

Conference “Joint Steps to Bring Kids Back UA”

Speech by Dunja Mijatović

Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

Kyiv, 8 December 2023

By video message

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Distinguished Guests,

Dear Commissioner - dear Dmytro,

Thank you for inviting me to speak at this event and I am sorry I cannot be with you in-person in Kyiv today.

The human rights situation of Ukrainian children transferred to Russia or to territories of Ukraine temporarily occupied by Russia has been a top priority for my Office since the earliest reports of the transfers emerged.

Since the beginning of the war, I have been consistent in calling on Council of Europe member states to keep this issue on top of their agendas.

I have devoted to this issue a part of my Memorandum on the human rights consequences of the war in Ukraine.

This year, in March, I came to Ukraine again for a country visit focused specifically on this issue.

In my observations after the visit, I denounced Russia's failure to return Ukrainian children as a serious violation of human rights.

And I called for urgent action and international co-operation to ensure the family reunification of the affected children.

And this message has been voiced clearly by member states in the Reykjavik Summit Declaration on the situation of the children of Ukraine.

Ahead of today's discussions, I would like to say two things.

First, I would like to acknowledge the crucial role played by organisations and networks of human rights defenders and civil societies, in Ukraine and in Russia, in facilitating the returns of Ukrainian children.

Much of this work is fraught with difficulty, and it is often done at a considerable personal risk to those involved.

I also wish to welcome the Ukrainian Ombudsman office's role in providing support to the children and their families.

Without the determination and commitment of all those involved, it would be impossible to navigate the long and winding road to bring the children back.

Now, news of every successful return brings great relief.

Several hundred children have been reunited with their close ones, in Ukraine.

While these successes remind us of the power of cooperation in the face of adversity, we must remember that many others have not been so lucky.

Thousands more children, vulnerable and often powerless, remain separated from their families and legal guardians.

And the clock is ticking.

Therefore, my second message is one of urgency.

Each passing day weakens the children's links with their families and complicates their eventual reunification.

Each passing day means more suffering for children longing to embrace their close ones.

And with each passing day, the hope of their return becomes more elusive.

We must not lose that hope.

Therefore, I am encouraged by the creation of the International Coalition of Countries for the Return of Ukrainian Children.

I hope that this new initiative will live up to its stated ambition to identify concrete and practical steps to support Ukraine in bringing back the children.

I also welcome the establishing of the Ad Hoc Committee to participate in a co-operation activity on "The situation of the children of Ukraine" by the Bureau of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

And as for my own role, I intend to continue working with civil society organisations involved in facilitating the children's returns to see how Council of Europe member states can better support their action.

Together, let us keep doing our utmost to bring all Ukrainian children back home.