

Dear distinguished guests, our gracious hosts,

To create is hard but beautiful.

To destroy is easy but monstrous.

Today, we live in a world where the forces of creation must be defended against powers of destruction.

Where we need to sacrifice for love in the face of hate.

Where we need to defend the beauty of life against death and violence.

Most of the world was surprised by the fierce, effective and heroic defense that Ukraine put up against the invading forces of the Russian Federation in the first few days of the war of aggression three years ago.

Let's be clear – because ... in some places, people seem to have gotten confused - it is a war of a aggression that Ukraine did not ask for, let alone start.

It is an unprovoked war of territorial conquest.

It is a war that was started against a nation that had set its ambition towards a better and brighter future, one where democracy, human rights and the rule of law would be guaranteed for all.

It is a war started by Vladimir Putin. It was his decision and it is his responsibility.

Russian troops, many of whom had no idea that they were headed for a brutal confrontation, were told to carry with them ceremonial uniforms so they could prance around Kyiv as conquerors.

Instead, the world watched with admiration a single-minded resistance by not only the

Ukrainian military but also the men and women of Ukraine: teachers, bankers, grocers, farmers, grandmoms and granddads, young men and women who did not hesitate to risk their lives to defend their country and their people.

So - why am I recounting this in a forum dedicated to the future of the children of Ukraine?

It is because I believe that it is because of the love for their children that Ukraine continues to fight and will ultimately prevail.

The people of Ukraine are fighting and dying so that their children can enjoy freedom, so they can live in a society where they can enjoy the beauty of life, a society where respect for the dignity of each individual is guaranteed, where love and kindness are revered but hate and violence are rejected. They are fighting for their children.

The Russians are fighting and dying to satisfy one man's thirst for power and a selfish notion of glory.

Defending freedom, beauty, and love requires more strength, more courage and a higher moral purpose than seeking temporary comfort by giving up in the face of evil.

Let's not forget that the President of Ukraine could have made a deal. He could have accepted an offer to be moved to safety.

A lot of Ukrainian politicians and influential people could have made a lot of money by selling out the future of the children of Ukraine. But they know the stakes. They have chosen to show strength and moral courage.

As Martin Luther King said: Non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good.

Dear Participants

The Council of Europe is based on a belief in human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

These are technical and legalistic terms.

But another way to articulate the mission of the Council of Europe is that when it all boils down to its primary elements - we are defending freedom of the individual, the beauty of life and the belief that love is the strongest human force.

And no love is greater than the love that all normal human beings have for their own children - and that all decent people have for all children everywhere.

This belief in the power of love for our children was very well expressed by President Zelenskyy in his inaugural address to the nation when he first assumed his office on 20 May 2020 he said:

„[...] I really do not want my pictures in your offices, for the President is not an icon, an idol or a portrait. Hang your kids' photos instead, and look at them each time you are making a decision.“

Unfortunately, I am not sure many other current world leaders would have said the same thing - and even more disturbingly, I know of quite a few who would have found the idea quite absurd.

Dear Participants.

This is my first public event in my new role as Special Envoy of the Council of Europe Secretary General on the Situation of Children of Ukraine. I am grateful and humbled by the trust placed in me by Mr Alain Berset, Secretary General of the Council of Europe.

The situation of the children of Ukraine is dire, and the Council of Europe is determined to help.

Millions of Ukrainian children have been forced to flee or have been evacuated from Ukraine to Council of Europe member states since February 2022. While most of these children were accompanied by at least one parent or guardian, many were unaccompanied or separated from their parents.

While it is difficult to obtain precise figures, what is certain is that the number of Ukrainian children outside of Ukraine is high. In EU member states alone, of the estimated 4.3 million people from Ukraine who are beneficiaries of temporary protection, 1.3 million are children.

This number of the relocated children must be added to the high number of children that have been unlawfully deported to the Russian Federation, Belarus or to temporarily controlled or occupied territories. An even higher number of children in the temporarily controlled or occupied territories are at risk of deportation, especially vulnerable groups, such as children in orphanages.

The safe return of the children and, ultimately, their successful reintegration into Ukrainian society, as well as the protection of children at risk of deportation, are a priority concern for both Ukraine and the international community.

As the First Lady of Ukraine, Olena Zelenska, stated in January last year: “At this pace, it will take us more than 50 years to return them.” It must be emphasized with great concern that the majority of the children unlawfully deported are at risk of irreversible harm and with every passing day, the chances of their identification and return becomes increasingly less likely.

The Council of Europe recently became a member of the International Coalition for the Return of Ukrainian Children. I will engage actively in the work of the coalition.

As for other efforts by the Council of Europe concerning today’s topic, allow me to point out a few.

We have issued a manual on “Psychological support and assistance to children who have experienced traumatic events”. It presents tools to understand the nature of trauma, its impact on children, and the importance of psycho-social support of children both during and after an emergency situation and is intended to support psychologists, social workers and other professionals offering psycho-social support to children and their families, including in educational settings.

But while we admire the bravery of the Ukrainian people, while we are in awe of their incredible perseverance in the face of adversity – let’s not be naïve. Their heroism comes with a cost. Not only in the sacrifices they are making on the battlefield. The entire nation is going through a period of deep trauma that is already manifesting itself in

severe challenges to the mental health and well-being of tens of millions of people. Given the far-reaching and long-lasting psychological impact of war on children in particular, it's crucial to address this through a psychological and trauma-informed care approach for children of Ukraine affected by war, both within and outside Ukraine. And without trauma-informed care for children of Ukraine, any reconstruction efforts would be incomplete or almost an empty promise on rebuilding Ukraine. It's not enough to rebuild roads, bridges and energy infrastructure. To truly rebuild after a war, you must rebuild the true worth of a nation, the human beings; the children, the future of Ukraine.

The Council of Europe Consultation Group on the Children of Ukraine - the CGU - represents another significant Council of Europe activity in support of the children of Ukraine.

The CGU is a direct implementation of the Declaration on the Situation of the Children of Ukraine, adopted at the Reykjavik Summit, in which the Heads of States and Government call on the Council of Europe to set up “an appropriate mechanism” to coordinate actions regarding children of Ukraine.

Launched in November 2023, at the request of Ukraine, the CGU unites experts from 43 member States, representatives from relevant international organizations, such as the EU, the UN, the Hague Conference on Private International Law, as well as representatives from international, European and Ukrainian civil society.

The CGU identifies gaps in protections and points to possible pragmatic, and sometimes innovative ways, to fill these meaningfully in line with existing European and international standards. It is the only platform of this type.

Other noteworthy initiatives at the Council of Europe include the Parliamentary Network on the Situation of the Children of Ukraine, launched in June 2024, highlighting the many important human rights issues facing children of Ukraine both within and outside of Ukraine.

I am pleased that the Network's Vice- Chair, Miapetra Kumpula-Natri, will be with us later this afternoon as panelist in session 2 on International Support for Reintegration and Recovery.

Dear Participants

The Council of Europe has the duty to do whatever it can to help in practical and concrete ways - we should also view it as essential to help promote the cause of Ukraine's future so that the world understands the stakes and does not get confused by lies and propaganda.

Echoing the words of the Council of Europe Secretary General, Alain Berset, I turn to the children of Ukraine themselves to unequivocally state: "We will stand up for you. Your rights matter. Ukraine's future starts with you."

We stand together in the pursuit of a better future - where people are allowed channel their energy and abilities towards creation and away from destruction, towards beauty and away from ugliness - towards love and away from hate.

The children of Ukraine deserve no less.

Thank you.