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THE IMPACT OF RUSSIAN INDOCTRINATION AND DEPORTATION OF CHILDREN ON LOCAL COMMUNITIES IN UKRAINE

ANALYTICAL REPORT

Kherson, 20 October 2024

Photo by Ivan Antypenko [instagram.com/ivan_antypenko]

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Prepared for the Reckoning Project

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METHODOLOGY

Topic: The impact of russian indoctrination and deportation of children on local communities in Ukraine

Research method: online focus group discussions (FGD).

Sample and target audience: **5 FGDs with 6 participants each** (3 FGDs — random sample with a difference within the age groups of no more than 15 years; 1 FGD — teachers and 1 FGD of single women who provide for the families).

Location: Kherson, Zaporizhia, Mykolaiv regions, as well as Donetsk region (territory controlled by Ukraine).

Field: March 28 – April 1, 2025

SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS: GENDER, AGE, PROFESSIONAL EMPLOYMENT AND MARITAL STATUS AS A CONTEXT FOR SHAPING EXPERIENCE

The detailed socio-demographic profile of the study participants provides the basis for a deeper analysis of their experience in the context of war, displacement, transformation of social roles and adaptation to new realities. Representatives of five target categories were involved in the focus group discussions, covering a wide range of age, professional and social groups: young people (18–33 years old), adults (34–49 years old), the older generation (50+), teachers, and women who support their families on their own. All respondents are residents or immigrants from the southern and eastern regions of Ukraine with direct or indirect experience of living under war, occupation, evacuation, or prolonged stress.

Participants in the younger age group (18–33 years old) demonstrate a significant variety of life strategies and levels of adaptability. Among the respondents there are representatives of both stable employment and students, volunteers, and people looking for their professional path. Some of them have experience of parenthood, including raising a child without a partner. Some young people are characterized by a sense of uncertainty and, at the same time, a desire for self- realization in new social conditions. There is also a noticeable interest in creative and supportive practices (volunteering, art), which become compensatory mechanisms in response to the destruction of habitual scenarios.

As one of the participants notes:

> *"I am trying to find myself, to be useful in some way. I am raising my child alone."*
> *(FGD_1, P3)*

Adult respondents (34–49 years old) tend to have established family structures, children, and previous experience in professional fulfillment, particularly in public administration, education, and industry. However, as a result of the war, a significant number of them were forced to change their professional trajectory or temporarily lose their jobs. This is accompanied by a high level of social burden associated with caring for children, supporting family, or engaging in volunteer initiatives. One of the key motivations for active participation in public life is a personal trauma:

> *"It's not because I wanted it, it's just that historically, unfortunately, it happened that trouble and tragedy came not only to my country, to my city, but also to my family."*
> *(FGD_2, P1)*

This narrative combines personal loss with collective responsibility, which creates a powerful motivation for action. At the same time, there is a sense of fatigue and confusion among this group, and at the same time a determination to adapt and ensure stability for their children.

Respondents in the 50+ age group mostly have experience of a stable work history before the war (repair, trade, industry), but many of them have now lost their

jobs or retired. The statements of this group show considerable emotional stress, which is caused not only by the war, but also by the role of a family pillar — many of them maintain a household, take care of elderly parents, or support children and grandchildren.

Many of the respondents' husbands and sons are involved in the fighting, which creates a constant background of anxiety.

> *"My husband is at war and my eldest son is also at war."*
> *(FGD_3, P6)*

In this group, the topic of internal resources is particularly important: most respondents, despite being tired, demonstrate a high level of responsibility, inner strength, and commitment to family values.

The educational group consists of specialists of different profiles (primary school teachers, physical education teachers, mathematics teachers, psychologists, choreography teachers). Despite the war, the vast majority have retained their professional identity, while adapting their working methods to the conditions of distance or hybrid learning, changes in student population, and the general context of uncertainty. Young teachers, in particular, demonstrate innovation and flexibility:

> *"I am a choreography teacher for children and mothers, and for adults."*
> *(FGD_4, P3)*

This multifunctionality in teaching indicates the expansion of the role of the teacher from traditional teaching to the function of support, guidance, and psycho-emotional stabilization of children and families.

Women who support their families on their own form a particularly vulnerable category of respondents, but at the same time the most mobilized. All women are raising children without partner support, while ensuring their well-being in the crisis. Many of them have been forced to change their field of employment, work in trade, are self-employed, or are

looking for a new career. Typical stories include caring for sick relatives, which often makes it impossible to find stable employment.

> *"Now I am looking for myself... I don't plan to return to the railroad (previous place of work — ed.)... I am looking for a job..."*
> *(FGD_5, P4)*

In addition to the practical burden, these women face deep emotional challenges: the loss of a stable lifestyle, increased responsibility, and the need to make decisions in the face of uncertainty. At the same time, they demonstrate a high level of psychological resilience, reflexivity, and readiness for change.

ATTITUDE TO THE ISSUE OF DEPORTATION OF CHILDREN IN THE GENERAL INFORMATION CONTEXT

The issue of deportation of Ukrainian children to the russian federation evokes an unequivocally negative and deeply emotional reaction from respondents. Regardless of age, gender, or professional affiliation, respondents unanimously characterize this phenomenon as categorically unacceptable, immoral, and contrary not only to international law but also to basic notions of humanity. The responses are accompanied by expressions of pain, anger, hatred, despair, fear, and helplessness. This indicates the high psychological sensitivity of society to the topic, as well as its deep roots in the context of personal and collective experience of war.

For many respondents, the first reaction to the mention of deportation is shock and rejection. The perception of children as the most vulnerable part of society forms a strong ethical stance against any violent actions against them. Young participants especially emphasized that such actions are incompatible with basic notions of humanity:

> *"It seems to me that this is a violation of some moral norms and rules. Because a child is a child. It cannot even exist without parents. And they just tore her away and took her somewhere."*
> *(FGD_1, P4)*

This statement represents a key ethical imperative: the inviolability of the children's world as the basis of the moral order of society.

Within all categories of respondents, a wide range of emotions can be observed — from deep empathy for children and parents who have lost the opportunity to be together to uncontrollable anger and rage. The sharpest emotions are observed among people who have had experience of living under occupation or passing checkpoints with children:

> *"The first emotion that came was fear. Because my child and I survived the occupation (...) And every time it was anxiety that everything would go well. (...) Separation is the worst thing."*
> *(FGD_1, P3)*

Such testimonies demonstrate not only an emotional attitude to the topic, but also the depth of traumatic experience that is activated when mentioning deportation. For older

respondents who have lived through the conflicts since 2014, particularly in Donetsk region, deportation is perceived as an inevitable threat of losing a generation:

> *"In addition to anger and hatred, I also have despair, because I am afraid that we are losing a lot of children (...) children are morally crippled."*
> *(FGD_3, P5)*

In many statements, there is a deep symbolic load on the concept of "child" — as the personification of the future of the state, its national security and the continuity of identity. From this point of view, the deportation of children is perceived not as an isolated event, but as a deliberate act of extermination of a people:

> *"Children are our future. And they are doing everything to make sure that it does not even exist physically. (...) This is the destruction of the nation, simply."*
> *(FGD_1, P5)*

This discourse contains not only an emotional reaction, but also a political assessment of the phenomenon as a form of genocide or ethnocidal practice that is systemic and targeted.

Older respondents and educators repeatedly used terms such as "crime," "abduction," and "immoral action," giving the events a legal and moral coloring. Important in this context is also the emphasis on the inability of the international community to respond effectively:

> *"I would also add outrage, because the international community is watching and waiting for it to resolve itself."*
> *(FGD_2, P2)*

This indicates a growing distrust of international human rights mechanisms and a growing demand for justice that goes beyond the emotional level and turns into political reflection.

The reactions of mothers raising children alone were particularly deep and personally colored. In this group, the focus of the experience is on the idea of the possible loss of their own child, which causes panic, paralyzing fear and refusal to even allow such a thought:

> *"I'm afraid to allow the thought of my child being deported. I have never thought about it and probably don't want to... It's horrible. Just horrible."*
> *(FGD_5, P4)*

This quote demonstrates the extreme psychological tension that the topic of deportation evokes, as well as its potential to retraumatize already vulnerable populations. The topic of deportation of Ukrainian children to russia is not just painful

it causes deep existential anxiety in society, bridging the gap between personal and collective experiences of trauma. In the perception of the respondents, this phenomenon is ethically unacceptable, legally criminal, and politically catastrophic at the same time.

It symbolizes not only violence against children, but also an attempt to break national continuity, take away the future, and reformat the identity of a generation. A systematic analysis of the testimonies allows us to identify three main levels of perception:

- personal (fear),
- family (destruction of the family structure),
- socio-national (transformation of collective identity and demographic deficit).

1) The most widespread and deeply reflected fear is the prospect of losing a child — physically, emotionally or identically. The feeling of powerlessness, despair and confusion is caused not only by the fact of deportation, but also by its context: war, legal impunity, ineffective international response. One of the respondents expressed it succinctly but unequivocally:

> *"What is the fear? Losing a child."*
> *(FGD_3, P6)*

For most participants, reactions to the possible loss of a child are associated with the destruction of a sense of stability and security. There is a widespread fear that the child will not return or will return morally and mentally broken. The idea of a child as a subject deprived of the right to choose, protection, voice, and freedom is formed. Some respondents use the metaphor of "slavery" or "life without a future," indicating deep psychological and legal trauma:

> *"It's the pain of a child being torn away from their own parents. (...) It's a lifelong trauma."*
> *(FGD_5, P1)*

2) The deportation of children appears as a catalyst for the destruction of the family structure. Many statements describe situations where, as a result of the loss of a child, a family becomes antisocial, psychologically damaged, or even disintegrates. According to the respondents, mothers or both parents are often forced to leave their communities in search of their child, which leads to family fragmentation and disruption of emotional ties between family members:

> *"This family will not be complete for the rest of their lives. (...) My parents will never be happy again."*
> *(FGD_4, P1)*

Most participants emphasize that this situation gives rise to manipulative patterns of behavior, when the aggressor state influences the choice of parents through the child, forcing them to resort to extreme, sometimes illegal, actions:

> *"This is, first of all, a violation of the moral state of Ukrainian families (...) My mother will be ready for anything. (...) It's scary."*
> *(FGD_1, P4)*

> *"russia has a lot of influence on families through their children. (...) And parents can do a lot of things — both unpleasant and illegal — for the sake of their children."*
> *(FGD_1, P2)*

In addition, the deportation process itself is often accompanied by public condemnation, stigmatization, and a lack of support, further isolating the affected family. One of the educators described a situation where a family that lost a child was left alone with their tragedy:

> *"A person asks for help, even just for psychological support, and they turn away from him or her. (...) This light just goes out in a person."*
> *(FGD_4, P4)*

3) The deportation of children, in the perception of respondents, is not just an act of violence, but a strategic tool of hybrid warfare aimed at cultural assimilation, demographic depletion and the destruction of collective identity. The process of ideological influence on children — "brainwashing" — is considered particularly threatening, leading to a loss of loyalty to Ukraine and even to transformation into hostile actors:

> *"These are children who can become unwilling killers in the future. They will be sent here and will physically kill their relatives (...) We are losing a part of Ukraine."*
> *(FGD_3, P5)*

One of the most frequently mentioned consequences is the massive decline in the child population, which directly threatens the existence of entire communities. In small towns, this leads to the closure of schools and kindergartens, and on a larger scale, to an aging population, loss of labor resources, and the strategic future of the country:

> *"If there are no children, there will be no village. This will have a very negative impact on our economy, on everything."*
> *(FGD_4, P2)*

At the level of everyday observations, the decline of active life in cities and villages is already being felt. People are losing not only children, but also the energy to plan —

> *"there is no one to build the future."*
> *(FGD_5, P3)*

A number of respondents drew parallels with historical examples, such as the Janissaries and Soviet deportations, which reinforces the fear of repeating past traumas. It is important that respondents not only record the threat to the individual, but also talk about the loss of human capital for the country: teachers, doctors, engineers, i.e. the potential for state development:

> *"We lost a doctor, we lost a teacher in the future, we lost an engineer."*
> *(FGD_3, P3)*

In addition, respondents note that deportations trigger an avalanche-like process of youth outflow and the disintegration of small communities, especially in frontline and rural areas. This leads to the gradual extinction of local communities:

> *"If a young family (...) loses their child, they go to look for them and it's unclear when they will return. (...) It's the death of a small village."*
> *(FGD_2, P2)*

The deportation of children to the russian federation is perceived by respondents as a deep moral, psychological and political threat. At the personal level, it is a fear of loss and powerlessness. At the level of the family, it is the destruction of its structure, the emergence of manipulation and isolation. At the level of the community and the state, it is the loss of population, national potential, loss of trust, and demoralization.

This process is interpreted not only as a humanitarian crisis, but as a long-term tool of war against Ukrainian identity. It is seen as a threat not only to individual children, but also to the integrity of generations and the foundations of Ukraine's future.

> *"Our future is being put on the line. This is our life, this is the development of our country."*
> *(FGD_4, P6)*

The respondents' stories in response to the question about their personal experiences reflect a deeply personalized and at the same time systemic vision of the traumatic experience of deportation of children. Based on the collected material, it is possible to outline both dominant narratives about specific deportation events and assessments of their impact on the moral climate and integration of local communities.

Deportation of children often took place under the guise of "voluntary" departure to health camps. Respondents recall examples of parents being encouraged to send their children to Crimea or russia by promising comfortable conditions, gifts, and financial assistance. At the same time, the original documents were taken away, making it impossible for the children to return. These processes were accompanied by convincing propaganda and social pressure. Some parents did try to resist, while others agreed under duress or out of a sense of hopelessness. Families in difficult life circumstances were particularly vulnerable and became targets of targeted manipulation:

> *"The children were taken away with the original documents... And now, unfortunately, they have no contact with the children. And the children are not necessarily in Crimea, but have moved on."*
> *(FGD_1, P5)*

This mechanism, according to respondents, worked systematically, with the involvement of occupation administrations, propaganda, financial incentives, and, in some cases, threats, arrests, and deprivation of parental rights.

The personal stories provided by the participants are striking in their depth of despair, disbelief and pain. Parents who tried to return their children were trapped in complex procedures, limited access to information, and a lack of understanding of the mechanisms of assistance. Many stories end in tragedy — deaths, suicides, and loss of contact:

> *"When you come to the city and can't pick up your child because he or she is in a camp... This is a factor of danger. This is fear."*
> *(FGD_4, P3)*

Such experiences leave a deep imprint not only on the families themselves, but also on the entire social fabric. Grief is often accompanied by feelings of isolation, stigmatization, and moral devastation. The assessment of community cohesion in the context of deportations was ambiguous. Some participants pointed to a high level of empathy, willingness to help, hide children, and look for ways to return. In some cases, the mechanism of neighborly mutual assistance worked:

> *"There were cases when even neighbors took the child to their place to avoid deportation."*
> *(FGD_5, P2)*

At the same time, other testimonies point to indifference, lack of systemic support, bureaucratic indifference, or even blaming the victims:

> *"A person asks for help, even just for psychological support, and they turn away from him or her."*
> *(FGD_4, P4)*

The level of community response, as noted, largely depends on geography (occupied, frontline, and de-occupied territories), community resource capacity, the position of local authorities, and the influence of volunteer structures. Often, moral support was more important than formal protection mechanisms.

In all the focus groups, respondents stated that there is no real cohesion in the communities. Help is limited to family or friends; in big cities, people don't even always know what happened to their neighbors. In rural communities, there is potential for solidarity, but even there it is the exception rather than the rule. The general mood is one of emotional isolation, lack of collective action, and disillusionment with the state's capabilities:

> *"When a child is stolen, parents get together and go looking for him or her. And the community? To sympathize."*
> *(FGD_3, P6)*

As a result, instead of unity, we are witnessing a moral vacuum: each family is fighting for itself, without institutional or social support.

The topic of deportation is deeply rooted in the contemporary collective experience of war. It becomes a part of not only personal biographies but also common national memory. At the same time, the level of its comprehension in communities varies significantly: some communities demonstrate readiness for mobilization, while others remain in a state of moral paralysis.

> *"It's a kind of powerlessness when children are taken away, and the community is just there, and cannot do anything about it."*
> *(FGD_5, P1)*

Despite these difficulties, some voices emphasize that even in the most acute situations, the struggle for the child, for truth, for solidarity, must become the starting point for a new social resilience:

> *"We need to fight for every child, and only then deal with the root causes."*
> *(FGD_2, P1)*

Thus, the experience of deportation creates not only vulnerability, but also a reminder of social responsibility and the need for a collective response that can become the basis of a new unity. Although the vast majority of respondents from all focus groups did not have personal experience with children who returned after deportation, some testimonies, both direct and indirect, allow us to reconstruct a fragmented but extremely revealing picture of return. This picture is not limited to the administrative fact of returning to the government-controlled territory of Ukraine; on the contrary, it reveals a much more complex reality: the collision of rehabilitation reality with long-term violence against the child's consciousness, alienation from family and internal deformation of moral guidelines.

Several study participants reported meeting children who had been returned to Ukraine. However, none of the cases were similar to a "successful return" in the classical sense — no child remained unchanged. However, the main thing is that these children do not perceive themselves as victims. On the contrary, many of them initially had a positive image of their experience in the russian federation:

> *"They were not shocked... They said they were given everything and even more... They did not understand why they were returned."*
> *(FGD_1, P5)*

This is not just the result of ideological processing — it is an example of a fundamental transformation of the child's emotional security structure. In the context of war, isolation from parents, and lack of stability, children build trust where they receive basic support — whether it is care in an orphanage, gifts in a camp, or positive attention from russian educators. The problem is not only the imposed propaganda, but the fact that it is based on meeting basic needs that these children have been deprived of at home — due to war, poverty, fear, or disorganized institutional care.

One of the most disturbing signals in the participants' responses is the description of cases where deported children refused to recognize their parents upon return, considered them a "threat," and showed alienation and even hostility. This is evidence of the systematic work on changing basic value attitudes being carried out in the russian federation. As one of the participants emphasized:

> *"The child stopped perceiving the parents at all... They made the parents look like aggressors."*
> *(FGD_4, P4)*

This experience is not only a consequence of information violence. It is violence against the emotional core of a child's identity. The loss of unconditional trust in parents is a deeper and more lasting trauma than physical displacement. It calls into question the very notion of "return," as reintegration without restoring contact with parents is only a formal procedure. Some respondents recalled teenagers who, having remained in the occupied territories without their parents, not only survived but, in the words of one participant, "grew old in their eyes." They changed, became reserved, tough, and despondent. One of these boys, Stepan, became a symbol of growing up under the coercion of history:

> *"He is old. He has experience in his eyes, as if he had lived half his life."*
> *(FGD_2, P1)*

Children returned from deportation need serious psychological assistance, but respondents repeatedly pointed to the lack of rehabilitation programs, indifference of institutions, and excessive responsibility that falls on the shoulders of parents. Children who have gone through the experience of emotional disorientation, manipulation, and severance of ties

often cannot integrate back into the family — and thus, the mere fact of return does not guarantee recovery:

> *"If these children return, they will be traumatized. And in the future, it will be a traumatized society for life."*
> *(FGD_4, P1)*

Thus, a generation is being formed that will have difficulties with self-identification, building trust, and adapting to the social environment, which threatens to create systemic instability in the post-war period.

Such statements show not just empathy, but a sense of loss: these children, even if they physically return, will no longer be able to be "just children." Their emotional resources are exhausted, and their worldview is often based on the traumatic experience of surviving in conditions of total unpredictability.

Some respondents pointed to the way in which media and state authorities create public "success stories" around child returns — sometimes showing faces and personal data. Such practices have caused outrage and a sense of breach of trust:

> *"I still don't understand how such stories can be used to speculate on the Internet."*
> *(FGD_1, P5)*

It is not only a question of violation of ethics or privacy, but also a question of deep distrust of official narratives that try to turn traumatic experiences into the object of an information campaign. The result is not solidarity, but skepticism, disorientation, and even rejection. As a result, the return of deported children cannot be seen as a completed act. It is an open, multi-level process that requires:

- long-term psychological support;
- deep social rehabilitation;
- creating a protected space to reconnect with family;
- Critical rethinking of media policies regarding public coverage of these stories.

Only with such a comprehensive model is a true return possible-not only bodily, but also emotional, social, and identitarian.

One of the least obvious but dangerous effects of deportation is the rupture in the internal moral field of communities. Envy, judgment, gossip, and even bullying arise in situations where some children receive more assistance (including information and media) than others, or when families who cooperated with the occupying power are subsequently portrayed as victims:

> *"Our children were hiding in basements, and someone who was taken away was given a laptop and a phone. This is not unification, this is bullying."*
> *(FGD_1, P3)*

These contrasts erode already fragile social trust in the affected regions. Some respondents pointed to the potentially explosive impact of deported children in the future — especially if their minds are shaped by propaganda. Such children could become "time bombs" — carriers of ideological ambivalence that could be exploited by the enemy:

> *"It could be a ticking time bomb... to play on emotions in Donetsk."*
> *(FGD_2, P1)*

The double disorientation is particularly dangerous: on the one hand, it is a separation from the native land, and on the other hand, it is an intensive integration into a new system of values through the instruments of soft power (friendly environment, gifts, household comfort, emotional loyalty of adults to russia):

> *"You can bring them back physically... But how to return them psycho-emotionally? And it seems to me that there is no such mechanism at the moment."*
> *(FGD_1, P5)*

ASSESSMENT OF UKRAINIAN SOCIETY'S ACTIONS TO COUNTER DEPORTATION AND RETURN OF CHILDREN: PROBLEMS AT THE LEVEL OF FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES AND THE STATE

In many cases, returning to one's homeland does not guarantee recovery; on the contrary, it can exacerbate the disorder, give rise to feelings of betrayal, confusion, and a long-lasting conflict of identities. At the community level, the consequences of deportation are manifested in the form of social exclusion, lack of trust, and moral division between "those who were" and "those who remained." Returning children risk being targeted for judgment, suspicion, or bullying. And communities that have not gone through joint trauma processing are unprepared for the integration process:

> *"This is a psychological trauma... She will not be able to live normally. It is necessary to restore the trust of these children in the country, why it did not protect them."*
> *(FGD_5, P2)*

The respondents are particularly concerned not only about the physical loss of children, but also about the quality of those who will return — traumatized, emotionally unstable, with alternative socialization experiences formed in a hostile context. This moral gap is one of the most dangerous consequences, as it reduces the community's ability to be solidary, open and act for the common good.

The focus group participants were unanimous in their opinion that the problem will not disappear with the return of children. This is only the first step in a complex, long-term reintegration process. Respondents suggested several important areas of action.

1) Almost all groups emphasized the critical importance of **professional psychological assistance** — not only for children, but also for parents who have also experienced trauma, and for communities that need to learn to accept rather than reject:

> *"We need constant work with a psychologist... And with parents and the community. Because bullying, condemnation is also part of the problem."*
> *(FGD_2, P1)*

2) Many respondents emphasize the need for **"gentle Ukrainization"** — not through pressure, but through creating a positive image of Ukraine, demonstrating opportunities, and emotional support:

> *"We need to show the level of Ukraine what we can do, what our prospects are."*
> *(FGD_1, P3)*

This involves cultural adaptation, inclusion in educational, sports, and art programs, taking into account the previous experience of children.

3) It is important to work with the communities themselves — **to overcome prejudice, to** raise awareness, to explain the reasons and context of deportations. This should prevent social segregation of returned children:

> *"People should understand that a child is not responsible for his/her parents, that he/she was a minor."*
> *(FGD_2, P2)*

Community-based initiatives, such as the creation of spaces for adaptation, psychological assistance centers, and mentoring programs, should become entry points for a gradual return to normal life:

> *"Adaptation centers... Providing education, work, assistance. Because each child will return with a different level of trauma."*
> *(FGD_5, P2)*

The long-term consequences of the deportation of children are not just about the fate of individuals. It is about the transformation of the entire structure of Ukrainian society: its emotional memory, social resilience, demographics, and collective identity. Without a comprehensive, systematic, and at the same time empathetic state policy, the consequences of this trauma can reverberate for decades in the form of distrust, fragmentation, loss of potential, and internal disorientation. The key to recovery is not only the return of children, but also the return of meaning, security and belonging.

When asked what the mechanisms of assistance should be, respondents mostly mentioned those areas that should have been introduced at the systemic level long ago but have not yet been implemented or exist in fragmented form. All focus groups, regardless of age and social status, named **psychological support** as the first and most necessary form of assistance. The emphasis was not only on the child as a victim, but also on parents, teachers, and communities:

> *"Until there is trust in the family, it will not go further."*
> *(FGD_5, P2)*

The need for **specialists** who are able to work with traumas of war experience, deprivation, and environmental changes is also emphasized. But at the same time, there is also criticism: such services are either unavailable or minimized. There is a particular lack of specialists in villages, where traumatized families are left alone with their pain.

Respondents paid special attention to **the educational environment**, where returned children often become targets for judgment or bullying. It was emphasized that educators often produce prejudice themselves by openly pointing out who was deported, who returned, who "went to Artek themselves."

> *"It is necessary to put it into the minds of educators that they need to perceive it differently."*
> *(FGD_1, P5)*

In this context, the community should not only support but also rethink its reactions, develop tolerance, and work with its own emotions through joint trainings, awareness campaigns, and peer-to-peer meetings.

Legal assistance is another important request. Families often do not understand where to go, what documents to collect, and what rights they have. Respondents repeatedly emphasized that a clear algorithm of actions should be developed at the state level:

> *"There is not even a legal protocol on what to do if a child is abducted."*
> *(FGD_4, P4)*

Participants see the need to create an institution like a "family support specialist," similar to those who work with veterans. Such a specialist would coordinate all processes, from finding a child to reintegration. Respondents admit that without government support, it is difficult for communities to change anything, especially when they lack resources. But at the same time, they emphasize that moral support, empathy, and solidarity are no less important than money:

> *"Sometimes it's better to stay out of it, but sometimes just being there is already support."*
> *(FGD_5, P2)*

> *"Respect, understanding — this is where support begins."*
> *(FGD_5, P5)*

The idea of training residents themselves, including teachers and officials, on how to properly interact with affected families was also raised:

> *"Because they can hurt and make it even worse."*
> *(FGD_5, P3)*

The key conclusion that emerged from the discussions is that families should not be left to fend for themselves. And while the state should be the primary guarantor of support, the community is the first environment of return, which can both heal and reject. Support mechanisms should include:

- psychological assistance to the whole family;
- educational training for teachers to avoid secondary traumatization;
- legal assistance through local or state platforms;
- creating an infrastructure of shared experience: clubs, spaces, communities;
- communication campaigns that send the right messages — not about guilt, but about solidarity.

This is not only a question of deported children, but also about the integrity of the community, about whether society is able to maintain humanity, empathy, and mutual responsibility in a state of war. At the same time, respondents in all focus groups demonstrate deep disappointment in the effectiveness of the actions of both the Ukrainian authorities and international organizations. The prevailing impression is that "a lot is being done" at the level of slogans, but in practice, families do not see any concrete help. Respondents unanimously emphasize that the Ukrainian state has neither a clear policy nor procedures that would guarantee support for families whose children have been deported. People who face this problem do not know who to turn to, and those who do often find themselves in a bureaucratic trap:

> *"You come to a state that did not try to return you."*
> *(FGD_4, P3)*

An important element of criticism is the lack of a comprehensive response program, from legal support to social integration upon return. Families find themselves in an information vacuum, often forced to act on their own, relying on volunteers rather than state institutions.

Most of the positive comments from respondents refer to volunteer initiatives: it is individuals, not the state system, who help find children, prepare documents, and organize return. However, this support is not systematic, not always legal, and depends on personal resources. Several participants emphasized that volunteers "pull

out" children literally at the last minute, often in dangerous conditions, without security guarantees:

> *"This is all done by people who have taken the initiative. The state does not."*
> *(FGD_3, P6)*

Participants have an ambivalent attitude towards international organizations, especially the UN, UNICEF, and the Red Cross. On the one hand, respondents recognize that it is thanks to

these organizations that some children have returned (for example, with the participation of Save the Children). But on the other hand, they express deep distrust:

> *"They cannot do anything. russia does not respond to any resolutions."*
> *(FGD_1, P6)*

This distrust is exacerbated by the lack of clear communication: people do not know what programs exist, who to contact, or what instruments of influence are used.

According to the respondents, both the state and the international community should be more active. The main requests were as follows:

- to define the deportation of children as a crime against humanity with clear mechanisms of responsibility. Not "removal", not "evacuation", but abduction,
- introduce a centralized state program of family support: legal, psychological, and logistical,
- guarantee housing, employment, and assistance with relocation to prevent danger before deportation,
- strengthen information support — where and how to look for a child, who helps, whom to contact,
- to the international community — to act more rigorously, use sanctions levers, and specify the responsibility of individuals and structures involved in child abduction.

> *"Every crime must have a face. Then the sanctions will have an effect."*
> *(FGD_2, P6)*

A separate layer of discussion is about forced evacuation as a preventive measure against deportation. Here, too, opinions are divided. Some respondents believe that the state should evacuate families from dangerous areas without fail — even without their consent. Others emphasize that coercion contradicts the Constitution and causes additional trauma:

> *"People have the right to make their own decisions. But if there are no green corridors, what kind of decision is that?."*
> *(FGD_2, P6)*

Thus, the key is **to** create safe conditions for voluntary evacuation, not to mechanically move people.

Focus group discussions have shown that the main problem with the role of the government and international organizations is not only the lack of action, but also the loss of trust. People trust volunteers more than the state; they rely more on word of mouth than on official resources.

In contrast to the "systemic helplessness" of the Ukrainian state, the actions of the russian federation against Ukrainian children, according to the focus group

participants, are an important component of a well-planned strategy. This is evidenced by dozens of comments from respondents from different parts of Ukraine: the occupier's actions were systematic, multi-stage, and adapted to the context of each community. At the same time, the very fact of deportations became possible due to the lack of state presence at a critical moment, the lack of information readiness of the population, the social vulnerability of individual families, and the breakdown of traditional systems of responsibility.

russia's strategy: ***gradual pressure, an information mask, a "resort for children" instead of captivity***

The russian strategy included:

- use of socially vulnerable children (from boarding schools deprived of parental care);
- voluntary and compulsory participation of parents (through promises of "treatment" and "recovery");
- further assimilation through changing names, citizenship, environment, language, and education.

Respondents clearly indicate that the deportations were not chaotic — they were based on prepared models of psychological, social and propaganda influence:

> *"The villages of Kherson region were pressured in a completely different way than the cities."*
> *(FGD_1, P5)*

> *"It was under the guise of camps, rehabilitation, recreation."*
> *(FGD_5, P1)*

> *"They take 10–12-year-olds. In a year or two, they are already useful citizens for them."*
> *(FGD_3, P6)*

This shows signs of ethnocide and genocide, with the aim of destroying identity, family ties, and social memory. At the same time, focus group participants repeatedly spoke about the catastrophic lack of state presence in the first days and weeks of the occupation, which made deportation possible. Specific cases were mentioned:

> *"February 24 — no prosecutors. There is no police. No SBU. No judges."*
> *(FGD_2, P1)*

> *"Our village head fled on the first day. They left us alone."*
> *(FGD_2, P4)*

The self-removal of the authorities left people alone with the enemy. In this situation, many families acted blindly — some agreed to "recreational trips", others left their children with their grandmother, thinking they would return in a week. No one realized that this would become part of the deportation mechanism. The problem was not only external pressure, but also internal social vulnerability:

- low level of awareness,
- lack of prior preparation for emergencies,
- material insecurity
- Lack of trust in the state.

This led to chaotic or wrong decisions, which became one of the reasons for the loss of children:

> *"Parents did not understand what the consequences would be. Because education at school does not prepare you for this."*
> *(FGD_3, P5)*

> *"They were promised 30,000 rubles each, but in reality, they took the child away."*
> *(FGD_4, P4)*

The participants named a number of interventions that could significantly reduce the scale of the tragedy: the creation of real evacuation routes with safe housing at the finish line — not just "bus to train and then whatever you want", a large-scale information campaign explaining what a "children's camp" is in the context of war.

> *"They put us on a bus and then go wherever you want. Who would go nowhere with children?."*
> *(FGD_4, P1)*

When respondents were asked about solutions that they would personally support, they came up with specific ideas. Among them:

- creating a national evacuation program with guarantees: housing, food, medical care;
- no ostentatious removal — instead, prepared, realistic relocation plans that take into account living conditions;

- adaptation programs for children and parents in new communities: language, social, and educational;
- legal and psychological support for families for at least a year after the evacuation.
- The focus groups show that the deportation was the result not only of the enemy's criminal will, but also of the lack of action on the part of the state at a time when it was critical. Participants do not hide their emotions: anger, frustration, pain, and a sense of powerlessness. But at the same time, they give rational, well-founded ideas that could be implemented if the state heard them.

> *"We can save children only if we save the family — with housing, with conditions, with a vision of the future."*
> *(FGD_5, P6)*

The replacement of identity through a "new life" in the aggressor country creates a risk of transforming Ukrainian children into carriers of a hostile system of values. Some focus group participants compared this to a planned genocide or "shot revival" — not only because of the loss of population, but also because of the loss of carriers of culture, language, traditions and memory. Particularly dangerous is the fact that deported children not only grow up in a different environment, but are often subjected to deliberate propaganda and isolation from their true history and national context. In this case, as one respondent noted,

> *"they will not know their roots first of all. They will not know their history."*
> *(FGD_2, P4)*

At the same time, an equally threatening factor is the internal effect: demoralization of society, disillusionment with their own state, and loss of a sense of belonging to a common past and future. Some interviewees emphasize that indifference or the lack of an appropriate cultural policy on the part of Ukraine is no less of a threat: if children lose access to their history, language, and symbols, if they are not taught to be proud of who they are, then even if they physically remain on Ukrainian territory, they may lose their inner sense of "Ukrainianness."

To counteract such consequences, respondents supported a set of measures aimed at strengthening identity on several levels:

1. The educational and cultural front. The strategy of patriotic education should be based not only on historical facts, but also on the formation of a positive emotional image of Ukraine: through culture, language, art, modern media and educational initiatives. As noted in one of the interviews:

> *"We need to educate stable, strong individuals... with a sense of self-esteem, including national roots."*
> *(FGD_4, P3)*

2. Working with families. The formation of national identity begins in the family. It was proposed to strengthen educational work with parents, to provide them with tools to educate them in Ukrainian values and dignity, even under conditions of occupation or displacement.

3. Support for the children who stayed behind. There is a need to focus on the formation of an educated, critically thinking young generation within the country, capable of preserving and transmitting identity. One participant emphasized the importance of this task:

> *"Even if there are few of them, they will be able to give support to the next generations."*
> *(FGD_3, P6)*

4. Use of digital platforms. In today's world, the Internet is an important tool not only for communication but also for identity formation. It was suggested that Ukrainian-language content — videos, cartoons, online courses, social networks — should be created more actively to preserve the connection with culture even for children outside the country.

5. Finding and supporting deported children. If it is not always possible to return them physically, we need to look for ways to connect with them through technology, soft cultural presence, and reintegration programs in the future.

6. Development of a national security protocol.
    - recognizing the deportation of children as a state emergency;
    - creating instructions and action algorithms for communities and families (what to do when there is a risk of occupation, how to act);
    - a register of children from the frontline areas, especially from orphanages, to allow for prompt verification of where they are.

7. Education and communication reform
    - introducing compulsory courses on civilian security in schools;
    - campaigns through the media, messengers, and social networks that explain the risks of deportation and how to prevent them;
    - active involvement of communities in joint planning and response.

ANALYZING BEHAVIORAL PATTERNS THAT INCREASE THE RISKS OF DEPORTATION AND INDOCTRINATION AFTER THE RETURN OF CHILDREN

The collected testimonies of the focus group participants allow us to systematically analyze how the mechanisms of behavioral control over children in the occupied territories are implemented, both through encouragement and punishment. Most of the situations described by respondents fit into the classical model of cognitive and emotional conditioning, or the "carrot and stick" method. At the same time, the "carrot" method is often only a cover for strategic indoctrination, while the "stick" is an instrument of physical and psychological terror.

The question about the experience of using the conditional "carrot and stick" in the context of war revealed the multifaceted nature of imposing behavioral models on children within this approach — from everyday family upbringing practices to targeted ideological indoctrination under occupation. Focus group participants noted that in peacetime, this model is often used intuitively and is perceived as an integral part of the upbringing process. At the same time, in a situation of war, these mechanisms have acquired a different depth — they have become an instrument of systemic psychological pressure and even a tool of state propaganda of the enemy.

In a peaceful context, especially among younger participants, "carrot and stick" appears as a household strategy of parental influence — restrictions such as "you can't go out until you do your homework" or "if you clean up, you get ice cream." Such examples were voiced by participants of FGD_1 (18–33 years old), who recognized that this is a form of soft manipulation, but within the framework of safe upbringing:

> *"Each parent has their own manipulative practices. (...) The system of good/bad policeman is present in every Ukrainian family."*
> *(FGD_1, P5)*

In the context of war, the situation changes radically. It is not about the influence of parents, but about the influence of the occupiers, who use the method of reward and intimidation as part of their political and information strategy. Participants from the Kherson region recalled situations where the russian military defiantly gave children apples or sweets, creating the illusion of benevolence, amidst violence, fear, and shooting. This was a clear

manipulation of the child's emotional vulnerability at the time of trauma, which leaves a deep mark on the mind.

> *"Parents are in front of your eyes all your life, and a russian man comes to a child with an apple. (...) He gave it to them and left. And everyone stood in a stupor."*
> *(FGD_2, P2)*

The most depressing part of the testimonies concerns targeted indoctrination through schools, propaganda, and pressure on parents. Participants mentioned systematic attempts to impose the russian discourse through education, media control, humanitarian aid, and household goods. The tools used include both carrots in the form of gifts, access to resources, and "better education" and sticks in the form of threats, blackmail, and violence:

> *"You start doubting yourself already (...) Their propaganda is so professional that it's just trash."*
> *(FGD_4, P4)*

> *"If you want to take your child away, give me another one."*
> *(FGD_4, P4)*

In several cases, participants explicitly referred to this as psychological terror, when the influence was exerted through intimidation, including threats at checkpoints about the child's fate. Sometimes children were used as a means of pressure: they were forced to tear off Ukrainian symbols or *"tell how good we are"* in exchange for *"helping the family" (FGD_5, P1; P2)*.

Rewards were used as a form of motivation to cooperate or emotionally "bind" to the occupying power:

- distribution of sweets or gifts to children whose parents were "friends" with the russian military *(FGD_2, P4)*.
- rewards for denunciations — monetary bonuses for reporting "disloyal" citizens *(FGD_3, P3)*.
- educational and artistic trips to Moscow that were used for propaganda purposes *(FGD_1, P2)*.
- positions and privileges to cooperating parents with the expectation of influence through children *(FGD_2, P6)*.

The analysis of these stories shows that the so-called "carrot and stick" method in wartime goes far beyond pedagogy. It turns into an instrument of control, manipulation and deformation of consciousness. And while in the family context it is based on love, in the context of occupation it is based on calculation, fear and abuse of the child's defenselessness.

That is why it is important to work systematically on information hygiene, critical thinking in children and parents, and to create supportive environments where children can rethink their experiences. This is especially true for those who have returned from the occupied territories. They need not only psychological support, but also institutional reintegration through education, culture, and dialogue, so that the "carrot" is no longer associated with the occupier.

When describing the "stick", i.e. threats of reprisals from the russian federation, this element was used even more actively. Respondents described the following methods of intimidation:

- Threats to take children away from their parents if they do not enroll them in russian schools *(FGD_2, P6)*.
- physical violence and humiliation at checkpoints — stripping, threats, mockery *(FGD_2, P1)*.
- detention in basements, in particular of minors, as punishment for patriotic actions or family position *(FGD_3, P6)*.
- psychological blackmail due to fear for relatives is a typical tactic when a child is forced to keep silent or act in a certain way by threatening the life of their parents *(FGD_3, P5)*.

> *"Oh, you have a mother, you forgot. We will come home and shoot you in front of your wife and children."*
> *(FGD_3, P6)*

The manipulative pressure was accompanied by changes in the child's environment, information background, and symbolic environment:

- spreading messages such as: "your country has abandoned you, we care about you" *(FGD_4, P6)*.
- ideological advertisement with a combination of Ukrainian and russian symbols — children in embroidered shirts against the background of the tricolor *(FGD_1, P5)*.
- forcing children to study in russian schools, agitation through teachers and friends *(FGD_4, P4)*.
- complete information isolation — access only to russian TV channels, with disinformation about Ukraine as an "aggressor state" *(FGD_5, P3)*.
- replacement of curricula, including Ukrainian history and language, with russian standards *(FGD_3, P6)*.

The methods of "carrot and stick" in the occupation are not an educational model, but a form of forced reprogramming of the child. The strategy is based on violence, punishment and demonstration of force as a tool of control; material incentives and symbolic "gestures of care" as a method of creating dependence; and information siege as an environment

where identity is formed. Particularly dangerous is targeted pressure through parents, who, under threat, lose their authority or become "repeaters" of the occupation logic.

> *"The worst thing is when a mother, frightened and humiliated, tells her child: 'We will do this from now on,' and this becomes a new norm for the child."*
> *(FGD_4, P3)*

This layer of evidence requires not only recording but also a professional interdisciplinary response: legal, psychological, educational, and informational. Because the loss is not only in the physical dimension, but in the very fabric of culture and generational continuity.

During the focus group discussions, it was clearly outlined that the imposition of ideas, behavioral models or decisions on children in the context of war and occupation can be carried out by a wide range of people. Most respondents emphasize that the determining factor is the authority, trust or fear that a child feels towards a particular person. These subjects can be conditionally divided into institutional (government, army, administration) and socially close (parents, teachers, relatives, peers, idols).

1. Parents as agents of imposition

The most controversial and at the same time sensitive category is parents. In many cases, it was they who passed on or transmitted their model of adaptation to the occupation realities to their children, including in the form of collaboration. Some respondents emphasized cases when children resisted their parents, preserving their Ukrainian identity despite family pressure.

> *"We have a lot of cases where children had a more conscious position. And their parents persuaded them: 'let's cooperate with the occupiers, look, we will be fine, we will have a lot of money.'"*
> *(FGD_1, P5)*

Parents often acted as intermediaries in manipulation by the occupation authorities — through threats to their lives or freedom, the child was forced to keep silent or cooperate. It was also through parents — through intimidation or material promises — that the occupiers implemented the "carrot and stick" model.

2. Government officials, military, administrative figures

In the temporarily occupied territories, traumatic imposition often took on institutional forms: through gauleiters, school principals, checkpoint commanders, and officials of pseudo-administrations. These figures had real leverage — control over mobility, access to education, and the availability of humanitarian aid.

> *"Teachers, gauleiters, coaches, cultural institutions. They said: if you don't go to a russian school, we will take your child away."*
> *(FGD_2, P2, P6)*

The military is particularly often mentioned as a source of intimidation — a demonstration of force, violence, and psychological pressure. Even cases when a child was given a candy or an apple were described by respondents as a manipulative gesture that took place against the backdrop of a total threat.

3. Educators: teachers, educators, coaches

Teachers who sided with the occupation authorities were identified as key carriers of ideological imposition. Their power over children was combined with the latter's vulnerability to authority.

> *"Someone whom the child trusts, or someone who puts pressure on him/her with his/her authority. This is a teacher, or a parent, or a representative of the authorities who has the power to do harm to his or her family."*
> *(FGD_3, P5)*

In some cases, teachers agitated for the "russian world" or conducted lessons on russian history and language, which was accompanied by pressure on parents and children who resisted.

4. Media, social networks, cultural symbols

The Internet is a separate risk category that respondents mentioned as a space where forms of psychological recruitment and involvement of children in dangerous activities are most quickly realized.

> *"Through TikTok. They pretend to be children, but in reality they are special services. They offer to do something, set fire to it, bring it. They promise money."*
> *(FGD_1, P6)*

Also mentioned were commercials, musicians, bloggers — those who have informal authority among adolescents. They can form a "new normal" in the child's mind, especially in an information-isolated environment.

5. Peers, recruited children, social groups

An unobvious but important source of imposition is infiltrated children who have been influenced themselves and have begun to reproduce the imposed models among their peers. This phenomenon was recorded in conversations between educators and single mothers.

> *"Children who are zombified. They can impose their opinions in their society — that they have been through it, that it is better that way. They are listened to more than adults."*
> *(FGD_4, P6)*

This creates an internal split in peer groups, where patriotic children may find themselves isolated or under pressure.

The most traumatic for a child is the imposition that comes from a close and emotionally significant adult — a parent, teacher, or coach. These are the figures who have the highest authority and control. At the same time, in times of war, coercion, fear, punishment, and psychological blackmail have become systemic through government institutions, military structures, and the information environment. Social media is a separate risk zone that allows bypassing traditional barriers to access to children. Thus, the range of actors involved in imposition is wide, and, importantly, responsibility is not always obvious — not only aggressors but also members of the local society adapted to them often act as carriers of traumatic attitudes.

The analysis of respondents' answers shows that the issue of preventing children from falling back into situations of manipulative imposition and "traumatic learning" requires an interdisciplinary and systemic approach. Respondents unanimously recognize that children who have already experienced external control through pain, punishment, or reinforcement need special protection — not only at the level of institutional care, but also in the everyday communication field.

A key prerequisite for building resilience to manipulative strategies is the development of a child's autonomous thinking, ability to reflect and interpret information. As one of the respondents noted: "A child should be taught from childhood that his or her opinion is important" *(FGD_2)*. This position is consistent with the idea of social learning, where a growing personality builds resilience through the experience of recognizing emotional, informational, or symbolic pressure.

Focus group participants pointed to a number of reasons why children remain vulnerable to repeated exposure to similar situations. These include: a lack of critical thinking, lack of skills to filter information on social networks, broken trusting relationships with adults, and low self-esteem. In response, respondents put forward several strategies for preventive action.

First, the emphasis is placed on the need to learn to recognize manipulation. It is proposed to introduce psychological literacy courses into the school curriculum, which would include topics of emotional self-regulation, boundaries of personal space, and detection of information pressure. As the respondent emphasizes:

> *"A child should be confident and know that it is not a bad thing to stand up for their own opinion."*
> *(FGD_4)*

This demonstrates the need to create an educational space where freedom of expression and reflection are not only allowed, but systematically encouraged.

Second, family upbringing plays a systemic role. The importance of a stable, predictable, and supportive family structure in which parents do not act as a source of additional anxiety

or pressure is recognized in almost all discussions. Psychological safety in the family is a prerequisite for children to acquire self-defense skills. As one participant noted:

> *"The world is destroying the family institution, and it is through trust in parents that a child forms a basic model of resistance."*
> *(FGD_2)*

Third, respondents suggest working with the child's digital environment. This is not only about restrictions, but also about content: developing high-quality Ukrainian- language content, including videos, animations, and educational podcasts. One of the participants notes:

> *"You can direct TikTok in the right direction — to produce high-quality Ukrainian content, not to give children russian bloggers."*
> *(FGD_1)*

Thus, a cultural counter-narrative is formed, an alternative to the repressive discourse that the child may have already encountered. Finally, special attention should be paid to the need to train professionals who are able to work not only with the consequences of trauma, but also with potential vulnerability to manipulation. This implies not only professional development of psychologists, but also the creation of an intersectoral network — school, family, community, digital environment — in which a child can find support, develop the ability to self-defense and avoid re- indoctrination.

IDENTIFYING SIGNS OF TRAUMA AND THE POSSIBILITY OF FURTHER ASSISTANCE TO CHILDREN WHO HAVE SURVIVED THE OCCUPATION AND DEPORTATION

The use of "carrot and stick" strategies with children — that is, manipulation through punishment, fear, reward, or deception — becomes an effective means not only of control but also of deep reprogramming of behavior and worldview. Identification of such cases is possible through specific behavioral signals, but the analysis shows that the line between indoctrination and other forms of traumatic exposure is extremely thin.

The focus group discussions revealed a wide range of reactions of children to the violence they experienced, both physical and psychological, as well as to the carrot- and-stick tactics used to control and impose loyalty. The impact of these methods is deep and long-lasting, affecting both the behavioral sphere and **the** child's identity processes.

The most commonly recorded reaction of children to violence or intimidation is withdrawal, avoidance of contact, and refusal to communicate even with peers. In several cases, there were examples of complete loss of interest in social activities.

> *"The child completely closed herself off from communication with her peers. She said: 'I don't know who is there, and I don't want to talk to them.'"*
> *(FGD_2, P6)*

In parallel, there was hypersensitivity to potential danger, increased anxiety, and fear of openly expressing one's own opinion, especially in the context of national identity or language. One case describes how a child was forced to change the language of communication due to the threat of physical violence against his mother.

> *"They said: 'Now we will rape your mother until you speak russian.' They took the girl out of the minibus..."*
> *(FGD_1, P3)*

This example demonstrates traumatic conditioning: language becomes a marker of safety or danger, rather than a means of identity or communication. Such experiences can be

consolidated at the level of subconscious reactions — submission, avoidance or anxiety in a situation of language choice.

In a number of cases, children who were under pressure or manipulation stopped sharing with their parents, avoiding conversations on sensitive topics. The reason for this could be either a loss of trust or a desire not to endanger the family.

> *"Children stop talking and sharing with their parents. Sometimes they don't even realize that they are provoking some actions against their parents."*
> *(FGD_1, P2)*

Another form of reaction recorded in older adolescents is manifestations of hatred, aggression, and emotional hostility toward the "other" — an ideological or even social enemy. This was also accompanied by labeling children associated with collaborators as "racists" or "traitors."

> *"When a child saw that someone had an electric scooter from a russian soldier, he would say: 'Kostya is a racist, we won't let him play.'"*
> *(FGD_2, P1)*

Such reactions illustrate the formation of new social boundaries, where identity is built not only on the basis of shared experience, but also on the basis of a moral assessment of the actions of parents or the environment.

In such cases, psychological trauma can provoke either complete adaptation to the aggressor's demands or, on the other hand, the formation of a radically unacceptable model of resistance, sometimes with the risk of destructive behavior. The key indicators of indoctrination noted by respondents were the following behavioral manifestations.

1) Changing the child's habitual behavioral structure.

This is the most frequent signal mentioned by respondents in all focus groups. A child's behavior undergoes a sharp or gradual transformation: a child who used to be open, sociable, and proactive suddenly becomes aloof, silent, suspicious, or overly cautious.

> *"If the child was open before, and then locked up, then a bell rings."*
> *(FGD_1, P2)*

Other children may show hyperactive defensive behavior — that is, aggressiveness, sarcasm, resistance. In cases where the imposition tactics were in the form of authoritarian pressure or physical fear, a "yogi" type of adaptation is formed — when the child does not let anyone, including peers, come near him or her.

> *"The boy is... like a hedgehog. He doesn't play with others, he is always alone."*
> *(FGD_2, P4)*

2) Loss of trust and reduced contact with the immediate environment

The majority of respondents emphasize the child's loss of emotional openness in interaction with parents or teachers. Such isolation is not always accompanied by tantrums or outright depression, but gradual alienation and silence is a stable symptom.

> *"The child stops talking to parents and sharing."*
> *(FGD_1, P2)*

In some cases, the child may not show any emotional signals, but lose the ability to think independently, copy other people's judgments, and demonstrate total agreement — regardless of the content.

> *"Such a child has no opinion. She agrees with everything."*
> *(FGD_3, P3)*

3) Changing meanings: new reactions to words, symbols, objects

Some cases indicate a deep associative consolidation of trauma, when everyday objects (toys, colors, speech) become triggers.

> *"The child was afraid of children's toys because they were given to her when her parents were raped."*
> *(FGD_2, P6)*

In less dramatic but more widespread cases, this can manifest itself in the rejection of certain language, gestures or words, in an overly alert reaction to familiar appeals, as well as in the repetition of indoctrinated phrases or assessments that are not typical of the age level of development.

4) Psycho-emotional manifestations: fear, anxiety, social adaptation disorders

Many reports show symptoms of anxiety disorders, including sleep disturbances, hyper-excitability or, conversely, inhibited reactions, physiological symptoms (enuresis), and vulnerability to noises or new situations. Some children completely refuse to play or socialize, choosing complete isolation.

> *"The child does not respond, stays in social networks, is silent."*
> *(FGD_2, P5)*

> *"My daughter began to show hatred and aggression. What she saw left an imprint."*
> *(FGD_5, P2)*

The overwhelming majority of focus group participants concluded that behavioral manifestations caused by indoctrination are difficult to clearly separate from the symptoms of other traumatic experiences, such as psychological or physical violence. Reactions such as withdrawal, aggression, anxiety, self-harm, and psychosomatic disorders are universal to all types of deep stress.

> *"It's all psychological. If there is a physical trauma, there are other signs. And here — anxiety, silence."*
> *(FGD_5, P2)*

> *"Violence is violence. The consequences may be similar, but the triggers are different."*
> *(FGD_4, P6)*

At the same time, some participants offered a more subtle interpretation: the key difference is not in the external signs, but in the content of the fixed patterns. That is, the child is not just afraid or suffering; he or she is developing a new type of reaction based on an understanding of "what is allowed" and "what is punishable."

> *"This method of manipulation creates patterns of behavior. A person reacts with caution to ordinary things. This is an inadequate response to adequate stimuli."*
> *(FGD_4, P3)*

Thus, cases of indoctrination are characterized by a deeper ideological layer of trauma, which manifests itself in a long-term distortion of the value system, linguistic identity, and image of authority.

Thus, an effective diagnosis of indoctrination experience requires not only observation of the child's emotional state, but also analysis of deep changes in his or her perceptions of the world, self, state, and loved ones. After experiencing violent influence — whether in the form of direct indoctrination or hybrid psycho-emotional pressure — a child enters an extremely unstable state of mental vulnerability. Attempts to help them require not only an individualized approach, but also a deep understanding of the specifics of the impact. However, as empirical evidence shows, even the best interventions can not only fail to work, but also provoke deterioration — especially when they are implemented according to general protocols that do not take into account the local experience of trauma.

As for the possibilities of further assistance and rehabilitation, focus group participants unanimously emphasize the crucial importance of the child's age. Young children are more likely to demonstrate readiness for contact, although they may not always realize the depth of their experiences. While adolescents are the most difficult category, prone to isolation, resistance or ideological "immunization" against help.

> *"Young children are more cooperative. With teenagers it is more difficult — they can completely withdraw."*
> *(FGD_1, P2)*

A school-age child can either seek closeness (often unconsciously) or react with hostility, as in the case of a child who lost his brother in a shelling and could not accept a new social environment for a long time.

> *"He perceived the entire environment as hostile... he was ready to strike."*
> *(FGD_2, P1)*

The case described above is illustrative of how the use of a soft toy as a means of establishing trust in a child caused a hysterical reaction because the toy was associated with moments of sexual abuse of her parents. Such a story reveals a systemic problem: the lack of relevant protocols for working with children in conditions of war, occupation, and hybrid indoctrination.

> *"The sight of a toy means that my parents are going to be raped... This experience does not exist in any country."*
> *(FGD_1, P5)*

This indicates the need to create new, localized and flexible approaches to psychosocial support for children. The following barriers that may hinder the healing process should be taken into account:

1) Deep distrust of the outside world

Almost all respondents noted a loss of trust as a key barrier to building therapeutic contact. This distrust is manifested not only in relation to adults, but also in the breakdown of relationships with peers.

> *"It's a loss of trust... they can be indifferent, but inside everything is destroyed."*
> *(FGD_3, P5)*

> *"The child is withdrawn, does not establish contact with other children."*
> *(FGD_5, P1)*

2) Refusal, denial, fear as forms of resistance to rehabilitation

There is often a complete or partial refusal to interact with psychologists, teachers, and social workers. The reason for this is a psychological barrier caused by the fear of being vulnerable again.

> *"It is the fear that they want to offend again. It is a rejection, a barrier."*
> *(FGD_4, P4- P6)*

Some children demonstrate behavioral rituals of avoidance, such as picking up objects, avoiding eye contact, and being unable to focus.

3) Social maladjustment and the risk of losing subjectivity

A significant number of children who have been psychologically influenced by forced imposition lose a basic sense of self-confidence and feel "different," which leads to lower self-esteem, loss of dignity, and self-blame.

> *"A child can become morally weak, unable to stand up for himself or herself."*
> *(FGD_5, P5)*

This not only complicates the process of socialization, but also creates long-term risks of secondary violence, bullying, or self-harm.

Thus, children's response to help is heterogeneous and deeply individual. It depends on age, level of traumatization, previous experience, and the way in which help is provided. Often, a child does not show direct signals — neither positive nor negativę — but is in a state of emotional collapse inside. Their rehabilitation requires a comprehensive but flexible approach. It is necessary to build a safe therapeutic space where the child is not only protected but also not forced to speak immediately. New methods are needed, adapted to the experience of wartime, involving multidisciplinary teams. The key is to recognize triggers and respect the rhythm of recovery set by the child.

Thus, helping children who have experienced indoctrination requires not only treating the consequences, but also rethinking the very approach to humanitarian, educational and psychosocial support in war. After all, children who have experienced the imposition of ideas, beliefs, or behavioral models through strategies of pain, fear, rewards, and coercion bear not only psychological but also ideological trauma. Their inner world is disrupted at its very core — in the ability to trust, to be guided by values, to have a stable self-identity and to form motivated behavior. Therefore, the needs of such children go far beyond "standard" psychosocial assistance.

TOOLS TO HELP CHILDREN WHO HAVE SURVIVED THE OCCUPATION AND DEPORTATION. PREVENTING RE-VICTIMIZATION

Focus group participants emphasize that children who have survived deportation need not just psychologists, but people who can "hear even when the child is silent." This should not be a formalized practice, but rather individualized and sensitive support, taking into account the child's unique experience, age, context of violence, and living space. Professional psychological support should be not abstract, but live, empathetic, and adapted.

> *"The most acute problem is the people who will communicate with them."*
> *(FGD_1, P5)*

> *"A child will need a person whom he or she can trust. And this is not necessarily a psychologist."*
> *(FGD_3, P4)*

The need for emotional and physical safety is the first and simplest in words, but the most difficult to fulfill. Children need the feeling that they will not be abandoned, that they are not in danger, that the world is not hostile. This is a counterbalance to the total destructive experience gained during occupation, deportation or ideological pressure.

> *"Confidence in the future. Security."*
> *(FGD_3, P3)*

> *"A safe space where they are comfortable... because the loss of security is the main thing that traumatized them."*
> *(FGD_5, P1)*

It is extremely important to let the child know that it is not his or her fault. His or her reactions, silence, aggression, anxiety, or desire to distance themselves are normal in response to abnormal circumstances. It is important that society does not condemn, but understands and supports them.

"The victim cannot be guilty in any way... this should be conveyed."
(FGD_4, P4)

"To be heard even when you are silent."
(FGD_4, P5)

The respondents also reflected on how to meet these needs, with the help of what tools: institutionally, structurally, emotionally.

1) The need to create and reform assistance services.

One of the most distinct opinions coming from different groups is that current state institutions are not able to respond to the specifics of the traumatic experience of children of war. Children's services, schools, social protection — everything needs to be deeply updated.

"They don't understand how to work with children who survived the occupation... We were not taught to talk to children who were raped."
(FGD_1, P5)

2) Support centers as centers of socialization and soft rehabilitation

Participants repeatedly described successful examples of local volunteer or international centers where children can not only receive professional help, but also gradually regain the ability to communicate, play, and coexist in a safe environment. Often, it is through collective activities (art therapy, games, workshops) that deeper needs can be identified.

"The children did not understand how to communicate with each other at all... They looked and did not know what to do with the other little one."
(FGD_1, P3)

"It should be a rehabilitation center where the child and mother can stay for a long time."
(FGD_2, P2)

3) Returning to the old familiar environment

Children who have lost their social practices (clubs, sections, communities) need not only new forms of leisure, but also the resuscitation of old identities. Those who used to play football need to return to the field; those who used to paint need to get paints.

"Returning to the environment that used to be."
(FGD_2, P6)

Empathetic strategies for the long term should include:

1) long-term and sustained contact — instead of short-term interventions.

Episodic help is extremely ineffective. A child does not open up at the first, second, sometimes even tenth meeting. He or she needs constant, ongoing contact with a trusted person who will become an emotional referent and a guarantor of safety:

2) therapy through bodily and sensory practices.

A separate niche is occupied by equine therapy, work with animals, sand therapy, and music — those practices that do not require words. This is key for children who cannot talk about their experiences because they do not have the language to do so:

3) art therapy as a way to safe expression

The practices of drawing, modeling, working with sand, shadows, and bodily images are the most common and successful in terms of intuitive accessibility for children. Participation in creative activities allows you to bring traumatic images out of the subconscious without going into a repeated replay of the pain. According to focus group participants, the most effective resources are those that not only relieve symptoms but also integrate the trauma into a new experience, returning the child's sense of self-worth and choice. Metaphorical cards, symbolic objects, and role-playing games create a safe space for expressing deeper states. Through the game, the child again becomes an agent rather than an object of influence. This is especially effective for younger children and those who do not verbalize their experiences.

> *"One of the methods is drawing fears... the child draws, and adults add to it."*
> *(FGD_4, P4)*

> *"Children like to sculpt... stickers, tattoos, anything they can make themselves."*
> *(FGD_2, P2)*

> *"Children are very good at talking when you play metaphorical cards with them."*
> *(FGD_5, P2)*

4) involvement in responsibility, leadership, and self-expression.

Creating a sense of influence on the world is fundamentally important for overcoming the experience of powerlessness and coercion. The role of captain, responsible for an animal or a team, creates a restored identity — not as a victim, but as a participant.

> *"Give me the opportunity to believe in my own strengths and take responsibility..."*
> *(FGD_2, P1)*

5) Therapy through interaction with animals (pet-therapy)

Communication with animals reveals children who are afraid of people. It is effective in the context of loss of trust, boundary violations, and physical abuse. This therapy is especially valuable in cases of deep fear or experience of sexualized violence.

> *"When a child works with animals, he is in charge... The pressure comes from him."*
> *(FGD_3, P6)*

6) Family support as a condition for effective therapy

In all focus groups, the opinion was expressed that working exclusively with the child without involving the parents is futile. The family system either restores the child's stability or, on the contrary, undermines it. Therefore, parallel work with adults is critically important.

> *"We need to work not only with the child, but also with the whole family."*
> *(FGD_4, P4)*

> *"If the mother is restored, she has a different influence on the child."*
> *(FGD_5, P2)*

7) Innovative practices (Superhero School).

A particularly striking example of an innovative model is the practice of the Superheroes School at Okhmatdyt. Its effectiveness lies in changing the paradigm of perception of a child: not as a victim, but as a hero who fights and grows.

> *"Even those children who are in the hospital all the time are superheroes. And you can work with those who have other needs in the same way."*
> *(FGD_1, P5)*

Successful identification and overcoming the consequences of traumatic imposition of ideas, thoughts and behaviors on children is impossible without well-established intersectoral cooperation. Three key actors play an important role in this process: state services for children, law enforcement agencies, and civil society organizations. Their interaction should not be ad hoc or declarative; it should be an institutional alliance capable of providing a responsive, timely and effective response to the psychological and social challenges that children face after experiencing violent indoctrination.

There is a consensus among the focus group participants that systematic information exchange between structures is a key condition for early detection of a problem. In practical terms, this means that an alarm signal received by, for example, a teacher or a doctor should be promptly forwarded to a social service, which, in turn, can involve or refer the case to a relevant civil society initiative. As one respondent noted:

> *"Law enforcement agencies are the first to receive this information... And the social service should have connections with NGOs that already take the child into their work."*
> *(FGD_1_Population_18–33, P4)*

It is emphasized that not only the formal chain of transmission, but also the level of trust in each party determines the effectiveness of the response. In this sense, NGOs are a powerful resource, as they have a low "entry barrier" for parents and children. On the ground, they not only organize events or interventions, but also carry out initial diagnostics. As the teacher rightly emphasizes:

> *"When a non-governmental organization organizes an event — sports or creative — the organizers can see by the child if he or she is emotionally distressed... And then they can inform the social service."*
> *(FGD_4_Teachers, P3)*

At the same time, respondents pointed to structural and ethical problems in the work of some services, including social services. Some of them operate according to outdated protocols, demonstrate formalism or even indifference. This leads to one of the key recommendations — retraining of personnel and reforming the methods of work of social institutions working with children.

> *"It needs to be reformed... They do not work as they should. There are many complaints... And they don't pay attention to the conditions or violence at all."*
> *(FGD_1_Population_18–33, P2)*

Another important aspect is the communication transformation of the image of the police and children's services. Very often, in the Ukrainian social perception, these structures are associated with punishment and coercion, not protection. Respondents to emphasize that this perception needs to be changed through the proactive presence of service representatives in communities, schools, and at peaceful events.

> *"We are often intimidated by the police... We need to move away from intimidation, and on the contrary, show that these are the people to whom we can turn for help."*
> *(FGD_2_Population_34–49, P6)*

According to the participants, the central condition for effective cooperation is respect for the division of functions rather than their duplication. Each structure should have a clearly defined area of responsibility and unique powers.

> *"All three organizations have different functions and should not be duplicated... NGOs are just about finding people who need help and uniting them."*
> *(FGD_3_Population_50+, P5)*

Respondents suggested other practical mechanisms:

- creating a single platform for data exchange between institutions,
- development of interagency protocols for responding to trauma situations in children,
- Involving professional speakers in schools to inform children,
- introducing preventive programs, including media literacy, for children and parents.

Thus, inter-institutional cooperation should not be limited to responding to a crisis, but should function as a preventive ecosystem for protecting childhood. Its goal is not only to identify post-traumatic symptoms, but also to create an environment in which such trauma is less likely to occur and its consequences are more likely to be overcome.

The issue of ethics in dealing with children who have been victims of violent indoctrination is not just a mandatory element of professional practice, but a foundation without which any intervention risks reproducing the very patterns of coercion it is aimed at. The answers of the respondents clearly indicate that ethical sensitivity, cultural competence and recognition of the child's autonomy should become the basic guidelines for all services working in the field of psychological support and rehabilitation.

One of the first and most important elements of an ethical approach is the rejection of punitive logic in the work of social services. Unfortunately, in today's environment, many institutions designed to protect children are perceived by them (and families) as repressive structures.

> *"The service for children is designed as a punishment service... And in order to make these conditions proper, we do not have such a service."*
> *(FGD_1_Population_18–33, P5)*

This situation undermines the credibility of support structures and reduces the chances of timely intervention. Instead of a harsh administrative response, respondents advocate a support model based on empathy, local context, and individualized approach. In particular, it was suggested that it is important to involve specialists from the same region as the affected child in order to take into account the socio-cultural characteristics of the environment:

> *"Perhaps the specialists should be from the region where the victims are from, more or less. Because they understand the situation more or less."*
> *(FGD_1_Population_18–33, P5)*

The second key point is the inviolability of the child's human dignity. Everything that happens to a child during an intervention should not be done to them, but with their consent and within their comfort level. This means not only legal compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, but also deep empathic awareness of professionals.

> *"They should be qualified specialists... And, of course, it is ethics, humanity."*
> *(FGD_1_Population_18–33, P3)*

The focus groups also discussed the burnout factor of the assistants themselves. Participants emphasized that effective assistance is impossible without psychological support for those who provide it. Professional empathy should be sustainable, but should not turn into self-destruction.

> *"It often happens that employees are already tired. And it's not that they become indifferent, but they also need a reboot."*
> *(FGD_1_Population_18–33, P2)*

Informal support through personal connections and trust plays a particularly important role in shaping ethical interaction. Institutional ethics is necessary, but without the active participation of local communities, volunteer organizations, and "people who care" it will remain only on paper.

> *"We contacted the employment center and found a job for the family. And thus, the children's service did not remove these children..."*
> *(FGD_1_Population_18–33, P5)*

In summary, it is essential that psychological interventions are truly trauma- sensitive, culturally relevant, and respectful of the child's autonomy:

1. To get rid of the punitive paradigm in working with children and families, introducing instead an individualized, non-violent logic of support.
2. Ensure high-quality training of specialists who have both trauma techniques and high ethical standards.
3. Involve local, culturally sensitive approaches, taking into account the language, traditions and experience of a particular community.
4. Work not only with the child, but also with his or her environment, restoring trust in the world through a system of relationships, not just a therapeutic conversation.

CONCLUSIONS

The experience of forcibly imposing ideas, behavioral patterns, and worldviews on children in the context of occupation, disinformation, and psychological pressure is not only an individual trauma, but also a systemic phenomenon that unfolds in the space between politics, social norms, and mental vulnerability. Based on the focus group discussions, a number of key points can be identified that allow for a deeper understanding of the social, emotional, cultural, and institutional aspects of this problem.

1. Traumatic imposition is not an episode, but a process.

   The majority of respondents speak of indoctrination as a complex dynamic that combines fear, punishment, manipulation, social pressure, and ideological processing. It is not a one-time act, but an indoctrination process that acts through authorities (parents, teachers, social media, opinion leaders) and gradually destroys a child's ability to reflect, identify, internal supports, and autonomous thinking.

2. Behavioral indicators of vulnerability are multifaceted, but not always specific.

   The responses show high agreement on the key signs of indoctrination trauma: withdrawal, anxiety, sudden changes in behavior, copying aggressive patterns, avoidance of social contacts, and abandonment of language or culture. However, respondents also noted that these signs are not always unique to indoctrination — they overlap with other forms of trauma, which requires subtle differentiation at the level of professional practice.

3. Children's reactions to assistance are polarized.

   Some children are open to support and seek safe contact, while others fall into silence, aggression, or refusal to help. This ambivalence requires a delicate approach and a high degree of adaptability of interventions, including consideration of age, type of trauma experienced, family context, and type of contact (primary or repeated).

4. The main needs of children are psychological support from qualified professionals; restoration of a basic sense of security (physical, emotional, cultural); recognition of the child's autonomy and respect for his or her experience, even if he or she cannot fully verbalize it. Children need socialization in a safe environment, a return to everyday life, and understanding from adults: not judgment, but support and acceptance.

5. According to the respondents, effective rescue interventions for children with the experience of occupation and deportation are soft, "non-frontal" psychotherapy that integrates play, stories, empathy; art and body practices (drawing, clay, sports,

metaphorical maps); therapy through contact with animals; working with parents at the same time: the psycho-emotional recovery of an adult critically affects the child's condition.

6. Gaps in the system of assistance include insufficient interagency coordination lack of information exchange between police, child services and NGOs); low level of professional training (outdated practices, lack of experience in dealing with military indoctrination); lack of trust in services that often function as punitive institutions rather than supportive environments; and There is a need to introduce culturally sensitive practices, especially when working with children from different regions, linguistic and ethnic backgrounds.

7. Ethical work with a child means, first and foremost, recognizing his or her subjectivity. Professionals should interact with a child not as an object of influence or a carrier of trauma, but as a person who has the right to silence or speech, their own interpretation of their experience, and informed consent to participate in any form of intervention.

8. Indoctrination-related trauma is a hybrid challenge at the intersection of psychology, sociology, pedagogy, and security. Overcoming it requires not only individual therapy but also a systemic, comprehensive approach. It is a challenge for the whole society to become a safe environment in which trauma does not fix the future, and support becomes the basis for rethinking it.