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INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS TASK FORCE

POLICY BRIEF · OCTOBER 2026

Children in Oleshky

Why a Choice Under Occupation Is Not a Free Choice



Safe first. Ask later.

No child should be asked about their future until they are safe, informed and assessed independently.

LEAD AUTHOR
Mandy Bostwick, MProf, MSc, MA
Clinical Director, Trauma Assist International
in association with the FOUN International Human Rights Task Force

2026

Friends of Ukraine Network
an initiative of the US Ukraine Foundation

Experts, advocates and members of the FOUN International Human Rights Task Force

Endorsed by

Lead author: Mandy Bostwick, MProf, MSc, MA, Clinical Director, Trauma Assist International, in association with the FOUN Task Force; contributors listed below.

LIST OF ENDORSERS (AS OF 10/31/2026)



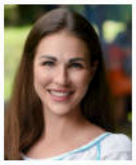
Mandy Bostwick, MProf, MSc, MA
Clinical Director and Advanced Trauma Specialist, Trauma Assist International



The Honourable Professor Irwin Cotler
Founder & International Chair, Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights; former Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada



Svitlana Diedova
Head of the DC Office at the Center for Strategic Initiatives and Assistance; Psychologist



Yuliia Dmytrova
Director & Founder, Charity Fund "TAPS" Ukraine



Kristina Hook, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Conflict Management, School of Conflict Management, Peacebuilding, and Development, Kennesaw State University



Dr. Donald N. Jensen
Adjunct, Johns Hopkins University



Robert A. McConnell
Co-Founder, U.S.-Ukraine Foundation; Director of External Affairs, Friends of Ukraine Network



Helary Rakete-Yakub, Ph.D.
Political Scientist and Researcher in Trauma and Violent Extremism



Bonnie Carroll
President & Founder, Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS); Advisor to TAPS Ukraine



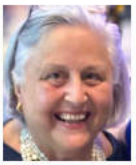
Dr. David M. Crane
Founding Chief Prosecutor, UN Special Court for Sierra Leone; Founder, Global Accountability Network



Viktor Dlugunovych, Ph.D.
Clinical Psychologist, New York State Office of Mental Health



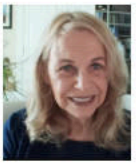
Carl Gershman
Founding President, National Endowment for Democracy (NED)



Irene Jarosewich
WFUWO Main Representative to UN DGC/CSU



Nadia K. McConnell
Co-Founder and President, U.S.-Ukraine Foundation



Mitzi Perdue, MPA
Co-Founder, MentalHelp.global; Co-Chair, Trauma Treatment Best Practices Working Group, U.S.-Ukraine Foundation



Dr. Eric Trupin
Professor, Department of Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences; Director, Division of Public Behavioral Health & Justice Policy, University of Washington School of Medicine

Executive Summary

A child still under the physical and informational control of an occupying force cannot make a free and informed choice about their future. **Any answer given in such conditions should carry no weight.**

Clinical, developmental, and legal evidence all point the same way. Children in coercive settings align with whoever controls their safety, say what they believe the questioner wants to hear, and decide based on the information they have been given.

Oleshky is Ukrainian territory, and its children must not be asked to choose between their own country and the occupying State. We recommend their urgent evacuation to safe Ukrainian-controlled territory through a humanitarian mechanism independently monitored by international organizations. There they should receive a stabilization and information period, family tracing, and an independent best-interests assessment. These safeguards protect the children and the credibility of the humanitarian initiative itself.



Children shelter in a basement during a missile attack

PILOT PROPOSAL

Oleshky should be run as a pilot, with an internationally monitored reception center on Ukrainian-controlled territory, a timeline tied to the ceasefire and to independent verification. It could then be scaled in stages to all temporarily occupied territory.

"Safe first. Ask later."



The U.S.-Ukraine Foundation has embraced the Forget-me-not flower as a symbol of Ukrainian children stolen by Russia—and of all victims of Putin's brutal war.



Background

On 23 October 2026, the White House announced a temporary ceasefire for Russian-occupied Oleshky negotiated with the assistance of First Lady Melania Trump. The purpose of the ceasefire in and around Oleshky is to provide humanitarian aid. The White House announcement followed Pope Leo XIV's 16 October call to Vladimir Putin and a public appeal for a ceasefire that would allow for aid deliveries and voluntary evacuation of trapped civilians.

The number of people still alive and trapped in Oleshky is unclear; however, among those remaining are an estimated 60 to 200 children. Reports indicate that children may be asked whether they wish to go to Ukraine or to Russia. Oleshky, currently under occupation by Russia, lies across the Dnipro River from Kherson, Ukraine. Oleshky residents have endured flooding since the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam in June 2023, shortages of water, food and medicine, movement restrictions, and reported obstruction of evacuations.

KEY DATES

June 2023
Kakhovka Dam destroyed; Oleshky flooded

16 Oct 2026
Pope Leo XIV calls Vladimir Putin and appeals for a ceasefire

23 Oct 2026
White House announces a temporary ceasefire for Oleshky

Three features of the situation bear directly on children

1 **Russia controls access and communication.**

Ukrainian sources report that Russian authorities block Ukraine's efforts to inform residents that it is safe to state their wishes and that return to Ukraine is possible.

2 **Information environment is managed.**

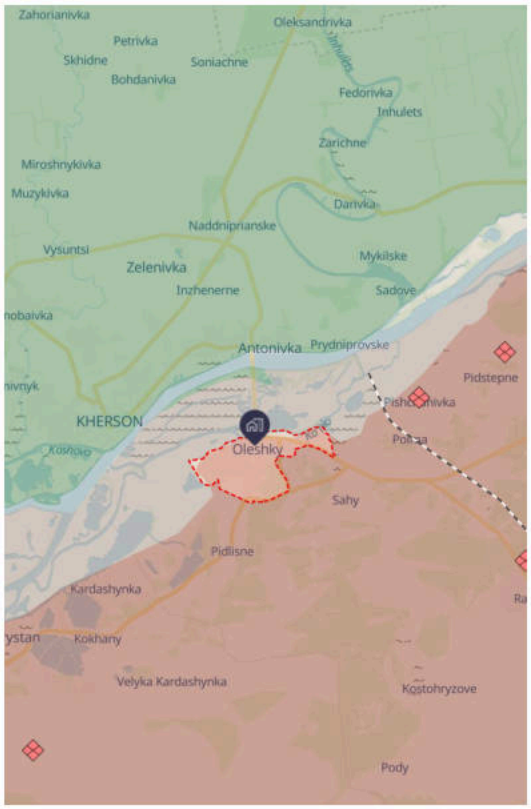
On 7 October Ukraine's Security Service warned of staged interviews with residents. As of late October, only one journalist from the Ukrainian side was reported to be accredited to visit.

3 **There is a propaganda incentive.**

A public result showing children "choosing" Russia would be a significant information win for Moscow.

OPEN QUESTION

The exact mechanism by which children's wishes will be recorded has not been published.



Oleshky lies across the Dnipro River from Kherson: occupied (red) vs. Ukrainian-controlled bank. Source: DeepStateMap

60–200

children estimated to remain among those trapped in Oleshky

June 2023

Kakhovka Dam destroyed — flooding, and shortages of water, food and medicine since

1

journalist from the Ukrainian side reported accredited to visit (late October)

THE EVIDENCE

Why these children cannot make a free choice

Five well-established findings explain why a stated preference made under occupation reflects the conditions rather than the child's own will.

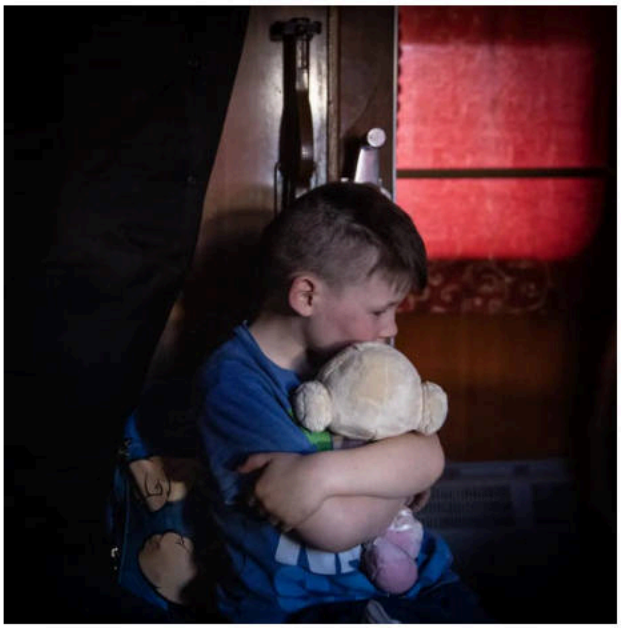
FACTOR	WHAT THE EVIDENCE SHOWS	WHAT THIS MEANS IN OLESHKY
1 **Dependency on the controlling party**	Prolonged captivity reshapes loyalties and sense of self (Herman, 1992). Intermittent threat plus dependency creates attachment to the source of harm (Dutton & Painter, 1981).	IN OLESHKY A wish to "stay" may be a survival response, not a preference.
2 **Suggestibility**	Children's answers shift with whoever asks, how they ask and what the child thinks is wanted, especially with authority figures (Ceci & Bruck, 1993).	IN OLESHKY Questioned by, or in front of, those who hold them, children give the answer they believe is safe.
3 **Information deprivation**	An informed choice requires accurate information about the options. UN investigators document compulsory "patriotic" education from age 3 and military training from 14.	IN OLESHKY Children who have been told that Ukraine, or their families, abandoned them are choosing on false premises.

FACTOR	WHAT THE EVIDENCE SHOWS	WHAT THIS MEANS IN OLESHKY
4 **Decision-making under stress**	Adolescent decisions are shaped strongly by fear, arousal, and social pressure (Steinberg, 2008). Trauma narrows thinking towards immediate safety.	IN OLESHKY These are the worst conditions for a decision about family, identity, and future.
5 **Fear for others**	Children weigh the consequences of their answer for people they love.	IN OLESHKY A child may say "Russia" to protect relatives, caregivers or friends who remain.

The presence or absence of parents matters greatly.

A child separated from parents depends even more on whoever controls their care.

First-hand reports from returned children support this claim. Journalists and practitioners describe children whose stated views changed once they were safe and reconnected with family.



KEY MESSAGE

A child's "choice" made under occupation measures the indoctrination, not the child's will.

LAW AND STANDARDS

What international law and standards require

Existing law already rules out treating a child's answer under occupation as decisive and places the burden on Russia as the occupying power.

STANDARD	RELEVANT REQUIREMENT
Fourth Geneva Convention, Art. 49	Prohibits individual or mass forcible transfers from occupied territory, with narrow exceptions.
Fourth Geneva Convention, Art. 50	The occupying power must facilitate the identification of children and may not change their personal status.
Fourth Geneva Convention, Art. 55	The occupying power must ensure food and medical supplies for the population. Relief is an existing duty, not a concession.
UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Arts. 3 and 12	Best interests are a primary consideration. Children have the right to be heard, with weight given according to age and maturity.
CRC General Comment No. 12 (2009)	Views must be expressed freely, without pressure, manipulation or undue influence, in a safe setting.
CRC General Comment No. 14 (2013)	The child's wishes are one factor in a best-interests determination, made by independent qualified professionals.
UNHCR Best Interests Procedure Guidelines (2021)	Sets out formal, documented best-interests assessment and determination for children at risk.
Inter-agency Guiding Principles on Unaccompanied and Separated Children (2004)	Family tracing and reunification come first.

March 2023
ICC ARREST WARRANTS

The UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine has found that forced transfers of Ukrainian children amount to crimes against humanity. In March 2023, the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants for Vladimir Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova for the unlawful deportation and transfer of children.



Jewish displaced persons (DPs) and survivors after World War II under the care of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA).

HISTORY

Historical precedent

This problem has been faced before, and stated wishes were not treated as decisive.

After the Second World War, Polish and Czech children taken and "Germanized" by the Nazi regime told Allied welfare workers they wanted to remain German.

Historian Tara Zahra's research (*The Lost Children*, 2011) shows that relief workers came to see these wishes as products of indoctrination and separation. Experience with war-affected children since, including with former child soldiers in Sierra Leone (Betancourt et al., 2010), shows that safety, family connection and community acceptance shape long-term well-being and identity.



Then and now: "Germanized" children (1945–48) (archive photos) alongside Ukraine's kidnapped children (2022–26) (source: https://childrenofwar.gov.ua)

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommended safeguards

We propose a staged mechanism in which no child is asked about their future until they are safe, informed and assessed independently.

1 No interviews under occupation

No child is asked to choose while under Russian physical or informational control. Any such answer has no evidential weight.

2 An independent humanitarian envoy

Appointed by neither party, with guaranteed, unaccompanied access to the children. The team includes child trauma clinicians, Ukrainian-speaking interviewers, and child-protection officers from a neutral body such as the ICRC or UNICEF.

3 Safe passage to Ukrainian-controlled territory

Children are evacuated with independent escorts to a protection center on safe Ukrainian-controlled territory, monitored by the ICRC, UNICEF or another neutral body. Transfer to Russia is not an acceptable solution.

4 A stabilization and information period

Several weeks of trauma-informed care, accurate information about family and options, and supervised contact with parents or relatives where possible.

5 Family tracing first

Where a parent or legal guardian is identified, reunification with that family is the default.

6 Non-leading interviews

Children's views are heard only after stabilization, using evidence-based methods such as the NICHD Protocol (Lamb et al., 2007). Interviews take place out of sight and hearing of anyone linked to the detaining authority.

7 Independent best-interests determination

A panel assesses each child's protection, care and family-reunification needs, giving due weight to their views. It does not determine nationality or a preferred State. Decisions can be reviewed if the child's views change.

8 No media, cameras, or public statements

Children's answers must never become propaganda for either side.

Each child's case should be documented so that decisions can be verified later.

IMPLEMENTATION

From principles to mechanisms

The main task now is to turn these safeguards into concrete operational, logistical, political, and scalable mechanisms. We propose four.

1 Delivering children to a transit territory

- **Transit location.** A transit or protection center on safe Ukrainian-controlled territory, operated, co-operated or independently monitored by the ICRC, UNICEF or OSCE. Transfer to Russia or a Russian-controlled zone is not an acceptable protection solution.
- **Escort and transport.** An independent team of child psychologists, interpreters, medical staff, and child-protection officers. Logistics include escorted buses, prior demining of the route and on-site medical screening.
- **Chain-of-custody documentation.** A record of who handed over each child, when and to whom, at every stage.
- **Timeline within a ceasefire.** The operation should be tied to an existing or new agreement, for example a ceasefire starting around 29 October 2026.

PROPOSED TIMELINE WITHIN A CEASEFIRE

Days 1–2

Registration and initial medical examination, observed by independent monitors

Days 3–5

Escorted transfer to the transit location

From day 6

Stabilization and information period, family tracing, then best-interests assessment

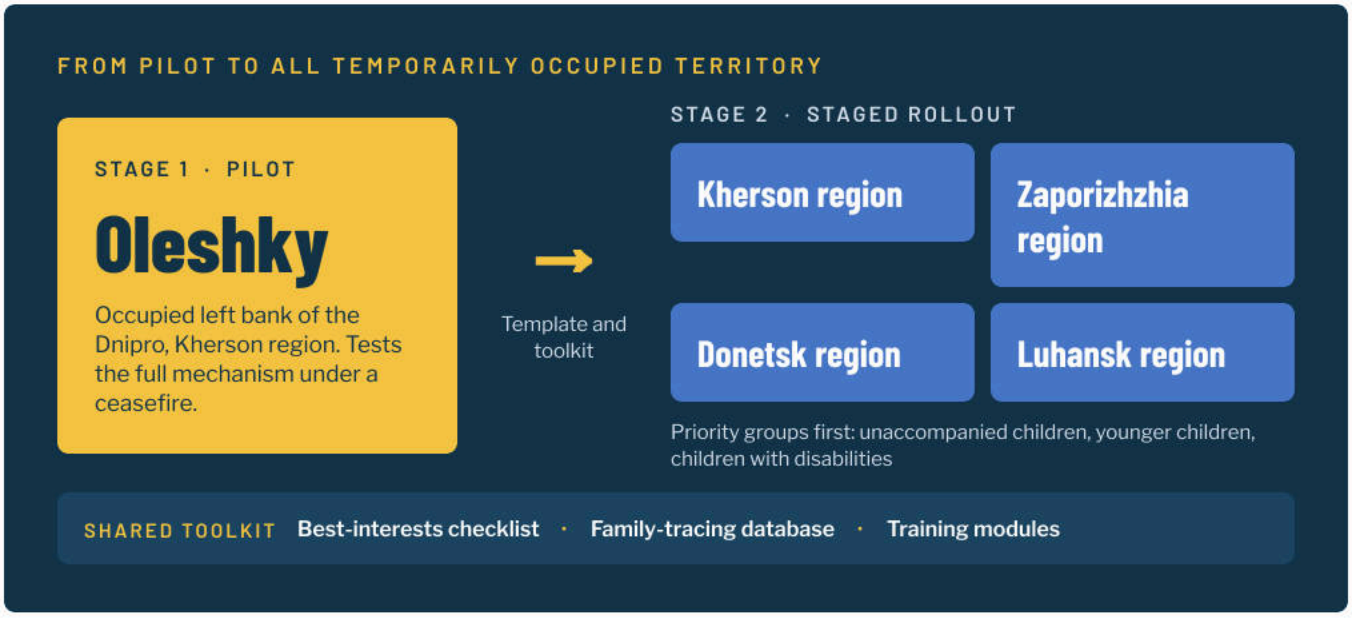


Oleshky city sign, damaged by munition fragments. Source: ArmyInform

IMPLEMENTATION

2 Scaling to all temporarily occupied territory

Oleshky should be treated as a pilot that could later extend to all temporarily occupied territory of Ukraine.



- **Proof of concept.** A successful Oleshky operation becomes the template for parts of occupied Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia regions.
- **Staged by priority.** Coverage should not be demanded everywhere at once. Priority groups come first: unaccompanied children, younger children, and children with disabilities.
- Standardized toolkit. A single best-interests determination checklist, a family-tracing database linked to Ukrainian and international registries, and training modules for local and international teams.
- **Institutional foundation.** The ICRC and UNICEF should be secured as permanent providers of independent assessment capacity, not a one-off mission.

PRIORITY GROUPS COME FIRST

1 **Unaccompanied children**

2 **Younger children**

3 **Children with disabilities**

IMPLEMENTATION

3 Taking account of the Russian position

The mechanism is more likely to be accepted if it anticipates why the occupation authorities may, and should, agree.

- **Incentives.** Agreement lets Russia meet its obligations as an occupying power (Fourth Geneva Convention Articles 49, 50 and 55), reduce international pressure, and show "humanitarian cooperation" without admitting guilt.
- **Mutual guarantees.** For example, an undertaking that the process will not be used for political accusations while the operation is under way.
- **Monitoring and verification.** A third party, such as the ICRC with observers from neutral states or the OSCE, with the right of unaccompanied access. Every step is documented for later verification.
- **Contingencies.** Plans for restricted access, children who "disappear" from lists, and attempts to stage interviews. Plan B: work only with children who have already been brought out.
- **Resources.** An estimate of needs (staff, transport, medical support, funding) and possible sources, including the United States, the EU, and humanitarian funds.
- **Legal protection of participants.** Diplomatic immunity or clear rules for international staff, so they do not become targets.



PHOTO — Independent monitors (ICRC / OSCE) at work in the field Source: https://www.osce.org/special-monitoring-mission-to-ukraine

OPEN QUESTION

Cost and staffing figures for the pilot still need to be estimated.

WHAT THE PILOT NEEDS

1 **Staff**
Child psychologists, interpreters, medical staff, child-protection officers

2 **Transport**
Escorted buses and prior demining of the route

3 **Medical support**
On-site screening and trauma-informed care

POSSIBLE FUNDING SOURCES

United States | European Union | Humanitarian funds

IMPLEMENTATION

THE PRINCIPLE WE INVITE THE FIRST LADY TO CHAMPION

Safe first. Ask later.

Building on the Russia-Ukraine Children's Reunification Initiative: every child safe, with family, and free from propaganda.

4 Engaging the First Lady

The First Lady has already helped reunite approximately 34 children and has established a channel of communication with both governments. Her involvement offers a unique opportunity to put children's safety first. We respectfully invite her to consider:

~34

children, to date, reunited with the First Lady's help

- ☑ Publicly supporting the principle **"safe first, ask later"**.
- ☑ Involving her team as observers or sponsors of the independent assessment.
- ☑ A joint statement with the Pope and humanitarian organizations.
- ☑ Hosting or supporting a transit hub as a "First Lady's Initiative".

Throughout, the focus is on what matters most: protecting children, supporting mothers and families, keeping children out of propaganda, and their long-term well-being.

COMMUNICATIONS

Key messages by audience

The same evidence should be framed differently for each audience.

First Lady's office and Administration support staff

PARTNERSHIP

Independent safeguards will ensure that the success of the First Lady's humanitarian work is recognized as genuine and lasting, and protect it from any later claim that children's answers were coerced or staged.

State Department, Congress

POLICY AND LEGAL

Make independent access, safe evacuation to Ukrainian-controlled territory and best-interests determination conditions of any arrangement. Russia's humanitarian duties are obligations, not concessions.

UNICEF, ICRC, OSCE, UN bodies

TECHNICAL AND STANDARDS-BASED

Apply existing standards (CRC General Comments 12 and 14, UNHCR guidelines, Inter-agency principles). Offer to provide the independent assessment capacity.

Media and think tanks

CLEAR AND DIRECT

A child's "choice" made under occupation measures the indoctrination, not the child's will. Who controls access to the children controls the answer.

FOR SOCIAL MEDIA, THREE SHORT LINES

> A child cannot choose freely while held by those asking the question.

> Get them safe first. Ask them later. Let independent experts listen.

> No filmed "choices". Children are not propaganda.

DRAFT TEXT

Draft text for a joint statement

The paragraphs below can be dropped into a joint statement for signature.

> *We welcome every effort to bring Ukrainian children to safety and to reunite them with their families. To protect those children, and the integrity of this humanitarian effort, we urge that no child be asked to choose between their own country and the occupying State. Oleshky is Ukrainian territory, and its children are protected under international humanitarian law.*
>
> *Children who have lived under occupation, separated from their families and exposed to fear and indoctrination, cannot express a free and informed choice in those conditions. This is the consistent finding of clinical and developmental research, and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's guidance likewise recognizes that children's views must be expressed without pressure or undue influence.*
>
> *We call for an independent humanitarian envoy with unaccompanied access to the children, and their urgent evacuation to safe Ukrainian-controlled territory through a mechanism independently monitored by international organizations. There, children should receive care, accurate information, family tracing, and an individual, child-sensitive assessment of their protection needs. Their views must be heard, but never used to legitimize or facilitate unlawful deportation or forcible transfer. Children's answers must not be filmed, publicized, or used for propaganda by any party.*

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Design: Olena Oliynyk, Creative Director, U.S.-Ukraine Foundation

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International Human Rights Task Force

CO-CHAIRS



Irwin Cotler
Former Minister of Justice of Canada



Carl Gershman
Founding President of the National Endowment for Democracy



Nadia K. McConnell
President, Co-founder, U.S.-Ukraine Foundation

EXPERT WORKING GROUPS (AS OF 10/2026)

Special Tribunal and Accountability Working Group



David M. Crane, Chair
Founding Chief Prosecutor, UN Special Court for Sierra Leone; Founder, Global Accountability Network



Irwin Cotler
Former Minister of Justice of Canada



Amb. Hans Corell
Former Legal Advisor, United Nations



Justice Richard Goldstone
Former Chief Prosecutor of the ICTY and ICTR



Inna Liniova
Director, Human Rights Center, Ukrainian Bar Association



Amb. David Scheffer
Former Ambassador-at-Large for War Crimes Issues, U.S. Department of State

Trauma Treatment Best Practices Working Group



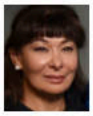
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Head of the GLOBSEC Kyiv Office



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President, Founder, Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors



Mitzi Perdue, Co-Chair
Journalist, war correspondent, philanthropist, anti-human trafficking advocate



Nata Chernyshova
TAPS Ukraine



Yuliia Dmytrova
TAPS Ukraine

Tanya Cotler (TBC)
Psychotherapist, Toronto



Mandy Bostwick
Clinical Director, Trauma Assist International (UK)



Dr. Eric Trupin
Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, University of Washington



Svitlana Diedova
Head of DC Office, Center for Strategic Initiatives and Assistance; Psychologist



Viktor Dlugunovych
Clinical psychologist, researcher with specialization in long-term psychological impacts of war



Helary Rakete-Yakub, Ph.D.
Political scientist; researcher with specialization in trauma and violent extremism

Judy A. Levitz, Ph.D. (TBC)
Psychologist and psychoanalyst; works with refugees

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ONGOING 10 YEARS ADVOCACY

International Human Rights Task Force

EXPERT WORKING GROUPS (AS OF 10/2026)

Abducted Children Working Group



Karolina Hird, Chair
National Security Fellow, Institute for the Study of War



Dr. Kristina Hook
Assistant Professor of Conflict Management, Peacebuilding, and Development, Kennesaw State University



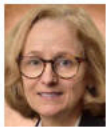
Paige Farrenkopf
Children's Team Lead, Yale Humanitarian Research Lab



Irene Jarosewich
WFUWO Main Representative to UN DGC/CSU; CRSV (Conflict-Related Sexual Violence), POWs and Civilian Detainees



Shelby Magid
Deputy Director, Eurasia Center, Atlantic Council



Christina Tershakovec
Chair, National Advocacy Committee, UNWLA



Dr. Iuliia Hoban (TBC)
Expert on child protection during war, born in Kyiv



The U.S.-Ukraine Foundation has embraced the Forget-me-not flower as a symbol of Ukrainian children stolen by Russia—and of all victims of Putin's brutal war.

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www.usukraine.org info@usukraine.org

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