

# THREE YEARS OF RUSSIA'S WAR OF AGGRESSION

Council of Europe  
action in support  
of Ukraine



**Report by the Secretary General**

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# MESSAGE FROM THE SECRETARY GENERAL

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**E**ach day that Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine continues, lives are lost, children's futures are stolen, destruction spreads and the very foundations of international law and the rules-based order come under attack.

This report takes you inside the Council of Europe's response since the first day of the war. Not intended as a comprehensive overview, it provides a look at our efforts to bring war criminals to justice, secure reparations for the damage inflicted, combat corruption, strengthen democratic institutions, empower youth, protect media freedom and more. At the centre are children and women, who all too often bear the heaviest burden in times of war.

The fight for Ukraine is a fight for justice, recovery and the right of the Ukrainian people to shape their own destiny.

Democracy, human rights and the rule of law are the bedrock of our societies. These are the values that unite and define us as Europeans. They have driven – and will continue to guide – the action of the Council of Europe in Ukraine until freedom is guaranteed, justice is served and peace is restored.



*Alain Berset*





# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- ▶ As we reach the three-year mark of Russia's illegal and unprovoked war of aggression, the Council of Europe is as determined as ever to support Ukraine and to hold Russia to account.
- ▶ The events of 24 February 2022 marked a rupture in the European legal and security order. For the first time ever, the Council of Europe faced an unprecedented and blatant violation of its own statutes and of the very principles of international law. The Organisation reacted immediately: on 25 February, with the backing of the Parliamentary Assembly and the Secretary General, the Committee of Ministers agreed to suspend the Russian Federation; on 16 March, it adopted the resolution that ended Russian membership; and on 23 March it adopted the resolution that led to Russia ceasing to be a High Contracting Party to the European Convention on Human Rights and other treaties and agreements, with effect from 16 September. In December 2022, the [Action Plan for Ukraine – “Resilience, Recovery and Reconstruction” 2023-2026](#) was launched, and as news came through of the plight of the children of Ukraine being torn from their homes, we mobilised every resource available to help them.
- ▶ These actions formed the backbone of the [political declaration](#) at the 2023 Reykjavik Summit.
- ▶ Ukraine's resilience, recovery and reconstruction, and action for the children of Ukraine, are our priorities as we work to hold Russia accountable for its illegal war of aggression and support Ukraine into the future. This report highlights the work done so far and is a testament to the Council of Europe's determination to work side by side with Ukraine in the future as it rebuilds stronger than ever from the trauma and destruction of war.







# ACCOUNTABILITY

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## THE EUROPEAN COURT OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Russia ceased to be a High Contracting Party to the European Convention on Human Rights on 16 September 2022. However, the European Court of Human Rights (the Court) is still competent to deal with applications against the country for the alleged violations that occurred until that point. At the time of publication, there are more than 4 600 individual applications pending against Russia, covering the conflict in Crimea and eastern Ukraine since 2014. Handling these cases effectively is not an easy task, not least because there is no longer a sitting judge elected in respect of Russia, but also because of Russia's lack of co-operation. The Court has adopted specific, rules-based practical solutions to optimise its working methods. Four interstate cases by Ukraine against Russia are pending, with a judgment on the merits delivered in one of these cases and an admissibility decision in another. These are *Ukraine v. Russia* (re Crimea), in which the Court found a pattern of violations since February 2014, and *Ukraine and the Netherlands v. Russia*, which the Court declared admissible and in which 26 states intervened as third parties.

## THE REGISTER OF DAMAGE FOR UKRAINE

The [Register of Damage Caused by the Aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine](#) (the Register), first mooted by the Parliamentary Assembly in October 2022, was set up in May 2023 as a response to the unprecedented damage inflicted on Ukraine and its people by Russia's full-scale invasion. Based in The Hague (the Netherlands) with a local office operating in Kyiv (Ukraine), it is an enlarged partial agreement, operating for an initial period of three years, whose aim is to collect, verify and store evidence of damage suffered by individuals, legal entities and the state. So far submissions cover the death of an immediate family member and damage or destruction of residential property. From the opening of submissions on 2 April 2024 until the end of January 2025, the Register received over 14 300 claims, and more categories will be launched soon. A [joint outreach campaign](#) between the Register and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe (the Congress) helped citizens to submit claims. To date, 43 states and the European Union have joined: 41 as participants and three as associate members. The Conference of Participants – the executive body – has met five times, most recently in October 2024 when it approved the budget for 2025 and discussed further claim categories.

Ukraine, the Netherlands and the Register organised four meetings between July 2024 and January 2025 to discuss the possibility of setting up a claims commission for Ukraine, with each meeting attracting more than 50 states and the European Union. Discussions focused on legal modalities, the institutional framework and ideas for the initial draft. Formal negotiations will begin in March 2025 under the Intergovernmental Negotiation Committee (INC). The Council of Europe is ready to play a key role in setting up the future claims commission for Ukraine and has been tasked with developing draft terms of reference for an open convention without prejudice to any decision by the INC.



## THE SPECIAL TRIBUNAL

Created in 2023, the Core Group on the Establishment of a Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine is a group of senior legal experts from some 40 states who have been working with the Ukrainian authorities, the European Commission, the European External Action Service and the Council of Europe to seek justice for Ukraine. It is working to create a special tribunal within the framework of the Council of Europe, allowing all international partners to benefit from the Organisation's experience and expertise in upholding human rights and the rule of law. The legal foundations were laid down at the February 2025 meeting, a step greeted by the Secretary General as "important progress which will have a major impact on the people of Ukraine for generations to come".

## PROJECTS

The Council of Europe continues to provide bilateral expertise and technical support to Ukraine on its domestic framework. Projects include:

- ▶ a strategy on the prosecution of war crimes for 2023-2025, approved by the prosecutor general in September 2023, with the Council of Europe providing technical support and information technology equipment;
- ▶ the Co-ordination Centre for Victims and Witnesses of War Crimes, set up under the office of the prosecutor general with Council of Europe help, providing a strategic long-term vision;
- ▶ a draft concept for a national register of victims of war crimes in criminal proceedings, linked to the Register;
- ▶ a law on compensation for damaged or destroyed property, setting up a national legal framework for compensation. Adopted in February 2023 and entering into force in May 2023, its success will depend on the situation on the ground, the work of local authorities in identifying and allocating temporary accommodation and support from the central budget to alleviate some of the associated costs.

# THE ACTION PLAN FOR UKRAINE AND OTHER COUNCIL OF EUROPE WORK FOR RECONSTRUCTION

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The Action Plan for Ukraine – “Resilience, Recovery and Reconstruction” 2023-2026 (the Action Plan), prepared in close consultation with the Ukrainian authorities and civil society, was adopted on 14 December 2022. The aim is to support Ukraine to reach European standards; a prerequisite for accession to the European Union following the country’s acceptance as a candidate in December 2022.

The Council of Europe is now carrying out 36 projects to stabilise democratic institutions, protect human rights and uphold the rule of law, funded by €39 million from 25 contributors, including the European Union, member states and the Organisation’s Ordinary Budget. The Action Plan is about recovery – but not only – it is also about transformation. Ukraine’s needs are complex and

work is focusing on constitutional justice, the fight against corruption and money laundering, efficiency of justice, media freedom, governance and democracy, and protecting the rights of groups in vulnerable situations, including minority rights.

The Council of Europe Office in Kyiv now has 78 staff members. It maintains contact with the president’s office, the parliament, ministries, law-enforcement agencies, the ombudsperson’s office, local authorities and civil society. It regularly consults embassies of member states and international partners.

In 2022, the Council of Europe Development Bank became the first institution to provide emergency humanitarian aid and has since approved six projects totalling €553 million: four for social housing, one for health and social care and one on microfinances. On 15 June 2023, Ukraine became the CEB’s 43rd member.

The Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights identified patterns of violations of human rights and international humanitarian law in Ukraine. Commissioner Dunja Mijatovic witnessed first-hand the consequences of the war during a March 2022 visit, with a second visit focused on the situation of the children of Ukraine, and drew up a [memorandum](#) and a [report](#) identifying serious human rights violations against Crimean Tatars. Commissioner Michael O’Flaherty has focused on the human rights consequences for people transferred to Russia, those living in the areas of Ukraine temporarily occupied by Russia and those living in government-controlled territory.

- ▶ There are 36 projects to stabilise democratic institutions, protect human rights and uphold the rule of law, funded by €39 million from 25 contributors.
- ▶ The Council of Europe Development Bank (CEB) was the first institution to provide emergency humanitarian aid and has since approved six projects totalling €553 million.
- ▶ The Commissioner for Human Rights identified patterns of human rights and humanitarian law violations in Ukraine, with reports highlighting abuses against Crimean Tatars and the impact on displaced persons and children.
- ▶ The Council of Europe helped develop a strategy for internal displacement, set up regional co-ordination centres and established up to 700 advisory councils for internally displaced persons (IDPs).

Several capacity-building sessions have been organised in a number of countries hosting persons who have fled Ukraine. The Council of Europe's network of national focal points on migration facilitated information sharing on integration challenges, such as labour market access, reception facilities, human trafficking, school attendance, language skills, housing and mental health. The Council of Europe's Language Policy Programme and the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) developed online resources to help Ukrainians learn the language of their host country. The Council of Europe supported the development of a strategy and plan on internal displacement, the creation of co-ordination centres in all regions and the establishment of up to 700 advisory councils for internally displaced persons.

The Action Plan is therefore not just about responding to today's crisis; it is about securing Ukraine's future as a stable, peaceful, democratic and European nation.

## HUMAN RIGHTS

### People with disabilities

Russia's war pushed an additional 7.1 million Ukrainians into poverty and more than 300 000 have become physically disabled. The Council of Europe provided a comprehensive needs assessment, offering policy and practice recommendations, some of which are being integrated into new social and labour codes. Ukraine was then able to develop a framework for employing people with disabilities, a state standard for housing and a national strategy on barrier-free living. It also provided guidance for the ombudsperson's office on monitoring social rights violations. Material produced by the Council of Europe is helping displaced Ukrainians with information they need to access social rights.

### Minorities

Russia's aggression has created profoundly serious dangers for minorities. The Action Plan therefore includes a project to make sure legislation and policies for national minorities meet European standards. The Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the Committee of Experts of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages are also working to uphold language rights and provide expertise on draft laws on civil partnerships and the Crimean Tatars.

In its turn, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) has [urged](#) host states to ensure that displaced Ukrainians have adequate access to housing, employment, education, healthcare and social services. It has also worked with the ombudsperson's office, the police, prosecutors and the judiciary to combat hate speech.

### Gender

Council of Europe legal standards on gender are an essential part of the Action Plan, including the recommendation on the rights of migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking women and girls, the 2024-2029 Gender Equality Strategy and the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence. The Action Plan adds expanded support for civil society, gender-sensitive reception procedures and support services for women on the move, measures to counter violence against women and domestic violence in emergencies and support to those working to address sexual violence in the context of war.

### Refugees

With Ukrainian refugees at potential risk of human trafficking, the Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA) has issued a guidance note and uses country visits to monitor what is being done to limit the risk. GRETA visited Ukraine in May 2024 and a final report is due in March 2025.

The Pompidou Group developed a toolkit on psychological first aid in response to the high number of IDPs in Ukraine and refugees arriving in other European countries; it is available in 10 languages.

## Media freedom

Media freedom and freedom of expression are key aspects of the Action Plan. Council of Europe support includes legal opinions on draft legislation, supporting the continued operation of the Ukrainian public broadcaster and training more than 100 judges on access to information. Ukraine became one of the first countries to launch the Council of Europe's Journalists Matter campaign and Ukrainian journalists held captive by Russia attended an online event held by the Parliamentary Assembly. More than 400 people attended the 16th Ukrainian investigative journalism conference in September 2024.

Ukraine received Council of Europe support to bring its law and practice on freedom of expression in line with European standards thanks to the Safeguarding Freedom of Expression and Freedom of the Media project, which ran from November 2024 to February 2025. Ukraine has also said it is willing to follow new standards to counter the use of strategic lawsuits against public participation.

## Culture

The Eurimages Fund continues to support Ukrainian film professionals and has extended the programme that allows member states to cover Ukraine's budget contributions. With national film funding at a standstill, Eurimages has worked to ensure that Ukrainian film producers can continue to benefit from the fund's support through grants, international promotion and direct financing. Eurimages highlighted the situation of the country's film-making community by bestowing the Eurimages Co-production Award on all Ukrainian producers at the European Film Awards 2022.

## RULE OF LAW

### Justice

The Council of Europe has helped support Ukraine's justice sector and ensure its respect for European standards in a number of ways. The European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) visited prisons, police stations and military detention facilities in October 2023 and the authorities' response to that report was published in December 2024. The European Commission for the Efficiency of Justice (CEPEJ) provided expertise on remote court hearings and videoconferencing, including a practical guide, and is part of a working group to assess and provide recommendations on the efficient functioning of the courts following the Russian invasion.

### Criminal law

Co-operation continues on criminal law matters. The draft third protocol to the European Convention on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters, which strengthens international co-operation on asset recovery, may in future provide the basis of a legal response to Russian action. Ukraine has also received support on using e-evidence of war crimes and gross human right violations and has adopted laws aligning domestic legislation with the Convention on Cybercrime.

### Corruption

Ukraine's strong commitment to combating corruption was evidenced by progress made following the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) [report](#) covering members of parliament, judges and prosecutors. The Economic Crime and Co-operation Division has helped Ukraine to strengthen national policy on financial investigations and on targeted sanctions. Although the Committee of Experts on the Evaluation of Anti-Money Laundering Measures and the Financing of Terrorism (MONEYVAL) has postponed visits to Ukraine, it has adopted a declaration supporting seizures and confiscations against Russia and provided guidance on how to identify and investigate sophisticated schemes used to disguise the origins of funds used to finance war. Ukraine regularly reports on threats to the integrity, safety and security of the international financial system arising from the war.





## DEMOCRACY

The Action Plan stresses the need to protect democracy during the war and to build resilient democratic structures and practices afterwards. This is the aim of the Supporting Transparency, Inclusiveness and Integrity of Electoral Practice in Ukraine project, which is being carried out in three phases to ensure national and local elections in Ukraine are democratic and held in line with international and European electoral standards. It aims to secure a level playing environment, to reintegrate all Ukrainian voters, wherever they are, and to ensure a gender balance.

### Local democracy

Intensive work is continuing at the level of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities to support Ukrainian municipalities and regions in their efforts to resist Russian aggression, protect citizens and provide public services in wartime, through grants, expertise and peer-to-peer experience. This has led for the first time to two citizens' assemblies to better engage civil society and citizens in decision making. Projects are underway with municipalities on democratic innovations and open government, promoting e-governance, greater participation of underrepresented groups such as youth, women and IDPs, and measures to defend veterans' rights.

A key area of work for the Congress is the [decentralisation reform](#) launched in 2014 with [overwhelming public backing](#). A new law on local democracy came into force on 8 January 2025 that broadens opportunities for citizens' direct engagement in decision making, even under martial law.

The Congress is taking the lead in the high-level dialogue between the Council of Europe and Ukrainian national and local authorities on good democratic governance, mapping a vision for the country's post-war multi-governance system and the recovery of local self-government.

Partnership is seen as a key resource. In March 2022, the Congress launched the Cities4Cities initiative to promote links among local and regional authorities in Ukraine and other European countries. The Intercultural Cities Programme has carried out various projects, often with support from cities such as Bergen in Norway and other international organisations, helping both elected officials and staff from local authorities to gain the intercultural competences they need to integrate those displaced by the war.

### Young people

The Action Plan puts an emphasis on young people both in wartime and as part of the post-war recovery. The Council of Europe is co-operating closely with the Ukrainian Parliament to develop youth policy and anchor youth perspectives in the decision-making process, supported by members of the Ukrainian delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly. Civil servants at the local and national levels have been trained to ensure youth participation and support youth organisations, with more than 2 000 young people from all over the country presently engaged in youth work projects and a new profession of youth specialist/youth worker that is now available.

Since October 2022, the European Youth Foundation has supported 47 projects to help young Ukrainians, including those internally displaced or who fled the country, some focused on women and girls and vulnerable groups.

Authorities responsible for damaged youth centres can submit claims to the Register. Any rebuilding will meet the standards of the Council of Europe Quality Label for Youth Centres.

Support for young leaders continued despite the war, with the Ukrainian School of Political Studies carrying out a programme in 2024 that brought key issues of human rights, democracy and the political process to 36 leaders from politics and public affairs.

### Cultural sites

More than a thousand cultural sites have been damaged or destroyed since the beginning of the war through Russia's systematic policy of targeting and looting aimed at erasing Ukraine's historical and cultural identity. These actions were [condemned](#) by the Congress, which has called on local and regional authorities throughout Europe to launch cultural heritage partnerships to assess damage and help in restoration programmes.

## Education and the environment

Expertise in these specialised areas from different Council of Europe bodies is essential and discussions are ongoing with the Ukrainian authorities to promote the reconstruction process, strengthen legislation and ensure policy meets international standards. At the beginning of 2024, Ukraine joined the Observatory on History Teaching in Europe (OHTE), which provides a platform to counter attempts to manipulate and distort Ukrainian history. A panel at the OHTE's 2024 conference looked at the historical silences surrounding Ukraine's role in European history. The Secretariat of the Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (Bern Convention) contributed to the United Nations report on the consequences on the environment of the June 2023 Kakhovka Dam Breach, which had an impact on protected areas and four of the Bern Convention's Emerald Network sites.

## Sport

The Council of Europe 2024 sports ministers' conference stressed that the Russian Federation and Belarus should not be represented in international sport as long as this aggression continues and committed to enabling Ukrainians to participate in sport.

The Assembly also [called](#) on the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and its constituent sports bodies to ban Russian and Belarusian athletes from the Paris Olympic and Paralympic Games.

## CHILDREN OF UKRAINE

"I am determined to ensure the strongest possible protection of Ukrainian children – both in Ukraine and across Council of Europe member states."

*Alain Berset*

The Council of Europe reacted at once to the plight of children in the conflict, condemning Russia in the strongest possible terms as evidence came to light of abuse and unlawful deportation, and issuing a strongly worded declaration at the 2023 Reykjavik Summit. A [resolution](#) was passed at the January 2024 Parliamentary Assembly session, and a [parliamentary network](#) was launched in June 2024 to assist Ukraine and international organisations in determining the quickest means of identifying and searching for deported children. In March 2024, the Congress [called](#) on local and regional authorities where such children were living to take protective action. The Commissioner for Human Rights issued a [statement](#), following a visit to Kyiv in April 2024, stressing the importance of working to repatriate these children.

The Council of Europe is mobilising every resource to help the children of Ukraine. In 2024 it joined the International Coalition for the Return of Ukrainian Children, giving its support to a joint communiqué at a conference in Montreal, Canada, in October 2024, which was attended by the Deputy Secretary General. In November 2023, it launched the Consultation Group on the Children of Ukraine (CGU), bringing together experts from 43 member states, international organisations and civil society to resolve complex legal and policy issues regarding Ukrainian children living in member states. It deals with topics such as guardianship, complex private international law issues, psychological support, trauma-informed care, human trafficking and access to education. The CGU has produced a joint report with GRETA on [trafficking risks](#) (October 2024) and [a mapping study on access to education](#) (November 2024), co-produced with the Council of Europe's Education Department, which presents effective strategies for integrating children into local schools while protecting their right to cultural identity. It held a hearing on preconditions for safe return and is following reforms of the Ukrainian child protection system, also supported by UNICEF Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia (UNICEF/ECARO) and the European Commission.





*Thordis Kolbrun Reykford Gylfadottir, Special Envoy of the Secretary General on the situation of the children of Ukraine*

The Lanzarote Committee, which oversees the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse, reacted to reports of sexual abuse, questioning the Russian Federation on 2 June 2023 about children who had been unlawfully transferred or deported to Russia or to the areas temporarily controlled or occupied by it. With no answer forthcoming, it deplored the lack of Russian response in a September 2023 [statement](#).

The Council of Europe supports Ukrainian investigators, prosecutors and courts to combat child sexual exploitation, abuse and trafficking, focusing on displaced children, children without parental care and unaccompanied children. It has analysed the justice system for minors and carried out a review of child-friendly justice. Council of Europe experts have prepared and delivered training on restorative justice, including mediation and restorative justice for minors, working with the Justice Ministry and the Co-ordination Centre for Legal Aid. Other training has focused on interagency co-operation in cases involving children and trauma-informed care for psychologists.

In February 2025, Thordis Kolbrun Reykford Gylfadottir of Iceland was appointed as the Secretary General's Special Envoy to ensure co-ordination on work for the children of Ukraine; to raise awareness of the challenges, Council of Europe standards and initiatives to support them; to foster international co-operation; and to ensure internal co-ordination. Her appointment was welcomed by the Secretary General, who pledged to work ceaselessly for these children: "Millions of children have been forced to flee Ukraine. Thousands were unlawfully deported to Russia or to the areas it temporarily controls or occupies. Those who have remained in Ukraine continue to suffer immensely from the ongoing war. I am determined to ensure the strongest possible protection of Ukrainian children – both in Ukraine and across Council of Europe member states."



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The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 46 member states, including all members of the European Union. All Council of Europe member states have signed up to the European Convention on Human Rights, a treaty designed to protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The European Court of Human Rights oversees the implementation of the Convention in the member states.

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