IPHR International Partnership for Human Rights

PROTECT UKRAINIAN CHILDREN FROM RUSSIAN TRAFFICKING

Statement on the World Day against Trafficking in Persons

30 July 2026, Brussels - On the World Day against Trafficking in Persons, IPHR calls for greater recognition of a form of trafficking that often remains hidden in armed conflict: the recruitment and exploitation of children, especially by Russia, for sabotage and intelligence gathering in its war against Ukraine.

The 2026 UNODC campaign "Trapped behind the scam" draws attention to people forced, under coercion, violence and fear, to carry out cyber-enabled scams. In Russia's war against Ukraine, another technology-facilitated form of trafficking remains largely hidden: Russian-linked handlers recruit Ukrainian children online, then trap them in an escalating cycle of coercion in which trying to leave becomes dangerous.

In a growing number of cases reported by the media, FSB-tied Russian handlers use assumed identities to approach Ukrainian children through social media with offers of easy money for completing simple, innocuous tasks. After initial contact and the completion of 'harmless' tasks, they often start using threats and blackmail to force the children to perform acts of espionage and sabotage, such as photographing military objectives, burning military vehicles or railway equipment, and manufacturing or placing explosives. OHCHR has recorded a surge in credible allegations of such recruitment in 2024 and found that the practice continued in 2025. Some children have been killed or injured in the process of carrying out such tasks. Others have been detained and prosecuted under the Criminal Code of Ukraine.

The word "trafficking" may suggest that a person has been transported across a border. The legal definition adopted by the United Nations, however, is broader:

Under Article 3(a) of the UN Trafficking Protocol, the act of trafficking includes recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt. Transportation is only one possible act. Where recruitment is the relevant act, no journey or border crossing is required.

Article 3(c) of the UN Trafficking Protocol provides that any recruitment of a child for the purpose of exploitation, such as forced services, shall be considered "trafficking in persons". Consequently, the recruitment of children to perform forced services, such as the described acts of sabotage and espionage, falls under the term exploitation as defined in Article 3(a) of the UN Trafficking Protocol. A UN joint study on *Child Trafficking and Armed Conflict* also confirms that recruitment and use in combat, support roles or criminal activity meet the definition of exploitation. Above all, pursuant to Article 3(c) of the UN Trafficking Protocol, any consent to the intended exploitation by a victim shall be irrelevant where means such as force or coercion have been used.

When Russian agents recruit and force children to perform acts of sabotage or espionage, Russia is trafficking Ukrainian children.

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This conduct forms part of a broader pattern of Russian crimes against Ukrainian children: In 2024, IPHR's Medvezhonok Camp investigation documented the deportation of around 300 Ukrainian children to Russia, their prolonged separation from their families and political indoctrination as part of Russia's common plan to sever their national and cultural ties to Ukraine. In 2026, IPHR also submitted written observations to the European Court of Human Rights in *Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union v. Russia,* concerning Russia's widespread and systematic practices of unlawful deportation, adoption and imposition of Russian citizenship on Ukrainian children. The 2025 US Trafficking in Persons Report for Ukraine confirms that thousands of children have been forcibly transferred by Russia and reports that Russian forces are recruiting and using children as soldiers, informants and human shields. In 2025, IPHR and the Harvard International Human Rights Clinic's Airstrikes and Atrocities report established that the 22 emblematic Russian aerial attacks documented by IPHR killed or injured at least 23 children and repeatedly struck places where children were foreseeably present—including schools, kindergartens, children's hospitals, playgrounds, and residential neighbourhoods—demonstrating a sustained pattern of attacks exposing children to exceptional risks of death and injury.

Children recruited, exploited and harmed in such ways must be treated first and foremost as victims and afforded respective protections.

We call for:

- **the recognition of Ukrainian children recruited and exploited by Russia as victims** of trafficking in persons;
- **an immediate end to Russia's recruitment, coercion and exploitation of Ukrainian children** for sabotage, espionage and other criminal activities, as well as to the unlawful deportation, transfer and targeting of Ukrainian children;
- **protection and assistance, rehabilitation and long-term reintegration** without stigma for children who fell victim to Russian trafficking, unlawful deportation and other crimes.
- **effective investigations** into alleged recruiters, handlers and responsible Russian officials, including their use of social media and other technologies, and accountability for those engaging in child trafficking;
- **full compliance by Russia with its obligations** under the UN Trafficking Protocol, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and international humanitarian law.

Russia's recruitment of Ukrainian children is often framed as a matter of sabotage, espionage or hybrid warfare, obscuring the fact that these children are victims of exploitation.

Russia's actions must be recognised for what they are: trafficking in persons.

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