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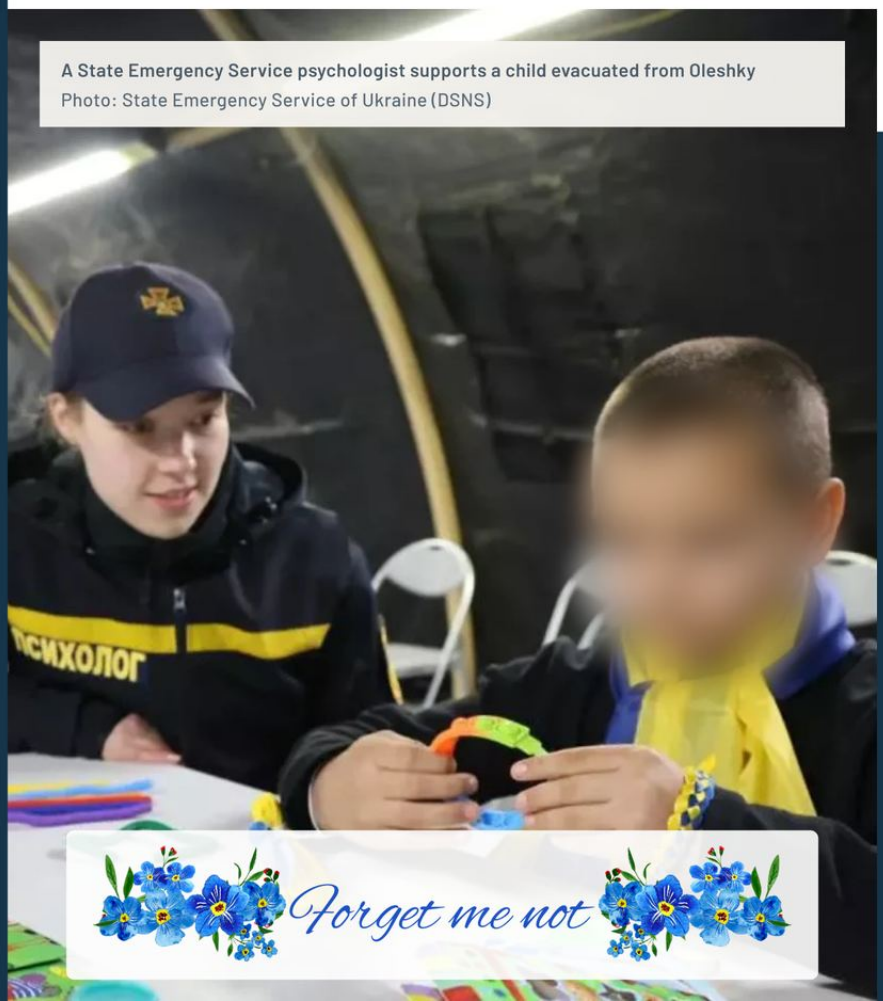
Friends of Ukraine Network
an initiative of the US Ukraine Foundation
ONGOING 10 YEARS ADVOCACY

INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS TASK FORCE

FOLLOW-UP BRIEF · NOVEMBER 2026

Lessons from Oleshky

The Very Good, the Bad and the Very Ugly



A State Emergency Service psychologist supports a child evacuated from Oleshky
Photo: State Emergency Service of Ukraine (DSNS)

Safe first. Ask later.

A child-protection and trauma review of the evacuation, measured against the safeguards in our October brief.

PREPARED BY
FOUN International Human Rights Task Force
U.S.-Ukraine Foundation
Follow-up to the October 2026 brief "Children in Oleshky"

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

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Summary

The Oleshky evacuation brought hundreds of people out of a besieged, occupied town, including children and elderly residents, **which is a genuine humanitarian achievement, and should be recognized as such.**

Journalist Zarina Zabrisky, who reported from Kherson throughout the operation, found that residents were free to choose their destination, without pressure, although jammed communications caused confusion. Measured against the safeguards in our October brief, however, the process still fell short for children. The choice of destination country was made at Armiansk, in occupied Crimea, under Russian control. No independent monitor such as the ICRC or UN was directly involved. Russia rejected the short route across the Dnipro, so evacuees travelled about 19 hours through occupied Crimea, Russia and Belarus.

The wider picture is darker. Ukraine's General Staff and Sky News report that Russia used the ceasefire to rotate troops, bring in ammunition and reinforce positions in Oleshky. Russian strikes elsewhere continued throughout, including on Dnipro railway station, a dormitory housing displaced families in Vinnytsia Oblast, and an aid center in Zaporizhzhia Oblast the day after the truce ended.

On 5 November, the First Lady hosted Russian and Ukrainian representatives at the White House to mark the ceasefire. Putin's envoy, Kirill Dmitriev, presented her with a drawing by an 11-year-old girl from Oleshky who, according to Russian state media, chose to live in Russia. Russian state media reported that the drawing was inscribed "I love Melania". Russia's delegation included its human rights commissioner, Yana Lantratova, a US-sanctioned official whom Ukraine accuses of a key role in the deportation of Ukrainian children. A child's reported choice, made under occupation, was presented as a diplomatic gift. **This is the scenario our October brief warned against.**

IF THIS MODEL IS REPEATED

The choice of destination must be made outside occupied territory, independent monitors must have unaccompanied access, and the ceasefire must not become cover for military gains. Evacuees need assessment by qualified trauma specialists and follow-up care, and the people who went to Russia must not be forgotten.

"A child's reported choice, made under occupation, was presented as a diplomatic gift."

Any account of Oleshky as a humanitarian success must also include what happened around the evacuation: the military build-up during the ceasefire, the continued strikes on civilians elsewhere, and the use of a child's drawing at the White House. This brief should be read alongside Zarina Zabrisky's forthcoming comprehensive analysis of the humanitarian, military, information-warfare and aftermath aspects of the operation.

What happened

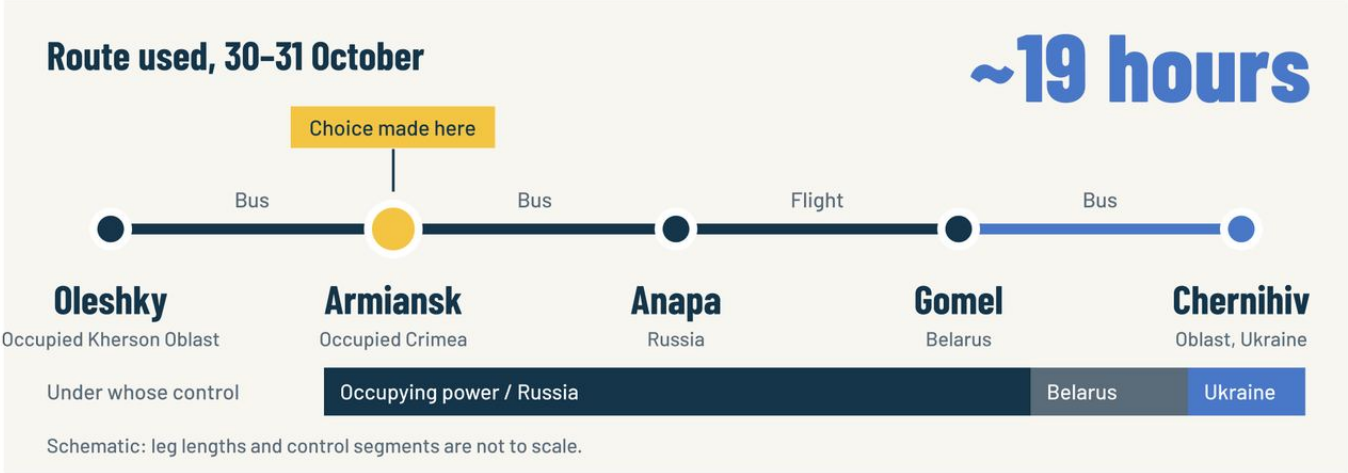
A local ceasefire in Kherson Oblast, brokered by the United States through the First Lady, ran from 03:00 on 27 October to 23:00 on 1 November 2026. Estimates of the number evacuated range from "far fewer than 750" (Russia's commissioner) to nearly 800 (the First Lady).

DATE (2026)	INSIDE OLESHKY	ELSEWHERE
May	Route across the Dnipro proposed to Ukraine's Ombudsman; rejected by Russia	
23 October	White House announces the temporary ceasefire	
27 October	Ceasefire begins at 03:00	
29 October	Demining of routes completed; two people killed during the work	Russian drone hits two trains at Dnipro station, killing at least 14; two 15-year-old girls killed in Chernihiv
30 October	Convoy of 25 buses assembles at Armiansk, occupied Crimea; evacuations begin	
31 October	Four planes from Anapa land in Gomel, Belarus; evacuees cross into Ukraine at Chernihiv	
1 November	Ceasefire ends at 23:00	Drone strike at a dormitory for displaced families in Vinnytsia Oblast kills a 13-year-old girl and injures three 5-year-olds
2 November	Ukraine's General Staff says Russia used the ceasefire to rotate troops and bring in ammunition	Guided bombs hit an aid center and its shelter in Komyshuvakha, Zaporizhzhia Oblast, killing at least 26; later reports put the toll at 40 or more
5 November		Event at the White House: Putin's envoy presents the First Lady with a drawing by an 11-year-old Oleshky evacuee now living in Russia

WHAT HAPPENED

The route

Russia rejected a short crossing of the Dnipro. Evacuees instead travelled about 19 hours through occupied Crimea, Russia and Belarus.



Proposed in May, rejected by Russia

A short crossing of the Dnipro

A direct river crossing to Ukrainian-controlled territory, reportedly refused because it would bring the Ukrainian military too close.

Route used

~19 hours through occupied Crimea, Russia and Belarus

Under the control of the occupying power for most of the journey.

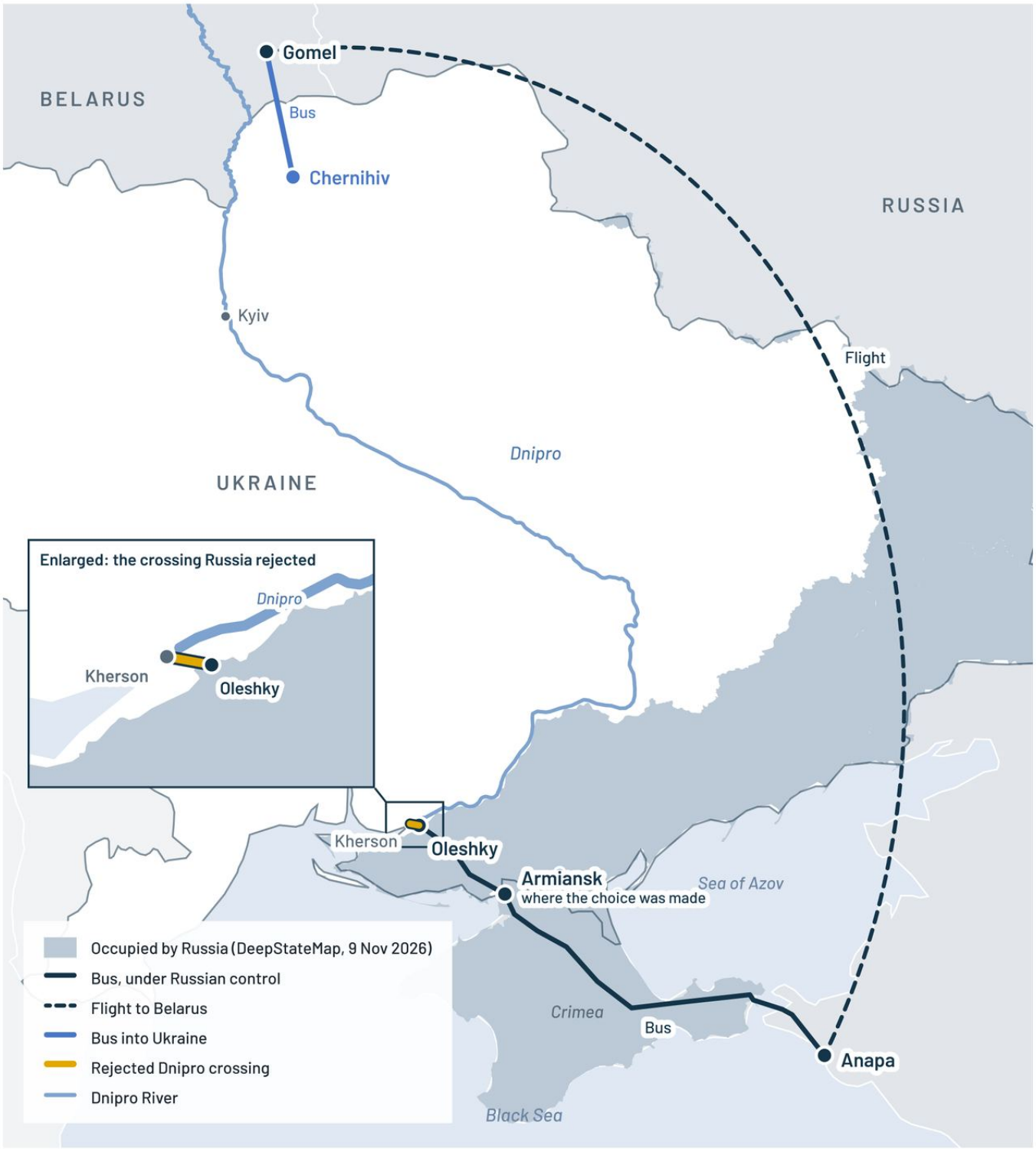
Numbers. The number evacuated has not been confirmed. According to Ukraine's Ombudsman, Dmytro Lubinets, 25 buses with a combined capacity of 750 passengers, and 22 ambulances, were prepared. The 750 figure therefore reflects seats available, not a headcount. The First Lady has said nearly 800 people were evacuated. Russia's commissioner, Yana Lantratova, said "far fewer than 750" left, that people were not counted, and that many seats on the buses were left empty. Newsmax reported 11 buses going to Ukraine and four to Russia. Both governments agreed not to disclose how many people went in each direction. Before the evacuation, Kherson regional officials estimated that approximately 2,000 civilians, including approximately 50 children, remained in Oleshky. How many remain now has not been verified.

Where people chose. Residents chose Russia or Ukraine at Armiansk, in occupied Crimea. Zarina Zabrisky, reporting from Kherson, describes the choice as free and without pressure, but says jammed communication lines caused confusion.

Route. Oleshky to Armiansk, then Anapa in Russia, a flight to Gomel in Belarus, and a bus to the Ukrainian border, about 19 hours in total. A river or helicopter route was never on the agenda: Russia rejected the Dnipro route in May, reportedly because it would bring the Ukrainian military too close.

WHAT HAPPENED

The route on the map



Approximate routes: lines show the direction of travel, not exact roads or flight paths. Occupied areas: DeepStateMap (deepstatemap.live), 9 November 2026. Borders: Natural Earth.

WHAT HAPPENED

Key facts reported so far



An evacuee from Oleshky waves from the bus upon arrival in Chernihiv Oblast. Photo: State Emergency Service of Ukraine in Chernihiv Oblast.

- **Participants.** Ukrainian, Russian and US representatives, led on the Ukrainian side by Ombudsman Dmytro Lubinets. The ICRC and UN were not directly involved. A small number of Russian, Ukrainian and US media were invited.
- **Reception.** Relatives, more than 30 hospital staff, ambulances, aid groups and police met evacuees at the border, with hot meals, medical examinations and help for children.
- **Next steps.** Lubinets and Russia's Commissioner, Yana Lantratova, are exploring similar humanitarian operations.

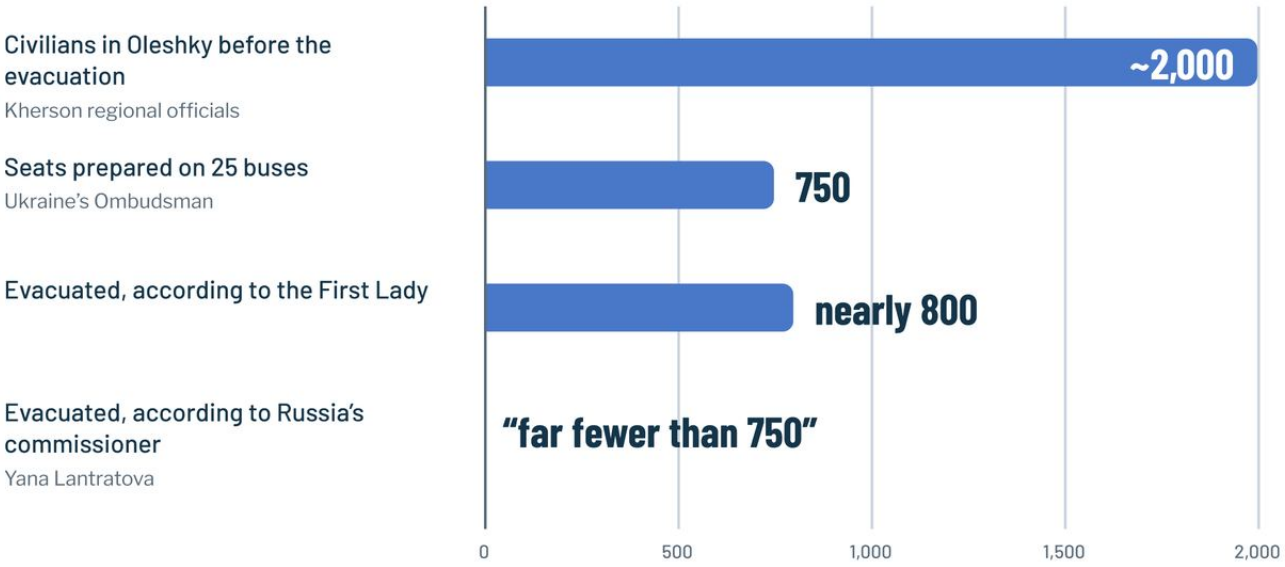
Open question: Official figures for the number of children evacuated, and for how many went in each direction, have not been published.

WHAT HAPPENED

The numbers

The number evacuated has not been confirmed, and official estimates conflict.

People, by source



The 750 figure reflects seats available, not a headcount. Russia's commissioner said people were not counted and that many seats on the buses were left empty. How many remain in Oleshky now has not been verified.

Where the buses went, as reported by Newsmax

11 buses to Ukraine

4 buses to Russia

Of 25 buses prepared. Newsmax did not report where the other 10 buses went. Both governments agreed not to disclose how many people went in each direction.

Children. About 50 children were estimated to be in Oleshky before the evacuation. How many children were evacuated, and in which direction, has not been published.

WHAT HAPPENED

Reception in Ukraine

In Chernihiv Oblast, relatives, medical teams, aid groups, police and State Emergency Service rescuers met the people who were able to leave occupied Oleshky.



State Emergency Service tents at the reception point in Chernihiv Oblast.



A State Emergency Service truck carried evacuees' pets.



An evacuee from Oleshky with his dog in Chernihiv Oblast.

Rescuers set up tents where people could rest, have a hot meal and receive the medical care they needed. Psychologists from the State Emergency Service talked with evacuees and provided psychological support, and a State Emergency Service truck carried their pets.

Photos: State Emergency Service of Ukraine in Chernihiv Oblast (dsns.gov.ua)

The very good, the bad and the very ugly

The good

- **Hundreds of people**, from a one-year-old to a 94-year-old, left a town where residents described cooking grass, hiding in basements from drones and losing neighbors to mines.
- **The ceasefire held**, with no violations reported during the evacuation.
- **Routes into the city were demined**, and food and medicine were brought in.
- **Reception in Ukraine was well prepared**, with medical teams, ambulances, relatives and help for children waiting at the border.
- **The operation showed that a negotiated humanitarian corridor** is possible and created a channel that could be used again.

The bad

- **The choice was made under occupation.** Residents decided between Russia and Ukraine at Armiansk, in occupied Crimea, still under Russian control. Even where no pressure was applied, this is the setting our brief warned against, and jammed communications meant families could not easily check information or contact relatives.
- **No independent monitoring.** The ICRC and UN were not directly involved, and no neutral observers were reported.
- **A route set by military interests.** A short crossing of the Dnipro was proposed in May and rejected by Russia, reportedly because it would bring the Ukrainian military too close. Evacuees instead spent about 19 hours travelling through occupied Crimea, Russia and Belarus, under the control of the occupying power for most of the journey.
- **Limited transparency.** No confirmed totals, conflicting official estimates, no breakdown of children, an agreement between the two governments not to disclose how many went in each direction, and media access limited to invited outlets.

The very good, the bad and the very ugly

The ugly

While the world watched the evacuation, the war did not pause.

- **Military gains under humanitarian cover.** Ukraine's General Staff says Russia used the ceasefire to rotate units, strengthen positions, expand anti-drone measures and increase ammunition deliveries. Sky News broadcast Ukrainian drone footage of armor and infantry entering Oleshky, and a Ukrainian marine brigade commander said troops moved into basements and damaged buildings to set up positions. Ukraine's Ombudsman, Dmytro Lubinets, has disputed reports of violations, saying the military equipment seen on the Russian side was used only for demining.
- **Strikes on civilians elsewhere continued.** On 29 October a drone hit two trains at Dnipro station, killing at least 14, and two 15-year-old girls were killed in Chernihiv. On 1 November a drone strike at a dormitory housing displaced families in Vinnytsia Oblast killed a 13-year-old girl and injured three 5-year-olds. On 2 November guided bombs hit an aid center and its shelter in Komyshuvakha, Zaporizhzhia Oblast, killing at least 26; later reports put the toll at 40 or more.
- **A propaganda campaign that fell short.** A local truce with a small, well-publicized evacuation gave Moscow a chance to present itself as a humanitarian partner while its attacks continued. According to Zabrisky, the Kremlin's information campaign largely failed, as independent reporting from Kherson exposed what was happening around the truce. The humanitarian gains are real, but they must not be used to obscure the wider pattern.

Reports from within the evacuation

Some sources reported concerns during the evacuation. **These reports are unverified:**

- A volunteer said Russian personnel pressured residents to choose Russia over Ukraine.
- A source said hospital patients were told they would face filtration if they left, and villagers were warned they could be shot if they approached the assembly point.
- Relatives said some people stayed behind out of fear of filtration.
- A volunteer said Russia began moving people before the agreed start date, with only Russian forces present.

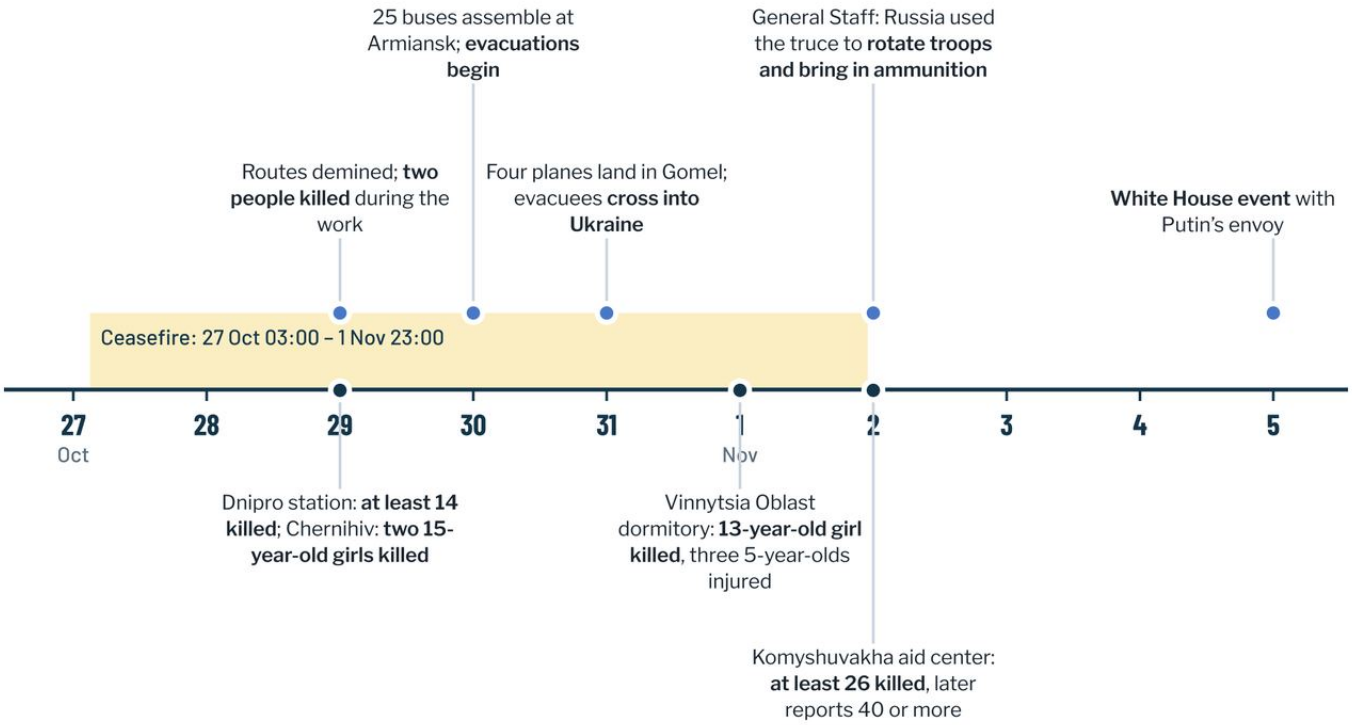
These reports conflict with other first-hand accounts. Zarina Zabrisky, reporting from Kherson throughout the operation, found the choice was free and without pressure, and Ukraine's Ombudsman has said evacuees were not subjected to filtration, document checks or phone searches. **Both sets of accounts should be examined.**

THE VERY GOOD, THE BAD AND THE VERY UGLY

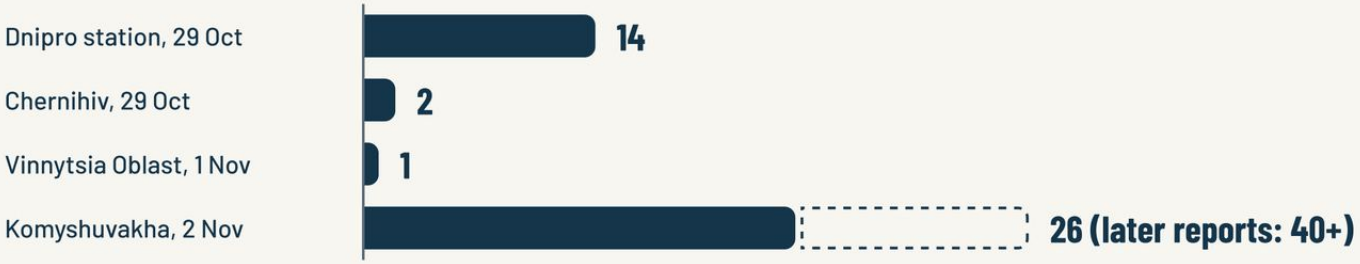
Around the ceasefire

What happened in Oleshky, and what Russia did elsewhere, from 27 October to 5 November 2026.

Above the line: events in Oleshky. Below the line: Russian strikes elsewhere.



People killed in the strikes above (at least)



Figures as reported at the time; see References.

After the ceasefire: The White House event

On 5 November the First Lady hosted Kirill Dmitriev and Yana Lantratova for Russia, and Davyd Arakhamia and Dmytro Lubinets for Ukraine. She called the truce "a spark in a world of darkness" and gave each side a letter for its president urging a more enduring peace. Ukraine presented her with the Order of Princess Olga, First Class.

A child's drawing as a diplomatic gift

Dmitriev presented a drawing by Lidiya, an 11-year-old from Oleshky. According to Russian state media, the drawing was inscribed "I love Melania", and Lidiya chose to live with her family in Tuapse, Russia. Dmitriev said the children's message "overshadows any diplomatic statement anybody can make". **A child's reported choice, made in occupied territory, became a public symbol of Russia's role as a humanitarian partner.**

A platform for officials accused of deporting children

Lantratova is under US sanctions and needed a special waiver to enter the country. Ukraine accuses her of a key role in the forced transfer of Ukrainian children. Dmitriev, who was sanctioned by the United States in 2022, conveyed Putin's personal thanks.

Limited coverage

Task Force members found little coverage of the event in major US newspapers, while Russian state media reported it.

The First Lady's efforts helped bring hundreds of people to safety and should be recognized. However, the event shows how quickly a humanitarian success can be turned into a propaganda platform, and **why children's voices must be protected from that use.**

THE YARDSTICK

Our eight safeguards

Set out in our October brief before the evacuation, these are the standards against which the operation is assessed on the next page.

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.

THE YARDSTICK

Assessment against our eight safeguards

On current reporting, three safeguards were not met, two were only partly met, and the other three cannot be judged because the information has not been published.

SAFEGUARD (OCTOBER BRIEF)	WHAT HAPPENED	ASSESSMENT
1. No interviews under occupation	Residents chose at Armiansk, in occupied Crimea; a first-hand account reports no pressure, but the setting remained under Russian control	NOT MET
2. Independent humanitarian envoy	Ukrainian, Russian and US officials only; ICRC and UN not directly involved	NOT MET
3. Safe passage to Ukrainian-controlled territory	Those who chose Ukraine reached Ukrainian-controlled territory, but only via Russia and Belarus and without independent escorts. Others were taken to Russia.	PARTLY MET
4. Stabilization and information period	No reported period before the choice; good medical reception on arrival in Ukraine	PARTLY MET after the choice only
5. Family tracing first	Relatives met evacuees at the border; no information on separated children	UNKNOWN
6. Non-leading interviews	No information on how residents, especially children, were asked	UNKNOWN
7. Independent best-interests determination	None reported	NOT REPORTED
8. No media or public statements	Invited media present, mostly Russian outlets in official photos. On 5 November Putin's envoy presented a drawing by an 11-year-old evacuee who went to Russia at a White House event	NOT MET

The Assessment column shows how far each safeguard was observed during the evacuation. **Not met:** the safeguard was not followed. **Partly met:** it was followed only in part, or only after the choice was made. **Unknown:** there is not yet enough information to judge. **Not reported:** no information on it has been published.

Each assessment should be reviewed as more information becomes available.

Trauma impact and the care evacuees need now

Evacuees experienced prolonged siege, hunger, isolation and threat, and then a long journey that kept them under the control of the occupying power until the final hours. The impact on children may not show for weeks or months.

How the evacuation itself added to the trauma

- **Prolonged uncertainty.** A 19-hour journey through occupied Crimea, Russia and Belarus kept people in a state of fear, not knowing whether they would reach Ukraine. For children, the elderly and the sick, this extends the stress response long after the threat should have ended.
- **Choosing under threat.** Being asked to choose a country while surrounded by the occupying forces, and amid reports of filtration, places an impossible burden on families. Parents may carry guilt or fear about the decision, and children absorb that stress.
- **Loss and separation.** Families leave behind homes, relatives, neighbors and pets. Some people stayed behind out of fear, leaving relatives who did leave worried and divided.

A calm, supported parent is the strongest protective factor for a child.

What care is needed now

- **Trauma screening** for every evacuee, with priority for children, the elderly and those with disabilities.
- **Child-specific assessment** by trauma-trained clinicians, looking for signs of trauma such as sleep disturbance, regression, withdrawal, flashbacks, hypervigilance and dissociative states.
- **Keeping families together** and supporting parents, since a calm, supported parent is the strongest protective factor for a child.
- **Longer-term follow-up** at three, six and twelve months. Many evacuees will have been exposed to cumulative trauma over many months, and complex post-traumatic stress symptoms often emerge after the immediate crisis has passed.
- **Safe opportunities to talk,** at the evacuees' own pace, without pressure to give testimony for media or political purposes.

AFTERMATH

After the evacuation

4

BUSLOADS REPORTEDLY WENT TO RUSSIA

The people who went to Russia

At least four busloads of evacuees reportedly went to Russia, first to a temporary center in Simferopol, in occupied Crimea. Their welfare, and especially that of any children, must be monitored. **They should have the right to contact family, receive accurate information, and change their decision.**

Displacement, reunification and recovery

The evacuation is the beginning of recovery, not the end. Families now face displacement, rebuilding their lives, and in some cases reunification after long separation. Each of these brings its own stresses, especially for children.

Needs assessment

Every family should have its needs assessed, covering housing, income, health, schooling and psychological support, and be linked to services rather than left to find them alone.

Reunification support

Children and parents reunited after months apart may struggle to reconnect. Children exposed to occupation and propaganda may feel conflicted loyalties and need patient, specialist support.

Community connection

Long-term recovery depends on belonging. Peer support, schools, faith and community groups are as important as clinical care.

Coordination

A clear lead body should track evacuees, so that no family falls through the gaps between government, health services and charities.

Open question: It is not yet clear what mechanisms are in place to assess evacuees' needs and connect them with longer-term psychological and community support.

QUESTIONS THAT REMAIN OPEN

The unanswered

These questions should be put to the governments involved and to the First Lady's office.

1	**How was the choice recorded?**	Who asked residents, and especially children, whether they wanted to go to Russia or Ukraine, who was present, and how were answers recorded? How did jammed communications affect what families knew?
2	**What happened to the children?**	How many children were evacuated, how many went in each direction, and were any unaccompanied or separated from family?
3	**Why was the shortest route refused?**	Russia rejected the Dnipro crossing in May, reportedly for military reasons. Will a shorter route be required in any future operation?
4	**Who was left behind?**	How many residents, especially the sick, immobile or children, remain in Oleshky, and why did they not leave?
5	**What are the facts about pressure?**	First-hand accounts differ. Can the reports of filtration warnings and threats be independently verified or ruled out?
6	**What happens to those who went to Russia?**	Where are they now, and can independent bodies reach them?
7	**Was the ceasefire used for military advantage?**	What did Russia move into Oleshky during the truce, and how will future ceasefires prevent this?
8	**How will children be protected from propaganda?**	Who approved the use of a child evacuee's drawing at a White House event, and was the child or her family consulted?
9	**What support is in place after the evacuation?**	Which body is responsible for assessing evacuees' needs and providing long-term psychological and community support?

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for any repeat operation

The Oleshky channel can save lives again, but only if the next operation corrects the gaps identified here.

1

Move the choice outside occupied territory

No one, and especially no child, should be asked to choose a country while under the control of the occupying power. The choice should follow a stabilization period in a neutral or safe location.

2

Independent monitoring as a condition

The ICRC, UNICEF or neutral observers should have guaranteed, unaccompanied access at every stage, from registration to arrival.

3

The shortest safe route

Civilian safety, not military convenience, should determine the route. If a direct route such as across the Dnipro is refused, the reasons should be stated and the longer route justified.

4

Ceasefire terms that bar military gains

Any humanitarian ceasefire should prohibit troop rotation, reinforcement and resupply in the area, with monitors able to verify compliance.

5

Child-specific procedures

Register every child, keep families together, identify unaccompanied children, and assign child-protection officers to them.

Recommendations (continued)

6

Reliable communications

Ensure residents can receive accurate information and contact relatives before and during the evacuation.

7

Transparency

Publish total numbers, numbers of children and numbers going in each direction, and document every step for later verification.

8

Trauma assessment and follow-up

Build trauma screening, assessment by qualified trauma specialists and long-term follow-up into the plan from the start, with a named lead body responsible for each family's needs assessment and community support after arrival.

9

Continued access to those who went to Russia

Agree in advance that independent bodies can check on their welfare and that they can change their decision.

10

Protect evacuees from propaganda and tell the whole story

No filmed choices or public statements by evacuees, especially children. Children's words, drawings or images should not be used as diplomatic gifts or in public ceremonies. Public accounts of any operation should include what happened around it, not only the evacuation itself.

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Map data

- DeepStateMap (deepstatemap.live). Occupied territory as of 9 November 2026. Page 6.
- Natural Earth. Country boundaries (Admin 0), 1:50m. Page 6.

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

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ONGOING 10 YEARS ADVOCACY

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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 11/2026)

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Former Minister of Justice of Canada



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Inna Liniova
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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

Friends of Ukraine Network
an initiative of the US Ukraine Foundation

ONGOING 10 YEARS ADVOCACY

International Human Rights Task Force

EXPERT WORKING GROUPS (AS OF 11/2026)

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



Shelby Magid
Deputy Director, Eurasia Center, Atlantic Council



Christina Tershakovec
Chair, National Advocacy Committee, UNWLA



Dr. Iuliia Hoban
Expert on children and childhoods in peace and security studies and the implications of the Russo-Ukrainian War for vulnerable populations



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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