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Chair: Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury

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• (1610)

[*Translation*]

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

[*English*]

Before we start, on behalf of all members of the committee and our staff, I would like to welcome a newcomer to this committee, Mr. Ron McKinnon.

Welcome, Ron, to our committee.

Mr. Ron McKinnon (Coquitlam—Port Coquitlam, Lib.): I'm very pleased to join you all. I've heard it's a great committee, and I'm looking forward to it.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Welcome to meeting number 62 of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format. I would like to remind participants of the following points.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. All comments should be addressed through the chair. The committee members must raise their hand if they wish to speak, whether they're in the room or participating through Zoom. The subcommittee clerk and I will do our best to maintain the order of speakers.

Before introducing the witnesses, I would like to take a moment to draw the committee members' attention to a budget handed out to them last week. The budget authorizes expenses related to our study on the current status of deported Ukrainian children. If the members are ready to adopt this budget, we can do so now. Otherwise, if the members want more time to review the budget, we can come back to it next week.

Is the subcommittee ready to adopt the budget?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now move on to our study.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the subcommittee on November 5, 2024, the committee is beginning its study of the current status of deported Ukrainian children.

I want to welcome the witnesses.

We're joined by Olga Tymchenko, independent strategic communications consultant; Mykola Kuleba, chief executive officer of Save Ukraine; and Veronika Sheldagaieva from Voices of Children.

You'll have a maximum of five minutes for your remarks. We'll then open the floor to questions.

[*English*]

Ms. Tymchenko, you have the floor for five minutes. Go ahead, please.

Ms. Olga Tymchenko (Independent Strategic Communications Consultant, As an Individual): [*Member spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

My name is Olga Tymchenko. I have the honour of telling you the story of Valeriia, an 18-year-old girl who is a symbol of resilience and the fight for freedom for me personally. Her life forever changed on February 24, 2022, when her hometown of Nova Kakhovka in Kherson region came under Russian occupation.

Before the war, Valeriia was a regular teenager. She loved dancing and aerial gymnastics. She loved walking along the banks of the Dnieper River and dreaming of the future. All of this came to a halt that morning when tanks with the letter Z and military heavy equipment appeared on the streets of the city. At first, nobody understood what was going on. Then everyone saw a Russian flag being hung on the hydroelectric power station building. That's when everyone understood that the war had really started.

Life under occupation was unbearable. Valeriia was constantly in fear. There was shelling, and there were explosions. Due to fear, she had continuous tinnitus.

The war started in October 2022 when the Russian occupiers started to "evacuate" children. On October 8, Valeriia, with more than 500 other children from Nova Kakhovka, were forcibly taken to occupied Crimea by the Russians. They were loaded onto 14 buses. They were taken under a military police convoy. The children were told that this was temporary, only for two weeks, but this was not true. Valeriia spent two months in Luchystiy camp in Yevpatoria. At that time, she was only 16.

Life in the camp was unbearable. The mornings began with the singing of the Russian anthem followed by lessons in which the children were told a false version of history. Teachers insisted that the Holodomor never happened and that Chernobyl was fiction. There was a lot of propaganda about the greatness of Russia. Children were told that their future lies with Russia. Children were also pressured to move to Russia. They were promised all sorts of benefits if only they agreed to receive a Russian passport. Valeriia was shocked to find out that sick children couldn't even get health care without agreeing to take on the Russian nationality.

It was especially difficult to watch the youngest children aged five- or six-years-old in this camp. They were dirty. They were coughing. They had head lice. The camp did not provide them with even the most basic of conditions. There was no medication, and children were punished.

Two months later, her grandmother came to pick up Valeriia. She was allowed to leave the camp on the condition that she would return, but she risked everything and decided to go to Ukraine to the unoccupied territories. She travelled alone through Russian checkpoints in Mariupol, Rostov-on-Don and Belgorod. Valeriia went through filtration camps in Russia and had to walk for two hours with her bags through a minefield. When she finally saw Ukrainian soldiers, she burst into tears.

In Ukraine, Valeriia was all alone and no had family around, but she passed an exam and entered a medical college in Kyiv. She had a dorm room, a scholarship and an the opportunity to study.

I met her in the winter of 2023. She was full of pain but determined to continue and build her future. I decided to support her and take her into my custody. She accepted. For nine months now, we have been living together. We are a family. During this time, I have seen how deep Valeriia's desire is to help others. She is studying to become a doctor. Her dream is to treat sick and wounded war victims.

● (1615)

Her story is the story of every child in Ukraine who has seen the war and lost their childhood, but remains strong. It is also a reminder of the thousands of children who are still under occupation and deprived of their basic rights.

I urge you to support Ukraine, our children, our freedom and our dignity.

Thank you for your faith and for your attention.

The Chair: Thank you. That was very good timing.

Now I would like to invite Mr. Mykola Kuleba to take the floor for five minutes, please.

Mr. Mykola Kuleba (Chief Executive Officer, Save Ukraine): Thank you so much.

Thank you for this opportunity. Today, I speak to you about a tragedy that transcends borders: the plight of Ukrainian children. Nearly 50% of the child population in Ukraine have been displaced, deported or lost to Russia's war in Ukraine. These children are not just numbers. Half of our children are at risk. With them, our very future and the very soul of our nation are at risk.

For our children still in Ukraine, around 1.6 million Ukrainian children living in Russian-occupied territories have been subjected to relentless indoctrination and medieval colonization by the Kremlin since 2014. They have been forced to adopt the Russian language, culture, values and traditions. They have been stripped of their Ukrainian identities and forced to foster loyalty to the occupying power, including eventual forced conscription to the Russian armed forces.

Only 19,546 have been officially identified as having been forcibly deported since the full-scale invasion, which is a huge number, but it is still inaccurate. As such, it underscores the vast scale of this atrocity and the urgent need for action to locate and return these children.

In occupied territories, schools erase Ukrainian history, calling our country a failed state. Children as young as six are enrolled in militarized programs, dressed in Russian uniforms and raised to hate the west. Many frontline Russian fighters today were once Ukrainian children, who have been moulded by this propaganda since 2014. A 10-year-old boy then is now a 20-year-old Russian soldier.

Even more alarming is the forced conscription of Ukrainian boys as young as 17 from the territories occupied since 2022. These boys, coerced into accepting Russian passports, are turned into soldiers for the aggressor state. This process violates a number of international instruments, including the Geneva convention, as it represents a deliberate strategy to use young Ukrainians as weapons against their own people.

Consider Serhiy, who, at 17 years old, was forced to accept a Russian passport under the threat of losing his property. Soon after, armed soldiers issued him a draft notice at gunpoint. With our help, Serhiy escaped, but many others remain trapped in this horrifying cycle.

All these actions bear the signs of genocide. Thousands of Ukrainian children are being systematically turned into instruments of war and victims of a conflict they never chose.

At Save Ukraine, we fight to save these children and preserve an entire generation. We have rescued over 500 children and provided trauma-informed, child-sensitive and evidence-based care to heal the deep scars of war, propaganda and indoctrination. Our services reintegrate these rescued children and families into society, helping them rebuild their lives and reclaim their identity.

However, we cannot do this alone. Canada has shown the world power, responsibility and leadership. Your support across parties has been pivotal, from leading coalitions to return deported children to partnering with Hala Systems for child identification and the return of some of the children. We also deeply appreciate the Ukrainian diaspora, the Ukrainian children's congress and organizations like the Canada-Ukraine Foundation and the Temerty Foundation for their unwavering support.

• (1620)

Every child saved is a future restored. Together we can ensure that no Ukrainian children are left behind, no identities are erased and no dreams are stolen.

I look forward to the questions to follow. Thank you so much.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now I would like to invite Ms. Veronika Sheldagaieva to take the floor for five minutes, please.

Ms. Veronika Sheldagaieva (Voices of Children): Hello, dear committee. My name is Veronika Sheldagaieva. I'm 17 years old. I'm from Kherson, which is a city in Ukraine that was militarily occupied by Russians in March 2022 when I was 13. I lived under the military occupation for seven months. I'm here to speak because I escaped, but many have not.

At the beginning of the occupation, people took to the streets to protest against the invasion and against Russia. My teachers and friends were among those who protested, but then Russians started shooting them at protests.

In the early days, in states of panic, people emptied all of the food from shops. Later, food was rarely replenished. Some farmers from villages attempted to bring in provisions, but the Russians halted them at checkpoints and took half of their supplies. The queues for bread were endless. My parents were in those queues for a long time. We couldn't find toothpaste anywhere, and yeast was being exchanged by people as if it was as valuable as gold. I remember how my parents used to divide groceries at home to make them last as long as possible, so there would be enough for everyone.

At checkpoints and even on the streets, Russian soldiers would check people's phones. If they found anything pro-Ukrainian, they would send people to their makeshift prisons. We called this "being taken to the cellar".

During occupation, I ran my own volunteer educational online project. One day, an unknown woman messaged me on Telegram and said that it was clear from my posts that I had a pro-Ukrainian position and that I should follow certain safety rules. I was scared because, if some stranger found my contact, anyone could do it. People there live in such a paranoid state constantly.

In the early months, Ukrainian communications networks were already blocked. For a while, people lived entirely without communication, which is very difficult for a modern person. We couldn't even find out about the danger because there was no air alarm in the city. It was a state of complete uncertainty.

The Russians held a pseudo-referendum, going door to door with guns and ballots. Obviously, those who refused to participate were in great danger. Yes, with weapons in their hands, Russians even came to my relatives' apartment.

Soldiers also came to my school. They scared our management and forced them onto their side. They told the parents that if their children refused to attend the occupied schools under a Russian curriculum full of propaganda, they would be deprived of their parental rights and the children would be sent to orphanages. At the same time, school activities at schools for some people I know... They ended up being deported to Russia without their consent. I didn't go to that school. I was afraid that I could be taken away. When someone knocked on the door, I used to hide.

Eventually, my family and I decided to leave. There was never a safe way out of the occupied territories. We were scared to leave, but it was equally risky to remain there. We were on the road for one week. The occupation authorities organized metal rafts that were pulled across the Dnieper River by motorboats. It was a very risky construction. A rocket hit it within a half an hour after my family and I used it.

Now I live on the other side of the front line and nothing of this is in my life anymore. All that is left are my memories. Despite the horrors I live with, I believe in the world that helps Ukraine. I believe in Ukraine. I believe in Ukrainian teenagers. We fight. We do a lot of things. We believe and we are strong.

Thank you.

• (1625)

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Thank you for your remarks.

[*English*]

Now I would like to start the debate with questions and answers.

To start, I'd like to invite Mr. Majumdar to take the floor for seven minutes. The floor is yours.

Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar (Calgary Heritage, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, all three of you, for taking the time to be with us today.

Veronika, merry Christmas, albeit an early one.

When you think about what, over the next month, is about to transpire, what is your feeling about where the world is at with respect to you, your friends and Ukrainian children?

• (1630)

Ms. Veronika Sheldagaieva: I feel that communication is sometimes hard, because you need to explain lots of context about your life, about uncertainties and so on.

To leap into uncertainty, this experience sometimes changes you, but at the same time I believe that there are always moments when you can communicate and when you can be helpful to others, like peers, so they understand this experience.

Have I answered the question correctly?

Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar: You have.

Let me also say that every single one of us here—and I don't presume to speak for my colleagues—admires your courage a great deal, along with your resilience and how articulate you are.

Thank you for being such a powerful voice for your generation, which has endured so much hardship, and know that the world is watching and the world is with you. I very much appreciate your testimony today.

Ms. Veronika Sheldagaieva: Thank you.

Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar: Mr. Kuleba, if I might turn to you, how many children would you say the Kremlin is holding hostage like Veronika and the story of Valeriia that we just heard?

Mr. Mykola Kuleba: Thank you so much, Mr. Majumdar, for your question.

There are around 1.6 million Ukrainian children who are living under occupation or in Russia and enduring extreme hardship with insufficient access to food, water, hygiene, health care and education.

To make matters worse, approximately 741,000 Ukrainian children have been registered in Russia since 2022. As you will remember, last year, Maria Lvova-Belova, Putin's commissioner, stated this number. Maybe now it's a bigger number, but these children and their families have been turned from their homes in Ukraine, subjected to an alien culture and denied their Ukrainian identity. How many of them are unaccompanied minors? We don't know to this day.

Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar: It is over a million, and the genocide of the Ukrainian people and civilization 100 years after Holodomor is just a tragedy beyond anything. It's unspeakable.

So much of what we talk about in the world today is geopolitical, but in earnest, this is why you fight. This is why Ukraine fights: to restore the promise of over a million Ukrainian children—half of the people, half of the youth of the country.

Mr. Mykola Kuleba: Yes, that is exactly the fight. Our fight is not just against an aggressor. It is also for the survival of our identity, our culture and our future. We are fighting to ensure that our children are not brainwashed, and they are not turned into instruments of war or subjected to a foreign power.

Our children should grow up in their own homes with parents and relatives and with the ability to speak their language, to celebrate their culture and to live their lives as they choose. Russia's actions are a direct assault on the essence of who we are as Ukrainians. For the sake of our children, we must fight back.

You are right. All of their actions show signs of genocide.

Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar: Here you are on the front lines of resisting the Kremlin's project of colonialization. You mentioned medieval tyranny being imposed on the Ukrainian people.

What do you want people in Canada to know and understand about this new imperialism that the Kremlin is imposing on Ukraine? As well, what's on the line for half of your young people's future and indeed all of ours?

Mr. Mykola Kuleba: We need to understand that this is not just a fight for Ukraine; it is a fight for freedom and humanity. The Kremlin is not satisfied with just Ukraine. They want to extend their control, their influence and their lies across the globe. They are attempting to indoctrinate our children to create a new generation of soldiers not just for them, but for the entire world to bow to their authoritarian rule. The lessons they are teaching are aimed at erasing the identity of our children, teaching them that their homeland does not exist, that their culture is inferior and that they are part of a larger imperial project.

This same tactic was used during the Soviet Union's period, and it is being used now on an even larger scale. What should concern the world, and especially the Canadian people, is that this is just the beginning. They will not stop with Ukraine. They will target other vulnerable populations, including children in the west. Their strategy is not just to fight Ukraine, but to create chaos across the globe. Russia's imperial ambitions extend far beyond Ukraine's border. They are attempting to destabilize nations, weaken democratic societies and use children as pawns in their global power struggle.

• (1635)

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Majumdar.

I invite Ms. Vandenberg to take the floor for seven minutes, please.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): Thank you very much.

I want to thank all of our witnesses, especially you, Veronika, for the testimony that you're giving today. You had mentioned that you want to be helpful. I can assure you that you are being helpful by telling these horrific stories—essentially about a brainwashing of an entire generation of children. I think it's important that this be heard.

I also wanted to thank you regarding Valeriia, Olga, and the fact that you've taken her into your family.

We hear your stories, but we know how many other children are not able to testify at a committee like this to tell their stories, because they're still there. Canada has taken on all of the kidnapped children as if they were Canadian children, as consular cases. I assure you that we stand with you.

My first question is for Veronika. You talked about how you happened to be in a different school and the fate of the others in the other school who weren't able to escape like you. What is it that you want the world to do for all of those children, so much like you, but who don't have a voice? What do you want to tell us as legislators here in Canada? What do you want the world to do?

Ms. Veronika Sheldagaieva: Ideally, I would like for nobody to ever experience the brainwashing that is now happening in such educational institutions. Nobody should ever go and be scared every day of what they will experience that day, because it's unpredictable, when you're staying in a school in occupied territories and in camps such as Valeriia experienced.

I feel the most important thing the world can do is to help Ukraine work on spreading information, because silence is something that kills lots of people. I would like for those children to find a way, some way—earlier is always better—to escape and live a better life in their peaceful cities, because it's also hard to be an IDP or a refugee after such an experience if your city is still occupied and you're going out.

I would like to have understanding from the world that the war is not stopping. It has already been more than 10 years.

● (1640)

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: Thank you very much. I think your words are going to go a long way in achieving that. Thank you so much for your courage.

I'd like to turn to you, Olga, because you're also witnessing firsthand the kind of trauma that comes from this.

We need to make sure the children are returned, but once they're returned, there's a long road for those children. Is there anything more that the world or Canada can do to support these children once they are in a safe place?

Also, then, I would ask you the same thing: What do you want the world to do to ensure these Ukrainian children are returned and that they remain Ukrainian children?

Ms. Olga Tymchenko: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you for this question.

It's very important to exert pressure on Russia through any means possible, be it diplomatically or otherwise, in order to pressure Russia to return our children.

When these children come back, they need a long process of rehabilitation and care. In Valeriia's case, for example, she has panic attacks as soon as she hears the Russian language. She believes that Russians may be present and, as Veronika said, anything could happen. It's unpredictable.

When she hears thunder or explosions, she has a panic attack. She is very afraid to cross any kind of border. We went to Poland with her, which is a safe border, and she will often have heart palpitations. She starts erasing her phone because the situation leads her to be triggered. She starts being afraid that she will be taken away somewhere.

These children need a long process of rehabilitation. Valeriia has been working with a psychologist for over a year, and only now is she starting to become better. If there are any programs, best practices or exchanges in Canada, and maybe camps for children like this, where they could travel and get some rest, those would be some ideas to mention.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: Thank you for all that you are doing as well and for articulating that. I think there are some very important things that perhaps we could follow up on in terms of providing support for some of these young children.

I also have a question for Mykola.

Very quickly, you're talking about young boys—as young as 17—who are being forcibly conscripted to turn around and fight, essentially against their own people. Of course, that would amount to child soldiers. At 17, they are minors.

You talked about international law, but what more can be done to ensure that international law is actually upheld in these instances?

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Kuleba, before you speak, can you please lower your mic? Put it down a bit.

Thank you. Go ahead.

Mr. Mykola Kuleba: Thank you so much. It's a very hard question. It's very hard to answer and give any recommendations to the United Nations or big organizations.

The message I stated last year at the United Nations Security Council, and in many parliaments, is simple: I know that, in 10 or 20 years, we will prove that what is happening now with Ukrainian children is genocide.

What can we do now? Why don't we put huge pressure on Russia with sanctions to stop this war, help innocent children come back to Ukrainian territory and reunite these families? Every day, we are repatriating kids from these territories. It is horrible. I cannot imagine if my child were stolen. Nobody can imagine it, but it's happening in Ukraine right now.

We need a strong voice around the globe for Ukrainian children.

● (1645)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Vandenbeld.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you now have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank all the witnesses for joining us for this vital study.

I must start with you, Ms. Sheldagaieva. I think that your remarks have shaken us all. I'm a father. I have a 21-year-old son, a 19-year-old daughter and a 13-year-old daughter. I'll make sure that they hear your story so that they can educate young people here about the reality of children in Ukraine. I think that the impact of your message matters. Your message absolutely must reach the entire international community.

I would like to ask you just one question. What's your biggest dream?

[English]

Ms. Veronika Sheldagaieva: I guess each Ukrainian now has the same dream: to have victory in this war, to have no occupied territories and to have people who went through a hard experience be psychologically healthy and working on rebuilding.

My biggest dream is to look around myself at all the people and understand that, even though we went through everything, we are connected. We're a very talented community within civil society—I'm a person who is very connected to civil society—doing innovations to build a very good country.

Thank you.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

Mr. Kuleba, this meeting today is partly your doing. You informed all the political parties of the need to hold this type of meeting. I would like to thank you for that. My questions will be a bit more technical.

First, NGOs such as yours, Save Ukraine, have been instrumental in finding Ukrainian children in Russia and bringing them back to Ukraine. This is largely the result of your work.

Can you tell the committee what strategies have proved effective in securing the return of these children?

[English]

Mr. Mykola Kuleba: Thank you.

We have a program, through the support of Canada, with Hala Systems to identify and locate Ukrainian children—stolen children, especially. We are building communications with those kids and finding their relatives and parents. Our repatriations look like underground railroads for these kids, because Russia is banning any way to take these children back to Ukraine. If you are a mother going to Russia to take back your child, you will be deported back to Ukraine and banned from Russia or Belarus for 20 years. That's why every one of our returns is like a special operation. We are working with special services.

After that, what is extremely important.... Veronika told you very powerful things about mental health and recovery. We are building services on the ground in local communities for different categories: orphans, children who experienced sexual abuse, families with babies and pregnant women. They are extremely vulnerable. The families of veterans are also extremely vulnerable. Very often, they have trauma. We need strong support to rebuild our country—to build a new country based on democratic principles, together with you and all of the civilized world.

We are a democratic country. You are a great example for us. Many Ukrainians came to your country to build it a hundred years ago and more. We want to do it together with you. We believe in our victory. We believe we can rebuild our country.

• (1650)

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Mr. Kuleba, in an interview with *Le Monde*, you stated that the Russification of Ukrainian children has increased since the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants for Vladimir Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova, the children's rights commissioner. Since then, it has become almost impossible to bring children home.

Could you explain how Russia's situation or approach has changed since March 2023?

[English]

Mr. Mykola Kuleba: The situation is very hard. Many kids disappeared from social media. You will not find information about where they are or how many have been placed with Russian families. Just today, some Yale research announced that more than 300 children have been placed with Russian families. Through this research, we have clarity. We found that Russian officials, including President Putin, directly authorized the forced adoption and fostering of Ukrainian children in a program deemed to be a potential war crime or crime against humanity.

It's very hard. Every day, Russian propaganda is poisoning Ukrainian children and erasing their identity. Very often, when we connect with a child, they are very afraid to come back to controlled Ukrainian territory because they believe, through Russian propaganda, that Nazis will kill them. It's very hard to convince an innocent child that no one will hurt them in Ukraine. Because of propaganda, many children believe this. They attend Russian school, even kindergarten. Russia brainwashes children everywhere.

The Chair: Thank you. Time is running out.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Now I invite Mr. Johns to take the floor for seven minutes.

Mr. Gord Johns (Courtenay—Alberni, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank our witnesses for their very important, very moving and very powerful testimony.

I'm going to start with you, Veronika.

Can you speak about how the trauma of the war has continued to impact your life and the lives of your friends? Also, follow up on what you think might be necessary in terms of additional supports that could be provided when children are returned home to Ukraine.

Ms. Veronika Sheldagaieva: Thank you for the question.

I feel that, for me, it became a part of my mental health already. I guess this feeling of uncertainty and of not understanding what would be next makes me differ a lot from my friends abroad, for example, who are pretty sure about their next years. This also includes people who are in free territories of Ukraine but are still experiencing war.

Also, I have close friends who are experiencing horrors at night. They're returning back. They have the same horrors that remain with them. People become more anxious. As I talked with psychologists, your concentration can be decreased because of this fact, because your mental health is trying to work with everything that you know. I still feel that I'm missing, sometimes, part of my memories because I'm simply trying to move on and live my life.

What can be done? I guess it's really important to have centralized psychological health that is available—not only for people who have lots of material resources, who live in big cities and who have money. Also, I am really thankful that I found Voices of Children at some point in time. We started working with them a really long time ago, and this helped.

I also feel that the involvement of youth, children and so on, is really important. When you feel that you are needed and that you are helping others, and when you find people with similar experiences and have that peer support from people who experienced the same, sometimes it's the most important thing to live your life.

I guess the thing that includes all the things that I said is that we need to speak about this experience, because it is only if you are formulating it from your head to text, to talking and to everything, that you then finally understand what happened to you. Even if you have lots of time to think without Internet, without connection and without everything, you cannot reflect there, so you need to go and understand that now it's part of you. We cannot cancel out experiences. We can only try to make something so that other people would not experience the same as us.

Thank you.

• (1655)

Mr. Gord Johns: You're incredibly wise, Veronika.

Veronika, can you speak about how important it is to you that other countries continue to stand with Ukraine? How can individuals with platforms continue to raise the awareness of the plight of Ukrainian children?

Ms. Veronika Sheldagaieva: Thank you.

I guess it's basic, but you really need to do it when you're spreading information through your social media, which is one of the most powerful instruments now. Also, we all know that there is a social media Internet war around the spreading of information, with propaganda and so on. It's important for individuals to spread information that officials are posting.

I also feel it's important not to forget about charities, foundations and so on, because it's a way for lots of people to gather together and, through small gestures, to help each other.

It's really important that other countries at least believe you. Now, I'm in an international community, and I'm communicating with people all around the world a lot. I feel sometimes that you just need to first explain context, and then, your life experience. It's quite normal that, for countries that are on different continents, like Ukraine and Canada, for example, you don't know...but when you're connected morally, through values, it's really important to know about each other. Ukraine is not only a country that is now asking for help; it's a great partner. We have lots of experiences that I feel we can share with those countries that are ready to be with us now.

I personally always check the news, and when I see communication between Ukraine and other countries, other embassies, parliaments and so on, it's a thing that I really like and really appreciate. It makes me warm in my heart because, once again, when you feel you're not alone, it's the main point where you can be strong.

You can rely on yourself, but is it effective? I don't think so.

• (1700)

Mr. Gord Johns: Thank you so much.

The Chair: Thank you, Veronika.

Thank you, Mr. Johns.

On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank you all, Ms. Tymchenko, Mr. Kuleba and Ms. Sheldagaieva, for your presence and your testimony. It is really appreciated.

I have a special thank you, again, to Veronika.

Veronika, you touched my heart, and I believe you touched the hearts of all the committee members. I wish you the best.

Thank you all. We have to suspend for a couple of minutes for the next round.

• (1700)

(Pause)

• (1705)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

[*Translation*]

I want to welcome the second panel of witnesses.

We're joined by Iryna Suslova, representative for the rights of children.

Ms. Suslova, you have the floor for a maximum of five minutes to give your opening remarks. We'll then open the floor to questions.

[*English*]

The floor is yours for five minutes, Ms. Suslova.

Ms. Iryna Suslova (Representative of the Ombudsman of Ukraine on Child's Rights, Office of Ombudsman of Ukraine): [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you very much. Thank you for your ongoing support of Ukraine.

I represent the office of the representative on children's rights of the office of the President of Ukraine, and I would like to talk to you about the children who are currently under occupied territories and who were forcibly transferred there.

From the beginning of the aggression, and according to data from the information bureau, more than 20,000 children were deported or forcefully transferred. However, as you can tell, we don't really have real data because, in some of the other information we have, there were more than 700,000 children transferred.

These children are so-called "evacuated", but that is not really true because humanitarian corridors should be opened for evacuation. Unfortunately, after February 24, 2022, there hasn't been a single humanitarian corridor opened to let these children pass, and 1.5 million children remain on occupied territories. We are collecting information about war crimes that the Russian Federation perpetrates against our children, including militarizing and changing their education, and propaganda. Children are being taken, under the pretext of rehabilitation, 2,000 kilometres away from their homes. If the parents protest, they're told that their children will simply be taken away without consent.

All establishments that existed in Russia are now filled with Ukrainian children. Who are these children? Some of them lose their parents because of the war. Some of them are there because they were just taken from their parents, without any kind of consent. We don't know. However, as the commissioner's office, we have to collect information about all of the children who were forcibly removed or deported, and about how all of the children, who are today on the occupied territories, are doing and how their rights are violated. We have to inform IRCC and other international organizations. We have to locate these children and understand where exactly they are.

We work with governmental and non-governmental organizations and with investigative journalists outside Ukraine, who help us use open-source information to locate these children. We work on the verification of these children by using databases in Russia that are open—for example, the adoptions website. In Russia, there are over 300 cases in which we see that children who are being put up for adoption, placed into foster care or adopted into Russian families are Ukrainian children. All of this constitutes war crimes and, unfortunately, no one can help us return these children today.

I have a story of Margarita Prokopenko. She has a brother, who is somewhere. We don't know where they are. They were in one of the orphanages in Kherson that we didn't have the time to evacuate. Margarita was taken by the wife of Sergey Mironov, a Russian politician. Her name was changed, and her date and place of birth were changed. We found her sister, who's been placed into a family. We restored the information, and we were prepared to reunite the children, but the Russian Federation keeps denying us access to this child, saying that we are making this up and that no such child exists.

There are hundreds, if not thousands, of these cases, and I believe you'll hear more about this from the next speaker.

• (1710)

What should we be doing now, once we know where the children are? We have to look for ways to get them back. One way the ombudsman uses is through Qatar. We are using negotiations to get children back, but this doesn't always work.

In April, Qatar received a list of 560 children, but only 54 on this list came back. Is this a lot? I don't think so. Out of 19,500 children, only 1,019 have come back, and each story they tell is very tragic. We have to double our efforts to get these children back. If we move at the pace we are moving at today, it will take 50 or maybe 60 years to get them back.

It's very important for us to have Canada today and in the future stand with Ukraine the way you stand by us to help with reintegration programs. We also ask you to implement more sanctions against the people who are perpetrating these war crimes.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

I would like to invite Mr. Nathaniel Raymond to take the floor for five minutes, please.

• (1715)

Mr. Nathaniel Raymond (Executive Director, Yale School of Public Health Humanitarian Research Lab): Thank you, Mr. Chair. It's an honour to appear before you again, and it's an extra special honour to be able to be here with my colleague Iryna Suslova, who is doing such incredible work on behalf of the children of Ukraine.

This morning at 7:00, eastern standard time, the Yale school of public health's humanitarian research lab, as part of the State Department-funded Conflict Observatory, released a new report on the issue of Russia's treatment of children from Ukraine, entitled "Russia's Systematic Program of Coerced Adoption and Fostering of Ukraine's Children".

This report is the result of a 20-month investigation that resulted in the identification of 314 children from Ukraine. Of those 314 children, 148 were listed in Russia's child placement databases, including 42 who have already been placed for adoption or guardianship or have had a citizen of Russia appointed as their guardian. An additional 166 of these 314 children we have identified, using the databases in large part, have been placed with citizens of Russia for fostering.

I want to state the headline of this research very clearly, because what it shows is that our worst fears are realized. Russia is adopting Ukraine's children systematically, in contravention of international law.

If you remember, in March 2023, Vladimir Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova, the child rights commissioner of Russia, were indicted for war crimes by the International Criminal Court. What we are discussing here today is a higher order of crime, which, according to Professor Oona Hathaway of the international law department at Yale law school, may constitute crimes against humanity. It's a higher order of crime.

In the initial war crime indictments, the issue was forced deportation. What we are discussing now is the transfer of protected persons from one national or ethnic group to another. That was the basis of the eighth Nuremberg trial, known as the RuSHA trial, against the Nazis for turning Polish children, through a process of Germanification, into German children during World War II.

What we know now is that in addition to the 314 we could identify, there are significantly more Ukrainian children who are basically being posted in these three interconnected databases. One is run by the Ministry of Education. One is funded directly by President Putin's office through the presidential grants fund and an organization called ANO TsRSP.

What we know is that these children are fundamentally being offered to Russian families through an act of deception. They are being presented as if they originated in Russia when, in fact, they originated in Ukraine. You need to know that under Russia's adoption laws, it is a requirement that, for a child to be adopted or fostered, they must be a citizen of Russia. Putin, while violating international law, has sought to comply with Russia's child welfare law. That means, with the Duma and through presidential declaration, working with Maria Lvova-Belova and Anna Kuznetsova of United Russia and the Duma, he has created a pipeline for temporary guardianship and proxy conveyance of citizenship to children from Ukraine.

This is the sum of all fears, because when children are adopted in Russia, the “new parents” and the “new families” can change their names, change their personally identifiable information, and they, for all intents and purposes, disappear.

We know that children have gone to 21 regions in Russia. We think that inside this database, there are children from Kharkiv, Zaporizhzhya and Kherson. The children we identified are from Donetsk and Luhansk, which were areas under Russia's control prior to the 2022 invasion. We think children from areas taken after February 2022 may also be in the database, but we haven't found them yet.

Tomorrow morning, I will address the United Nations Security Council with U.S. ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield, and we will bring this issue and this evidence directly to Russia and the members of the council. It is there we will have a simple demand: Russia needs to do now what it should have done at the beginning—

• (1720)

The Chair: Mr. Raymond, your time is up.

Mr. Nathaniel Raymond: Yes.

Through you, Mr. Chair, Russia needs to provide Ukraine and the Red Cross with a list of the kids it took so that they can come home.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we go to a period of questions and answers.

I would like to invite Mr. Mike Lake to take the floor for four minutes, please.

Hon. Mike Lake (Edmonton—Wetaskiwin, CPC): I know our time is going to be pretty short here.

The question that I have, Nathaniel, for you, is to try to get a bit of an understanding of the adoptive parents, so to speak. To what extent do they know the full backgrounds, or the backgrounds at all, of the kids they are “adopting”?

Mr. Nathaniel Raymond: That is an excellent question, sir.

In the first group of children who were in a test program run by the Moscow region mayor, it is clear that the mayor of Moscow, working with Maria Lvova-Belova, selected previously involved foster parents for the kids, who had a clear understanding that these children were Ukrainian. We do not know, in the post-annexation period when the database program began, which was approximately October 2022, to what degree knowledge about the children's backgrounds was given to the “new parents”.

What we do know are the names of many of the parents. We have not published them to protect them from reprisals, but you're asking an excellent question. There are at least two phases to this program. The first is pre-annexation, and the second is post-annexation. It appears that the level of information provided changed between the two.

Hon. Mike Lake: The obvious question, with limited time in the conversation, is this: What can Canada do, right now, to help in this situation?

I think everybody around this table recognizes the terrifying, horrifying nature of what's being so articulately described today by our witnesses. What ought we to do immediately as first steps?

Mr. Nathaniel Raymond: I was at the Montreal ministerial meeting hosted by Global Affairs Canada, and I can say that I was quite impressed by Foreign Affairs Minister Joly and the leadership she took, particularly on the issue of data and data coordination. As I said at that meeting—and I think your government was right alongside me and agreed when I said it—there are really four coordination challenges for the international community, with Canada's leadership as a pivotal supporter of Ukraine and as a pivotal leader within the ministerial group. There are four challenges on data, and data is crucial. If we do not have the proper data, we will fail.

The four challenges are, one, a donor support group to ensure long-term, multi-year support so that Ukraine and folks like Iryna Suslova and her colleagues have the resources they need to do their jobs. That's step one.

Step two is a technical support group for Ukrainians on many of the complex identification requirements.

The third is the negotiation group, with Qatar and South Africa playing crucial roles with the Holy See. That group needs to grow. It needs to get stronger and more coordinated.

The fourth and final one is an information-sharing group where nations such as Estonia and those with expertise on digital issues can ensure security and legal compliance for sharing data among law enforcement, civil society and governments.

Those are the four challenges. Canada is already engaged, but that's where Canada needs to be.

I'll turn it back over to you.

Hon. Mike Lake: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Raymond.

Thank you, Mr. Lake.

Now I invite Mr. Ehsassi to take the floor for four minutes, please.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi (Willowdale, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Raymond. Welcome back. Your testimony has always been incredibly helpful.

I understand that recently—and you alluded to this in your testimony—you suggested that a higher level of crime is involved. I have heard debates among various experts that the forcible deportation of children can fall into war crimes. It can fall into crimes against humanity, and it could also be deemed to be committing genocide.

What are your thoughts on how it is most properly classified?

Maybe Mr. Raymond fell off. Hopefully we'll have Mr. Raymond join us a bit later.

I will go to Ms. Suslova.

Thank you very much for your testimony.

We heard from previous witnesses about the relentless indoctrination that is happening to these children in the occupied territories. I was wondering if you would elaborate on that, because I take it that you're watching developments very closely. If you could provide us with more information, that would be very helpful.

• (1725)

Ms. Iryna Suslova: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you for the question.

It is true that Russia, contrary to international humanitarian law, has changed the educational system and militarized it. They changed history textbooks, so now they say that Ukraine has never existed as an independent state.

The second aspect is that they are militarizing education and creating military camps. They are making military training part of the youth's education. They are teaching them how to use drones and military tactics. They are basically preparing these children and youth to eventually conscript them to use in the aggression.

We are getting a lot of requests from occupied territories about how to bring children back to Ukraine. We help them do that, especially when they are 16 and 17 years old. The Russian authorities are trying not to let them leave Russian-controlled territory, because they are getting them ready to be conscripted to the Russian army.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thanks so much.

I will go to you, Mr. Raymond.

Thank you for being back. Your testimony is always incredibly helpful.

With respect to the forced deportation of children, you are now suggesting that a higher level of crime is involved, having looked at the evidence.

I think we lost Mr. Raymond again.

The Chair: Yes, I'm sorry. He sent an email saying that he has another event, and he had to leave.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: He was on for a second and then was gone again.

The Chair: Yes, that's okay.

You have 25 seconds, Ali.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Ms. Suslova, if you could provide us with any testimony that demonstrates how brainwashing is taking place with some of these children, it would be much appreciated as well.

The Chair: Give a quick answer, please.

Ms. Iryna Suslova: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

They changed the curriculum. Children are receiving information from the school and the surroundings. Once the curriculum was changed, television and every social system was aimed to change their outlook of the world. They don't even need to deport them, as they did at the beginning of the aggression. They've integrated the Russian system on our occupied territories. One million and a half children are there.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Suslova.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you have the floor for three minutes.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We learned today that Mr. Raymond's organization, the Yale School of Public Health Humanitarian Research Lab, released a report this morning. From what I understood, I would have liked to ask him about the names of the people responsible for these forced adoptions.

I can see now that Mr. Raymond has joined us.

Mr. Nathaniel Raymond: Yes.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I know that communication must be challenging given your Internet network. If you give me the chance to ask you a question, that would be good.

Could you send the committee the report that you released this morning? I gather that the report contains evidence of forced adoptions of Ukrainian children by Mr. Putin's regime and that the people responsible are named in the report.

Is that right?

• (1730)

[English]

Mr. Nathaniel Raymond: I'm sorry. I'm just rejoining. I missed the original question and interpretation. My computers have been attacked since Sunday. This is my third computer.

Can you please repeat, sir?

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Should I ask the question again?

[English]

Mr. Nathaniel Raymond: Yes, please.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Okay.

You informed us that your organization released a report showing and proving that Mr. Putin's regime was engaging in forced adoptions of Ukrainian children on Russian soil. I gather that you also have the names of the people responsible for this criminal operation.

Could you send the committee the evidence and the names of the people responsible? If possible, could you also send the committee the report that you released this morning?

[English]

Mr. Nathaniel Raymond: Yes, we can immediately. The names are listed within it. We can also provide the underlying data about the children, if so requested by the Canadian government.

We have provided that to the Government of Ukraine, the national police, the ministry of justice, and the International Criminal Court. Yes, sir.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

Ms. Suslova, you really do have extraordinary skills.

You're the ombudsman for children's rights in Ukraine. In your opinion, isn't the forced adoption and brainwashing of children an act that violates the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide adopted by the United Nations in 1948?

[English]

Ms. Iryna Suslova: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

The prosecutor service of Ukraine has started proceedings on these matters, and all the crimes, the war crimes, and how to qualify whether it's genocide are dealt with by investigative authorities.

Thank you.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

Mr. Raymond, in your opinion, does this violate the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide?

[English]

Mr. Nathaniel Raymond: I'm waiting for interpretation, sir.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: In your opinion, do the crimes currently being committed against Ukrainian children by Mr. Putin's regime—brainwashing, forced transfers and forced adoptions—violate the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide adopted by the United Nations in 1948?

[English]

Mr. Nathaniel Raymond: Sir, it is a subcomponent act of the crime of genocide. It requires what is called *dolus specialis*, which is a finding of special intent. By itself, it is not genocide, but it can, with special intent and combined with other acts, constitute genocide. In our report, we address the legal question of whether these acts are *prima facie* by themselves, consistent with alleged crimes against humanity.

In terms of whether this evidence could be part of a crime of genocide prosecution, yes, it could be part of a larger crime of genocide prosecution. However, by itself, without special intent, it is simply a crime against humanity, which, while grave, is not *prima facie* genocide.

The Chair: Thank you.

[Translation]

Thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

[English]

Now, I invite Mr. Johns to take the floor for three minutes, please.

Mr. Gord Johns: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you both for your important testimony and the critical work you're doing.

Ms. Suslova, the international coalition for the return of Ukrainian children was launched this past February by both Canada and Ukraine. Global Affairs Canada identified four key areas of focus for the coalition: the coordination of joint efforts, information sharing, capacities alignment, and advocacy and communication.

Can you please speak to the progress that has been made by the coalition on these key areas since it was launched in February?

• (1735)

Ms. Iryna Suslova: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

On December 8, the first meeting took place. What is the progress? We have progress in searching for children. We have attracted more partners, teams that are doing verification and searching for children. Also, we had a conference, as Mr. Raymond said. Only one team was Nathaniel Raymond's, and we are very grateful for his team's efforts, but there are other teams all around the world who are helping us find children.

The second question is the registry. We have to have verified data. Without the data, we cannot do our work of returning children. We have good news that the Ministry of Justice of Ukraine has opened a registry. It was announced in Montreal. We have to collect information from all stakeholders—Ukrainian data and from other government agencies—collect data in one registry and one database, and verify the data. Then we'll have a better understanding of what the numbers of children are. It's a huge effort, and it has to be done. This is our homework, and we are supported by our international partners in this work.

The third very important part is attracting a new intermediary. Currently, we are working with Save Ukraine, the Ukrainian Child Rights Network, as well as the ombudsman of the parliament. They work through Qatar or Moskalkova.

As I mentioned earlier, we don't have too many children whom we were able to repatriate back with the help of international intermediaries. We have to find additional intermediaries. It's an important role for the international coalition in this. They can work to find new intermediaries between our two countries. The more intermediaries, the more there will be opportunities to bring back more children.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Johns.

On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank Mr. Raymond and Ms. Suslova for their presence and their good testimony. It was very interesting to the committee. If you feel some other information may be of interest to us, please feel free to send it to the clerk or to me.

We wish you well. Thank you for your presence.

Is it the will of the committee to adjourn the meeting?

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: No. On a point of order, you forgot to acknowledge that it's Ms. Vandenbeld's birthday.

The Chair: I mentioned that.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: No, you did not.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: It's good. It's fine.

The Chair: Troublemaker.

The meeting is adjourned.

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