed Conflict at the United Nations. That's is probably enough to help us towards the United Nations General Assembly resolution on the repatriation of Ukrainian children, because we need to push the Russian Federation to comply with its international obligations.

Also, we need to recognize the political indoctrination and re-education of Ukrainian children as a serious violation of children's rights committed during armed conflict, because without this recognition, the Russian Federation will continue this policy.

Of course, we need to not only repatriate Ukrainian children but also rehabilitate them. That is why we need to support the initiative by the Trust Fund for Victims in the ICC and use their assistance mandate and implement this policy for rehabilitation and reintegration even before the verdict of the ICC.

Thank you.

Mr. Yvan Baker: Thank you very much for that.

Mykola, I will come back to you.

Do you have any other recommendations for us? What are things we can do as members of Parliament and people in government to support you in helping to repatriate Ukrainian children currently in Russia?

Mr. Mykola Kuleba: Thank you.

I met you several times in Canada. I thank you for your position and for the position of the parliamentarians who are standing with us and fighting for Ukraine. It is very important to us.

As you know, Maria Lvova-Belova, Putin's commissioner, reported that they've registered more than 700,000 Ukrainian children in Russia. We have no idea how many of them are unaccompanied. We have no idea how many of them are orphans—children who have lost their parents because they were killed by Russians—or received Russian passports or were placed in Russian families or orphanages.

These are our kids. They are Ukrainian children. Many of them cannot sleep and are dreaming about escape. I can tell you a story about a 12-year-old boy who escaped. We returned him. He told me he dreamed of escape, and he planned every night to escape. He would cross the minefields on the front line. Can you imagine a 12-year-old child planning to cross minefields?

We understand the Russian aggressor. It's very hard to win this battle, but we will win. First of all, however, we need you to put pressure on Russia to give us information about all the Ukrainian children who have been deported and who now live in Russia. We want to know what happened to them. We cannot live normally when we have no idea what happened to them.

How many of them want to come back to Ukraine? We understand that after brainwashing, many of them received Russian passports and may want to stay there with their new relatives, but there are thousands of orphans who have been deported. There are thousands of Ukrainian children dreaming of coming back, but we don't know. We have no information. That's why we at Save Ukraine are searching for any information.

We built an underground railroad to return children. We returned 200 children, but that's just a little. It's a drop. It's a sample. We need more. You can help us do this, but it is [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

Mr. Yvan Baker: Thank you, Mykola. My time is up.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Madame Bérubé, you have the floor for seven minutes.

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First, I would like to sincerely thank all the witnesses for sharing their stories today.

You are brave, resilient and, most of all, resolute. You believe in your country. You have endured psychological and physical trauma. We want to hear your stories because everything you tell us is invaluable for our study.

The issue of parents consenting to send their children to camps in Russian-controlled areas was discussed at length with witnesses last week. We know that the way Russia obtains the families' consent is questionable.

My question is for Mr. Mezhevoj.

Is it correct to state that Russian authorities never obtained your consent?

• (1205)

Mr. Yevhen Mezhevoj: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian. Interpretation in French translated as follows:*]

Thank you for the question.

Of course, no one asked for my consent. I was simply told that they would be taken care of while I filled some paperwork. I got my kids on the bus, then I did not hear from them again. I was in Olenivka for 45 days and I had no news of them until May 30.

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Your children were abducted and the Russian authorities and military subjected you to abuse and violence.

Can you give more details on the situation you faced? It is very important. We know that so many people in your country have experienced violence, and we would like to know more.

[*English*]

Mr. Yevhen Mezhevoj: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

I'm sorry, but I'm not sure I really understood the question. What kind of information are you looking for?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Your children were abducted. On top of that, you were subjected to violence at the hands of the Russian authorities and military.

Can you give more details on what you were subjected to?

[*English*]

Mr. Yevhen Mezhevoj: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

First of all, there are constant interrogations. There is a lack of fresh air in the cells. The cells were overflowing. In the Donetsk detention centre, we were 55 or so. There was no air left to breathe. We were basically lying under the door trying to breathe. There was not enough water. We had two loaves of bread and a litre and a half of water for all of us for 24 hours. We slept on the floor. It was very hot. It was intolerable.

When we were taken to Olenivka, it was pretty much the same. We would be given dirty water from time to time. The food was disgusting—fish mixed in some kind of porridge. The dishes were dirty. We mainly ate bread.

There were no hygiene conditions. In order to use the bathroom, we had to use our own clothing. There were a lot of us in the cell. In a six-person cell, we were 55. When women were brought from Azovstal, we were transferred to the second floor. In a one-person cell, we were 28.

We were put to labour. We had to dig gardens. We were painting, cutting grass, etc., basically making repairs to jail number 120 in Olenivka.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: In the vast majority of, if not all, cases like yours, are parents forced to accept the transfer of their children in Russian-controlled areas?

[English]

Mr. Yevhen Mezhevoi: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

You cannot accept this. You have to fight for your children. You have to use every possible way to get your children back, grasp at any opportunity, any straw. When I knew I had only five days to get my children back, I felt desperate. I knew that any mistake on my part could deprive me of my children. I was like a robot. I didn't sleep. I didn't want to do anything else. I had to get my children back, and in two days, I managed to do so.

You cannot give up. There are good people out there who will help. There are so many volunteers out there helping in different situations. You cannot stay silent. You have to call for help, move ahead and get your children back, regardless of anything.

• (1210)

[Translation]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: These children's families have to face danger and armed conflicts. It seems like parents give their consent to try to protect their children and give them an opportunity to get better food, for example.

Is that the case?

[English]

Mr. Yevhen Mezhevoi: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

Indeed, parents are deceived in order to get their children. Parents are told that their children will be safe and to just send them away. I've heard about that too, but I know it's a one-way ticket.

[Translation]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Would you say that, in most cases, parents actually give their consent, or is it simply the safest decision, given the circumstances in which these children and their families were in?

[English]

Mr. Yevhen Mezhevoi: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

I think maybe yes, at some point that's probably the best choice the parents can make, but I was not provided a choice. I was torn away from my children, and while I was in jail, I nearly went crazy thinking about where my children were and what happened to them. I couldn't stop thinking about that. I knew nothing about my children and my only thought was, "How do I get my children back?"

[Translation]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Bérubé.

I believe Madam Rashevskaya would like to add something in answering your question, Madame Bérubé.

Go ahead.

Ms. Kateryna Rashevskaya: Thank you so much for this opportunity.

I would like to add some details to the case of Mr. Mezhevoi. He has three children who were unlawfully deported together with other children from Mariupol, first to occupied Donetsk and then to the Polyany sanatorium in the Moscow region. Then some of these children, the so-called group of 31, were directly transferred—

The Chair: Excuse me; there is no translation. I would like to ask you to repeat your words when the translation is on, please.

Ms. Kateryna Rashevskaya: The three children of Mr. Mezhevoi were not the only ones who were accompanied in the—

The Chair: Can you lift your microphone a little bit, please?

It's better. Keep going, please.

Ms. Kateryna Rashevskaya: The three children of Mr. Mezhevoi were unlawfully deported from Donetsk to the Polyany sanatorium in the Moscow region, together with other children from Mariupol. Some of these children were transferred to Russian foster families for foster care. Some of them were transferred to—

The Chair: Just a moment, please. We are having trouble with the translation.

They are asking you to lift the microphone again, please. It has to go a little bit up.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Mr. Chair, they're saying it's the quality of the signal.

The Chair: Unfortunately, our interpreters cannot do the translation for you.

I'm sorry. I'll ask you not to continue. We have no interpretation—

• (1215)

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Chair, on a point of order, it's very unfortunate that this happened, but maybe we can advise the witnesses that they can send written responses to questions. We will very much read and reflect on written follow-ups sent by all of the witnesses.

The Chair: It's a great idea.

I believe you can send a written response to the committee. We would welcome that.

[Translation]

Ms. Kateryna Rashevskaya: Mr. Chair, can I answer in French?

[English]

The Chair: Unfortunately, no. Most of the members speak English. Please send it in writing, if you don't mind.

Ms. Pam Damoff (Oakville North—Burlington, Lib.): I have a suggestion.

If she speaks Ukrainian, the Ukrainian interpreters' audio seems to be acceptable. Perhaps she could speak in Ukrainian and let the interpreter...

The Chair: Can you please speak in Ukrainian? We would like to see how it goes.

Ms. Kateryna Rashevskya: *[Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:]*

Can you hear me now?

The Chair: Yes.

Continue, please.

Ms. Kateryna Rashevskya: *[Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:]*

Here's what I wanted to say. Mr. Mezhevoj's three children were deported to the Polyany sanatorium, in the Moscow region, together with other children. We called them "the group of 31". Among those children, there were some who were first fostered in Russian families. Others were fostered in Russian orphanages.

Filipp Golovnya was there in the care of Maria Lvova-Belova, as well as Bohdan Yermokhin, a boy who recently received a draft notice to join the Russian army. Once he is 18, on November 19 of this year, he will have to go to the Russian military office, and it's very likely that he'll be sent to the battlefield in Ukraine.

Bohdan has a sister in Ukraine who has all of the documents to get him back home, but at the same time, Bohdan tried to cross the Russian border, where he was detained at the personal order of Maria Lvova-Belova by the Russian FSB, so we are fighting for these two weeks before Bohdan turns 18 in order to prevent them from drafting him into the army, violating all the rules of international law.

We are working on getting other children back who are also about to turn 18.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now I would like to invite Madam McPherson to take the floor for seven minutes, please.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I also would like to express my gratitude to all of the witnesses, particularly the children who shared their stories.

This is harrowing testimony for us to hear. Like many in this room, I am also a mother. I listened to the testimony of Ms. Bodak and thought that my son is 16. I can't even imagine the horror that you've had to endure, to hear that they put a hood over your head and...

I'm also so impressed with how strong your testimony is and that you're able to come here and share your thoughts and your stories with us.

I am also trying to understand how it is that the children on this call were able to get back to Ukraine and that so many of the Ukrainian children who were taken have not been able to return.

I would start with the parents.

If I could ask Ms. Bodak to begin, I know how hard you fought to have Vladyslav returned to you. From your perspective, what are those things that we can assist with? How did that happen? Was it

luck? Was it hard work? Was it a combination of all the things being aligned? I would like to hear your perspective on that.

Ms. Tetiana Bodak: *[Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:]*

I had no idea how to get him home until I received information that there is an organization, Save Ukraine, and that this organization helps to bring back Ukrainian children. I contacted them and I worked with them. When I was on my way, I was working with Save Ukraine, and they were with me from the beginning to the end. Prior to that, I had no idea how I was going to be able to bring my son back.

Basically, my son, who had already worked with them before, recommended to me to talk to them and to work with them. Now when I know about similar situations, I always provide the name and number of this organization, Save Ukraine, and I recommend getting in touch with them and working with them.

• (1220)

Ms. Heather McPherson: Mr. Mezhevoj, could you give us your perspective on that?

Mr. Mykola Kuleba: *[Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:]*

Thank you for your question. We cannot let you know how we are doing this in Belarus or Russia. It's confidential information that has a high degree of risk for those people who help us rescue these children.

Please know one thing: Russians are doing everything in their power to prevent these children from returning to Ukraine. Parents or people who have parental rights have to go through interrogations and lie detectors and have to provide DNA samples.

The oldest of such cases are controlled personally by Madam Lvova-Belova. Madam Lvova-Belova was talking about a group of 31, and how Filipp tried to escape. Russians understand very clearly that all these children are witnesses of war crimes, so it's easier for them to send these children to the Russian army to be killed on the battlefield, or they prevent them from leaving in other ways, because they know these children have a lot of information and stories they can share. They have stories of war crimes, so all Ukrainian children who are there are being threatened and frightened. They are given all kinds of motivations to stay in Russia and are provided with untrue information that it's dangerous to go back to Ukraine.

There is one boy who is 14 years old now. He was 13 when he ended up in occupied territory in Russia. He was given a Russian birth certificate, but he didn't want to take it, so he returned it. For that action, he was persecuted. He was issued a new Russian birth certificate, but it was not given to him; it was in his file. When he was 14 years old, he was forced to receive a Russian passport. He didn't want to receive a Russian passport, but when legal representatives came to pick him up, they were not allowed to take him to bring him back to Ukraine.

I cannot tell you specifically what steps we took to bring him back to Ukraine, but it's a very complicated and difficult enterprise, and a very risky one.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Mr. Mezhevoj, is there anything you'd like to add? I see your hand is up.

Mr. Yevhen Mezhevoi: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

Yes. I would like to add to Kateryna Rashevskya's comments about the group of 31. I have this list of people. This is a list of the children who were stolen by Russian authorities. This list includes my children, Bohdan Yermokhin and Filipp Golovnya, and all other children.

When I arrived in Latvia, my child had a Russian ID card. One of his friends—I can't say his family name—told him that three days after we left the camp, all the children were placed in foster families in Moscow, and he was also placed in a foster family. My son asked him how he liked it there, and he told him, “What can I do? I have nowhere to go back to. My house was destroyed. Here at least I have a place to stay.” That was the response of that boy.

That's all I can add.

• (1225)

Ms. Heather McPherson: I think that's my seven minutes.

The Chair: I would like to go to the second round.

I invite Ms. Damoff to take the floor for five minutes.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Thank you, Chair.

I want to thank all the witnesses for being here, in particular the young people who have come to share their stories. I can't imagine how retraumatizing it is for you to share your stories, but know how important it has been for us to hear you and for Canadians to hear your voice here in Canada. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for your bravery.

I wanted to talk a bit about mental health. If it's too difficult for the young people testifying to talk about this, I'm happy for the others to talk about it.

Research has shown that the younger the age of people who are taken into situations like this, the harder the psychological consequences are. I think all of you talked about the support you're getting since you have been back in Ukraine, but can you talk a bit about what's needed and how we in Canada can support the difficult transition to coming back home? The psychological abuse you have lived through while in Russia won't go away just because you crossed the border.

That's for whoever would like to take that question. It's open for anyone.

Mr. Mykola Kuleba: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

If I may, I can begin. As I speak, maybe our children present here will think about whether they would like to add something.

You are absolutely right. Everything depends on the age of a child and how long they spend in occupied territories or in Russia. It depends on particular circumstances, such as how they were deported and how they were transferred. There were cases when the military would dress them up and cases when military Russian personnel would use the threat of weaponry. They would place them in

their military vehicles and remove them from Ukrainian territory to Russia, so obviously there could be all kinds of trauma related to that.

Those 200 people we rescued all have different stories. The first thing that every one of them needs, whether it's in Canada or in Ukraine, is safety and permanency. These are the main things that are required by children. That's why we created Hope and Healing Centers: It's so that these children can go through a six-month program of rehabilitation. They live there. They are fed there. We clothe them. They are able to study the Ukrainian curriculum.

There is a psychological person on staff and all kinds of services are present there that would allow these children to rejuvenate their lives, and we are doing all this, as you can understand, during the war that's going on. We are not only bringing them back; we are also rehabilitating them and reintegrating them back into society.

Now I would like to ask our children to maybe share their ideas.

Ms. Kseniia Koldin: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*] I would like to add that it depends, of course, on their age and what their attitude is to Ukraine and how they love Ukraine.

I spent nine months in the territory of Russia. I had a specific attitude. No matter what they did, I didn't want to abandon Ukraine. I didn't want to receive Russian citizenship, even though they told me, “You don't have parents and it would be better for you to assimilate, to adapt.” I was refusing it outright, but I know that my brother, who was 12 years old, was more susceptible to the psychological pressure that was placed on him.

We were all in different foster families. He remembers that in Ukraine there were Russians and that there were shellings and bombings. In Russia, it was a peaceful environment, so for him.... I was older, so I understood that it impacted him and I realized even then that maybe he would not be coming back, because there would be all kinds of barriers to his coming back. If parents do want to bring their child back, or if it's a sister or a brother, if the Russians know there is family back in Ukraine, they place an even bigger psychological pressure on them to prevent them from thinking about going back to Ukraine.

• (1230)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Damoff.

Now I would like to invite Mr. Genuis to take the floor for five minutes.

The floor is yours, Mr. Genuis.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to join others in saluting the heroism and resilience of our witnesses. Of course, for all of us, these stories make us think of our own families and children and how horrible it must be to be in these situations.

I also think of my grandmother, who was a Holocaust survivor. She spent part of the war separated from her family, in hiding. The promise we made at the end of that war to her generation was “never again”. We have failed to deliver on that promise, as we are again hearing testimony of what is clearly a genocide planned in and perpetrated from the highest levels of the Putin regime. Vladimir Putin himself is directly involved in this.

I want to focus my question on hearing more first-person testimony, but I want to invite the NGO representatives to respond in writing to this initial question: Which further individuals should be sanctioned for their involvement in these crimes? Which further international legal processes do you think should be convened, and against which individuals?

These are concrete proposals our committee can make, so I'd appreciate your following up in writing on those points.

I'd like to ask the young people here to specifically share any efforts those who were controlling you used to force you into propaganda activities.

Were you forced to do certain things that you understood would be used as Russian propaganda? Were you filmed? Would other children sometimes try to not participate in those activities? What would happen to them if they refused to participate in those activities?

Mr. Mykola Kuleba: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

I will try to explain that to the children.

Do you know of any crimes Russia committed, or any propaganda or pressure? Can you share what you think were illegal methods applied to you—the wrong things the Russians did to you? You can speak about that here.

Ms. Anastasiia Motychak: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

There was a teacher who worked at the camp. She beat the children. For example, she beat me because I left the territory of the camp just for a bit. Another boy was beaten because she thought he had stolen her things, even though that was not the case. She had no proof of that.

• (1235)

Mr. Vladyslav Rudenko: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

Hello. My name is Vladyslav.

We had a situation in the camp. My friend was also pro-Ukrainian, and Astakhov, the chief of the camp, said something to him. He wouldn't listen. He continued to have his pro-Ukrainian position. We were in our room. After that, Astakhov understood he couldn't do anything to us, but there were other children our age, and they could beat us up, yell at us and gang up on us. He told them we were pro-Ukrainian. Then, in the evening, eight guys came in and started to beat my friend and kick him in the head. I said to them, “Hey, guys, that's no way to solve the issue. Let's talk.” They still beat him up.

The next day, we were sent to the isolation room—the punishment room—and spent two days there.

Mr. Mykola Kuleba: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

Allow me to add that Vladyslav is talking about Astakhov, who was basically the director of the camp. During the annexation of Crimea, he was in a special unit of the riot police, the Berkut. After Crimea was annexed, he started to collaborate and work for Russia. That's the camp where he was committing all of these crimes against children. He was intimidating them. It was basically torture. He kept them locked up and deprived them of food and water. He used different forms of punishment against the children. Children say that very rarely, after a personal conversation with him, would any child not agree to take on Russian citizenship and accept it with all of the conditions.

That's why Vladyslav is a hero for me. It's because he did not betray his ideas. He consistently kept his Ukrainian identity and withstood the pressures, trials and attempts to make him into a Russian child. I also understand how hard it was for other children, because it was easier for them to give in, give up and accept all of the conditions, from taking on Russian citizenship to everything else. Very often those children who did not agree would be committed to a mental ward. They could keep them heavily medicated with special medication.

Denys could probably add a few words about himself, if he so chooses.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

I have Mr. Mezhevoj. You can take the floor and add whatever you want on this question.

Mr. Yevhen Mezhevoi: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

Indeed, I would like to complement the answer and tell you about my children being in the Russian Federation in the Polyany camp.

First of all, children were made to attend discotheques. That was for children who after the war were afraid of loud noises. They were shown movies about the war, about Cruella, who made dogs into a fur coat. The children were basically traumatized. They were made to attend movie theatres and these discotheques.

As the young person here mentioned, there were children who were ready to intimidate those who maintained their pro-Ukrainian position. These were older boys who would come in and say, “You are wrong to say this. Do not do this.” They were in charge of the younger children in the camp. They intimidated them and pressured them. They were sort of watchmen. That's what happened in that camp.

Additionally, children underwent a thorough medical examination. We don't know why, but my five-year-old child had to give blood for syphilis. I'm not even sure why. Additionally, they would give them some green pills. Nobody knows what those pills were. They told them they were vitamins. Nobody even knew what these pills were.

Thank you.

• (1240)

The Chair: Thank you.

I'm sorry. I have three witnesses who raised their hands to speak.

What do you think? Do we leave them and ask Ms. McPherson, and then I can let them go after that?

Ms. Heather McPherson: No, they can go ahead.

The Chair: Okay.

Please go ahead, Mr. Denys Berezhnyi. You have the floor for a few minutes.

Mr. Denys Berezhnyi: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

I can tell you about a situation that happened. There was a child in a camp who did not listen to the camp leaders. That child was sent to a psychiatric ward because they thought the child was mentally ill. The child didn't sleep or eat, so they were committed to a mental ward.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Rudenko, you can take the floor.

Mr. Vladyslav Rudenko: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you. This is what I'd like to add.

When I was in my punishment cell, in isolation, they would give me eight pills and they were saying I had to take them or they would send me to a mental hospital. I would say, "No. I don't know what these are. I'm not going to take them." They then took everything from me. I had a tiny room, two by three metres, with a small window. I had to stay there and I thought I would really go crazy.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Motychak, please, you can take the floor.

Ms. Anastasiia Motychak: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

I would like to add that the police were called on us because we were misbehaving, or, rather, we were showing that we were from Ukraine. One time girls put a blue and yellow balloon up, and they came into our room and popped the balloon and then took us to the police station. They took down our information and said that if we ever did anything like that again, we would be sent to the police again and the police would decide what to do with us.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now I invite Madam Rashevskva to take the floor, please.

Ms. Kateryna Rashevskva: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

Here is the story that I would like to share.

A boy named Oleksandr Ursol was taken by Russia for so-called medical treatment. He had been wounded by a Russian missile during the Mariupol bombing. There is a story about him in the Kyiv Independent.

That boy did not receive the medical treatment that he really needed. He had to be treated again in Georgia first, and then in Germany. Georgian doctors say that the boy was prescribed a certain diet that led to a lot of weight loss for this child and that his very life was in danger due to that diet.

Some children are given these pills and others are not provided medical treatment, and that's how they justify their reasons for deportation.

That's what I wanted to say. Thank you.

The Chair: Now I would like to ask Madame Bérubé to take the floor.

[*Translation*]

Madame Bérubé, you have five minutes.

• (1245)

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Your testimony about the horrors that this war has put you through and children being torn away from their families is really difficult to listen to. What we have heard today is inhumane, but your strength, bravery and determination are unwavering. You are models for us all. In my eyes, you are all heroes.

Ms. Bodak, I know you had to go through harrowing situations, especially to bring your son back home.

Can you tell us about the challenges that you had to overcome to get your son back?

[*English*]

Ms. Tetiana Bodak: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

The difficulties arose at the borders. At the Belarus border, for example, I was interrogated for two hours. Why am I going to Russia? For what reason? They had all sorts of questions for me.

Then there's Domodedovo in Russia. It's an airport in Moscow. It was very difficult there too, but I managed to get through quickly. I spent maybe an hour and a half there—maybe even less—before being admitted into Russia.

I think the most difficult point was Lazurne, the village where I was held for five days. For 24 hours I had a lie detector in a cellar. When we were let go with my son, that was the scariest part, because they did not want to let us go. They didn't want to let us out of Russia. We tried several checkpoints and failed. Then volunteers asked us to lie low for about a day and a half so nobody would know where we were. Then they told us when the car would be coming for us and that the car would take us to the border.

Indeed, a car came. My son and I went in the car to Pskov in the Smolensk region. That was where we were able to cross over to Latvia. They let us through, but before that, from 2:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m., we had to stand there at the border—and we were extremely cold—because they didn't want to let us through. Then, at 6:00 a.m., they let us through, and at 9:00 a.m., when the guards changed, we were able to arrive at the Latvian checkpoint. That's where we had no more problems.

When Latvia let us in, all they asked was, "Where are you from?" and "Where are you going?" I said that I got my son from Russia and I'm taking him home to Ukraine. We had no more problems. They just wished us happy travels. In Poland, I also had no issues, even though my son had no foreign travel documents. He had an internal passport.

The scariest part was Russia, because Russia did not want to let us out. They maybe didn't want to let my son out because he knew too much. I just don't know.

[Translation]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: You certainly feared for your life as well while you were bringing your son back.

I have a question for your son Vladyslav. He can answer if he wants, if he feels comfortable to do so.

Did you observe any psychological or physical changes in your son once you were reunited and back home? Could some of these changes lead you to believe that he experienced violence at the hands of Russian authorities or other people?

[English]

Ms. Tetiana Bodak: [Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:]

Changes have taken place. When he went there, he was 16 years old. He was like a child, but when I was removing him from there, he was like an adult. He was looking at me. It was my son, but he was a more mature person who had suffered a lot, who had gone through many things. He changed significantly during the eight months that we were apart.

• (1250)

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Bérubé.

[English]

Now I would like to invite Ms. McPherson to take the floor for five minutes.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to everyone for the testimony today. This has been very powerful for us.

I would like to end by asking the children some questions, if I could.

I want to get a better sense of who was with you. I'll ask a few questions, and then whoever would like to respond can do so.

I'd like to know how old the children were. What was the age of the youngest child you saw in these camps or the youngest child who was taken? Did you know any of the children when you were taken? Did you know any other children? We know that Kseniia had her brother. When you were rescued, when you were brought away from there, were those other children forced to remain there?

Finally, can you tell us how you're feeling now? How are you feeling about your situation now and what the future looks like for you now?

Mr. Mykola Kuleba: They are discussing it now. Maybe we can clarify this question one by one.

First of all....

[Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:]

Who was the youngest child you witnessed?

Ms. Heather McPherson: I want to be very clear that if they don't want to respond or if they don't feel...that's okay as well.

Mr. Mykola Kuleba: [Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:]

If you don't want to respond, you don't have to.

It's okay. We have someone who will respond.

Mr. Vladyslav Rudenko: [Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:]

At our camp, we had a team for young children aged six to eight years old. Some of them were crying all the time. They wanted to see their mothers. They were told, "No, we are not able to send you. You have to stay here." Staff told us we would spend three or five years there.

That's all I know.

Mr. Mykola Kuleba: Who's next?

Ms. Anastasiia Motychak: [Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:]

The youngest children I remember at the camp were girls. One girl was seven years old. Another one was about 10 years old. They were told that their parents were supposed to come. They told their teacher. The teacher told them, "If your parents do not come to collect you, you will be transferred to an orphanage or you'll continue to study."

Mr. Mykola Kuleba: [Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:]

Could you please formulate your question again?

What specific question would you like to hear the answer to?

Ms. Heather McPherson: Really, I just wanted to give the children an opportunity to share more with us. I would like to know a bit more about the camps and a bit more about how they are doing today.

I think their answers have been wonderful so far. That's sufficient.

I know that Mr. Mezhevoj would also like to speak. He had his hand up.

Mr. Yevhen Mezhevoi: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

Our camp was named Polyany. There was a group of 31. The youngest was my daughter. She was born in 2015. There were also two children, Ishchuk Oleksii and Diana Skidz, who were born in 2014. Those were their years of birth. These were the youngest in that camp on the list I have in my hands.

• (1255)

Mr. Mykola Kuleba: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

I would also like to add that we were bringing children back home from different camps. It's most difficult to return young people, because those who are 12 years old may somehow be able to use social media to let their relatives know where they are. However, the younger children don't have this ability. The children will attest to that.

Adults who worked in those facilities never, ever helped children connect with their parents. They never tried to help them find their parents or inquire whether the parents would like to reunite with their children. We didn't find evidence of that in a single camp. They were doing everything possible to make sure that these people never went back to Ukraine.

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Motychak, please.

Ms. Anastasiia Motychak: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

I would like to add that at the camp, I didn't feel very well. They were very hard circumstances. There was psychological pressure. Every time I recall those days, I don't feel well. I would never wish for anyone to be in my place at that camp.

Mr. Yevhen Mezhevoi: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

I would also like to add to what Mykola said. In the case of my children, they were trying to convince them that their father would not be able to collect them. They told them that your father will not be able to reach you in such a short time. You have to make a decision. You should accept the offer of being placed with a foster family or going to a specialized educational facility.

The list they had was 31 people. They made sure that they would not cross paths with other children. They were isolated. They were there on a special program, isolated so they would not intersect with other children who were at the same camp, because there were other children there as well. They prevented them from communicating, and they were only able to see and maybe to talk to each

other through an open window. That's what happened with my oldest son as well.

Mr. Vladyslav Rudenko: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

I know of one other situation at the camp. Teachers and the director brought a girl who had attempted suicide. She had cut her wrists and she was transferred to a hospital. She spent two weeks at the hospital.

The Chair: Thank you.

That puts an end to our committee. The time is almost over.

On behalf of all members of the committee and the staff, I would like to thank all our witnesses for their presence. Your presence was so important to this committee. Your testimony really touched our hearts deeply. If you feel that you have some other information to share with the committee, you could send it in writing.

Thank you. Have a great day.

Now I would like to have a few minutes to discuss our travel project.

I believe you have received a draft for two proposals, one to travel to New York and one to travel to Toronto. Is it the will of the subcommittee to adopt both projects?

Go ahead, Ms. McPherson, please.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I looked at both of the proposals. I think the one for going to New York is very interesting. I would be very supportive of that proposal.

Going to—

• (1300)

Ms. Pam Damoff: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair. Sorry, but I think we're supposed to be in camera to talk about travel. Is that right?

The Chair: Yes. The problem, as the clerk told me, is that it takes a few minutes. Due to the time being over, we decided to do it.

If you insist, we could take more time, if it's the will of the committee to accept that, and go in camera.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: I might suggest that rather than discussing it here.... There are a lot of other steps that the proposals have to go through. If we adopt both proposals.... I think the inclination was a prioritization of the New York proposal. Every party has tools to stop it later on if they wish.

The Chair: I believe we will have no unanimity on that, so both projects—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: We don't have time at this meeting.

Ms. Heather McPherson: There's a consensus, and we do not have—

The Chair: We have no consensus, so we will forget about it.

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

You have received earlier today a draft work plan for the study—

[*English*]

We'll leave it for tomorrow.

An hon. member: I think we would want Mike here for the work plan.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

The meeting is adjourned.

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