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Beyond Genocide, Ethnocide and Identicide: Russia's 'Strategic Imperial Demographic Policy' of Russifying Ukrainian Children

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ABSTRACT

Following the Russian Federation's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, thousands of Ukrainian children have been forcibly taken from occupied territories and transferred to Russia. On 17 March 2023, the International Criminal Court officially recognized these actions as a war crime. Based on extensive documentary research as well as visual materials, this article argues that the Russian Federation is executing a systematic policy of child abduction. Frame analysis is used to understand the rationale behind the actions and narratives of both Ukraine and the Russian Federation. The discussion critically examines the applicability and limitations of terms such as genocide, ethnocide and identicide, contending that the phenomenon in question transcends these conceptual categories. Instead, the article proposes defining this forced transfer of Ukrainian children as a 'strategic imperial demographic policy'.

1 | Introduction

Following the Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Ukrainian authorities reported that thousands of Ukrainian children had been kidnapped by Russian forces from the Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine and transferred to Russia, at times in collaboration with Belarus. The figures related to kidnapped Ukrainian children are reckoned to vary widely, from about 19,500 to nearly 750,000.¹ The Russian side never concealed it, nor did they define it as forcible. The International Criminal Court (ICC) officially recognized the crime on 17 March 2023, issuing arrest warrants for Vladimir Putin, President of the Russian Federation, and Maria Lvova-Belova, Russian Federation Commissioner for Children's Rights, alleging them to be "responsible for the war crime of unlawful deportation of population (children) and unlawful transfer of population (children) from occupied areas of Ukraine to the Russian Federation (under articles 8(2)(a)(vii) and 8(2)(b)(viii)

of the Rome Statute). The crimes were allegedly committed in Ukrainian occupied territory at least from February 24, 2022".² Notably, the forcible transfer of Ukrainian children dates back to 2014, following the invasion of Crimea and the Donbas (Umland 2024: 4). Serjey Sumlenny clearly argues that "Russia started the practice of kidnapping Ukrainian children as part of the infamous *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World) concept already in 2014" (Sumlenny 2023). According to him, the ICC arrest warrant deserves praise- though with some reservations. Sumlenny also explains how Yelizaveta Glinka, the well-known head of the charity organization *Spravedliyava Pomoshch* (A Just Help) founded in 2007, began to transfer children from occupied territories of Ukraine in 2014, prior to Maria Lvova-Belova. These kidnappings were camouflaged as 'humanitarian missions' (Sumlenny 2023).

On 23 April 2022, UNICEF spokesperson Joe English, though having expressed the impossibility of verifying reports of child

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abductions, stated that he found them ‘incredibly concerning’ (Falk 2022). He noted that “the abduction of children during times of war is one of the six grave violations against children in conflict and is prohibited under international humanitarian law” (Falk 2022). Many used the terms genocide, ethnocide and identicide to define the illegal transfer of Ukrainian children to the Russian Federation.

In May 2022, President Putin simplified the process of granting Russian citizenship to orphans and children without guardians from occupied Ukrainian territories,³ legally allowing their adoption by Russian families. Moreover, according to the Russian Federation Family Code, adopting parents can change both the last and first names,⁴ as well as the date and place of birth, of an adopted child.⁵ Last but not least, this can be done without the consent of children under 10, which means a complete obliteration of the national and cultural identity of deported and newly adopted Ukrainian children. It is very important to note that the Russian Federation Family Code (Article 165)⁶ required the consent of the foreign child’s legal guardian and the responsible authority of the state of which s/he is a citizen to adopt a foreign child on the territory of the Russian Federation. The simplification of the process of granting Russian citizenship to kidnapped Ukrainian children was realized in the context of Article 29 of the Russian Citizenship Code by a presidential decree promulgated on 24 April 2019 by Putin.⁷ This was followed by another decree promulgated on 29 April 2019 to determine the categories of foreign citizens who have the right to apply for Russian citizenship with simplified procedure.⁸ This included Ukrainian citizens living in Ukrainian-controlled parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Thus, the simplification of the process to obtain Russian citizenship, which legalized the granting of Russian citizenship to kidnapped Ukrainian children, served to bypass Article 165 of the Family Code, requiring the consent of Ukraine and the legal guardians for the adoption of Ukrainian children. This proves how systematic the policy of kidnapping Ukrainian children is.

In that perspective, this article argues that the Russian Federation is conducting a systematic kidnapping policy. It also aims to clarify why the terms ‘genocide’, ‘ethnocide’ and ‘identicide’ are inadequate for defining the abduction of Ukrainian children, as these terms do not fully reflect the extent and implications of this act. Rather, it should be understood as a tool of ‘strategic imperial⁹ demographic policy.’ Through sociological and historical analysis, it is argued that Russia’s forcible transfer policy intends to erode Ukrainian identity by reducing the population of Ukrainian children (influencing the nation’s capacity to renew itself) and increasing the Orthodox Russian population in Russia by Russifying Ukrainian children. Interestingly, Duffy Toft (2019: 2–3) wrote that Soviet census data after the World War II revealed lower birth rates and shorter life expectancies for Slavs compared to other nationalities. This alarming trend became a “state secret and a major policy concern,” with the 1979 census results unpublished for 5 years. While the Soviet Union was perceived as predominantly Russian-Slavic, “only the Politburo knew that it soon wouldn’t be so.” (Duffy Toft 2019: 3). This fact, which remains valid today, is considered one of the reasons for the Russification of Ukrainians and severe Russian attacks against

the Ukrainian identity. It also reinforces the study’s main argument that the kidnapping of Ukrainian children goes beyond genocide, ethnocide and identicide.

The inadequacy of the concepts of genocide, ethnocide and identicide lies in their failure to fully capture the continuity of Russia’s policies, which have been implemented throughout history, and serve as the foundation of its own historical narrative and framing. What distinguishes the Ukrainian case from other instances of cultural and national assimilation is that the Russian state does not view Ukrainians as a foreign or inferior group, but rather as part of the Russian nation. That is, the Kremlin’s effort is not directed against a group it considers second-rate, but towards people who “do not know they are Russians”, to impose their ‘correct identity.’ Ukrainian children are the most susceptible to this ‘correct identity’ indoctrination; this policy does not only affect the unaccompanied children but also those with families, subjecting all to the Russification propaganda.

The first section of this article presents estimates on kidnapped Ukrainian children and provides Russian and Ukrainian evaluations of these abductions. The second section draws attention to the insufficiency of the concepts of genocide, ethnocide and identicide in this context. It then discusses the historical and sociological reasons for describing this kidnapping as a ‘strategic imperial demographic policy.’ The article uses a documentary research method, examining official documents from Ukraine and Russia. This includes statements from officials, media reports and the analysis of the Russian legal framework with a focus on the recent changes in the citizenship law and the family code after 2014. Documents by international organizations and institutions such as the Eastern Human Rights Group, UN, UNICEF, ICC, PACE and OSCE about the issue of the deportation of children from occupied territories of Ukraine are analysed from 2022 to the present. Furthermore, visual materials, including documentaries, videos of parents searching for their children, and footage of returning children, are also employed. Interviews with returned children were conducted by the ‘Children of War’ online platform under the supervision of professionals and made available to researchers. This ensured both ethical compliance and access to first-hand material about the experiences of forcefully transferred children and their parents.

The examination is done through frame analysis. Goffman (1974) is the first scholar to use the term framing for understanding the organization of the world. Framing is a powerful tool, which allows us to understand how the actions are framed, legitimized and rationalized. While studying the official and other documents, the speeches, and the documentaries related to the transfer of Ukrainian children to Russia, frame analysis is used to understand the rationale behind the actions and narratives of both countries. We defend the view that frame analysis helps us to understand the subjectivity of both sides, and how Russia is shaping the perception of the people by using strategic framing both inside and outside the country through legal changes, propaganda (via controlling the ideas of the Russian public mostly through the control of the media, and using a new language to define its actions at the national and international level), the idea of being encircled by enemies (NATO and the ‘fascist’ West including the West of Ukraine), and the manipulation of history

and identity (Russians and Ukrainians are one people) to define the invasion of Ukraine.

2 | Russia's Invasion of Ukraine and the Forcible Transfer of Children

The Kremlin's war against Ukraine, which began in 2014 and escalated into a full-scale military invasion on 24 February 2022, has resulted in the destruction of numerous Ukrainian cities and villages, widespread civilian casualties, massive war crimes and displacement of millions of people. Civilians in the Russian-occupied Ukrainian territories have been subjected to the arbitrary rule and impunity of occupying authorities.

Moscow has pursued a systematic policy aimed at eradicating Ukrainian cultural identity and integrating occupied territories into the Russian Federation (See Hird 2024). This policy encompasses repressive measures against disloyal Ukrainians, ideological indoctrination, Russification, altering of the ethnic composition of occupied regions. Since 2014, Russian authorities have sought to transform young Ukrainians in the occupied territories into 'new Russians.' (Vorobyova 2024). This issue has increasingly drawn international attention.¹⁰ The UN Human Rights Council's Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine conducted interviews revealing that "many of the smaller children transferred have not been able to establish contact with their families and might, as a consequence, lose contact with them indefinitely."¹¹

Other international organizations have also confirmed the forcible transfer of Ukrainian children from the occupied territories to the Russian Federation. On 26 January 2023, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) condemned the Russian and Belarusian aggression as "gross human rights violations and violations of the international human rights law" (Resolution 2482).¹² PACE further warned that the "so called 'de-Ukrainization' process carries characteristics of public incitement to genocide" and confirmed that Russian actions against Ukrainian civilians, including "the forcible transfer of children of group to another group for Russification purposes through adoption by Russian families and/or transfer to Russian-run orphanages or residential facilities like summer camps" relates to Article II of the Genocide Convention.¹³ PACE called upon Russia "immediately cease the forced deportation and transfers of Ukrainian civilians, including children ... and allow a safe return and, in the case of children, ensure that they are promptly reunited with their families".¹⁴ In February 2023, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, visited Ukraine and emphasized the urgent need to reunite deported children with their families or legal guardians, calling for coordinated international human rights action.¹⁵

On 12 December 2023, the Yale School of Public Health's Humanitarian Research Lab published a report titled *Belarus' Collaboration with Russia in the Systematic Deportation of Ukraine's Children*.¹⁶ Based on field research, the report documented that, between 24 February 2022 and 30 October 2023, at least 2442 Ukrainian children aged 6 to 17 were transferred to Belarus, indicating Belarus' support for Russia's systematic campaign of child deportation and the Russia Federation's

role in this collaboration. The report identified 13 facilities in Belarus, where children were subjected to re-education and military training; however, it noted that the exact number of children remaining in Belarus is unknown.¹⁷ Andreas Umland (2024) from the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies (SCEEUS) also addressed Belarus' role and emphasized that Russia's policy of deporting Ukrainian children has persisted since 2014. Aligning with the argument of this article, Umland stated that the Russian invasion is not only a geographical and military-political conquest but also a demographic and national-cultural project aiming to increase Russia's declining population by Russifying Ukrainians (Umland 2024: 6).

Due to the ongoing war, providing the exact number of Ukrainian children deported to Russia and Belarus is currently impossible. Only rough estimates are made by Ukrainian and Russian sources. President Zelenskiy stated in a documentary by *The Kyiv Independent* that "Russian military is blocking any attempt to organize humanitarian corridors and save people, our people ... we know for sure about at least 19,505 deported Ukrainian children and this is only a fraction of our little Ukrainians who are still in the hands of the enemy."¹⁸ In February 2024, he tweeted, "We know the names of almost 20,000 children who were deported. And this is probably only a part of the larger number - hundreds of thousands of children could have been deported. Children whom Russia refuses to return to their families and homeland. Children who are taught to hate freedom."¹⁹

The Children of War online platform, established by the Ukrainian Ministry for the Reintegration of the Temporarily Occupied Territories, reports fully documented cases. As of 13 April 2025, the platform lists 19,546 forcibly displaced Ukrainian children.²⁰ Meanwhile, open-source data from the Russian Federation reports that 744,000 Ukrainian children have been relocated to Russia.²¹ Daria Herasymchuk, Ukraine's Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights and Child Rehabilitation, expressed scepticism about the Russian statistics and estimated that the actual number may be as high as 300,000 (Semenyuta 2023; Kolesnychenko 2023). Mykola Kuleba, the former Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights and founder of the "Save Ukraine" project, indicates that over 1.5 million Ukrainian children may have been living under Russian control and subjected to Russia's educational and informational influence since 2014 (Lykhohlyad 2023). According to the Children of War portal, only 1269 children taken to Russia have been returned to Ukraine as of 13 April 2025.²²

The illegal transfer of Ukrainian children to Russia began with the "Train of Hope" program in 2014, through which Ukrainian orphans from occupied Crimea were sent to Russia for adoption by Russian families, and imposed a Russian identity²³ despite protests by Ukraine's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.²⁴ The 2023 report by Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE-ODIHR) has this remark: "Russia began to transfer children from the occupied territories of Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk regions in 2014." (Bilkova et al. 2023, 40). Accordingly, the official Ukrainian data showed 4323 illegally transferred orphans and children in social care institutions as of 1 January 2014, but only about 20 have returned to Ukraine (Bilkova et al. 2023, 40).

The SCEEUS report also confirms the ongoing deportation of Ukrainian children since 2014 (Umland 2024: 6–7).

Ukrainian children have been abducted from Russian-occupied regions through various methods, including forced relocation following the detention or death of parents, or the withdrawal of parental rights. Many are sent temporarily for ‘recreation’ but remain isolated and indoctrinated, with some children permanently transferred from orphanages. Since 2014, Russia has openly acknowledged these forced deportations and adoptions.²⁵ The Eastern Human Rights Group reports that orphans taken from occupied territories, are first placed in Russian detention centres, then transferred to “Centers for the Promotion of Family Education,” where they are assigned guardians and prepared for adoption by Russian families instructed to instil loyalty to the Russian government.²⁶

The OSCE Report details the stages and categories of deported Ukrainian children, confirming Russia's intentional negligence in seeking the children's relatives and the commitment of numerous other rights violations. The OSCE mission considers the re-education and permanent integration of these children into Russian families as proof of deportation under Article 49 of the Geneva Convention IV (GCIV) and altering of their nationality as proof of the violation of Article 50(2) of the GCIV. The mission confirmed repeated violations of the children's rights including the rights to identity, family, liberty, security, religion and participation to cultural life, and breaches of multiple articles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (Bilkova et al. 2023: 2).

Briefly, Ukrainian children are subjected to forced Russification through specially designed educational programs, materials, curricula, cultural events and specially trained social workers and foster families (Khoshnood et al. 2023; Walker 2024; Gall et al. 2023, Sullivan 2023; Vorobyova 2023; Kolesnychenko 2023). It becomes even more challenging to identify those whose names and biographies have been altered. It severs any remaining connections between children and their homeland, thereby finalizing the systematic process of their Russification.²⁷

3 | Different Narratives by the Russian Federation and Ukraine

Although both the Ukrainian and Russian governments declared that Ukrainian children had been transferred from Ukraine to Russia since the beginning of the war, they have different narratives of this phenomenon and their framings differ significantly. Ukraine asserts the illegality of the forcible transfer of children and defines it as a war crime and genocide aiming to destroy the Ukrainian identity. Russia's narrative is entirely different. Maria Lvova-Belova argues that when Russia grants citizenship to Ukrainian children, it does not violate their identity. She claims that issuing Russian passports to these children does not nullify their Ukrainian citizenship and identity and, rather, it offers them the opportunity of dual citizenship and other advantages. Lvova-Belova asserts that Russia's actions towards Ukrainian children are prompted solely by empathy and love.²⁸ Similarly, President Putin declared that “children are a sacred cause. We took them out of the conflict zone. Saving their

lives and health,”²⁹ a statement that reflects his persistent emphasis that Ukrainian territory forms an integral part of historical Russian lands and echoes his notorious words that Russians and Ukrainians are ‘one people’ (Putin 2021, 2024).

Kremlin's broader narrative of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict justifies the Russian Federation's forcible deportation of Ukrainian children. In this context, Russia denies being the aggressor and claims to have peaceful intentions in resolving the conflict in Ukraine. Russia asserts that it was compelled to send troops to Ukraine to prevent “the threat of a direct attack from Ukrainian territory on the Russian Federation.” (Putin 2021, 2024). Furthermore, Russia portrays Ukraine and its government as dependent on the orders it receives from Washington (Putin 2021, 2024). Russia's stated objective is to “ensure that Ukrainians have the right to determine their own fate” and to protect both Russia and Ukraine from what it perceives as Western aggression (Putin 2021, 2024). Russia claims to be rescuing Ukrainian children from the ‘barbaric bombings’ by Ukraine and the West, and helping them exercise their rights to special care and assistance (Zakharova 2022). Therefore, the forced deportation of Ukrainian children is referred to as ‘evacuation’ in Russia.

Russia's denial of a distinct Ukrainian identity manifests itself not only in its leader's pronouncements but also in a series of recently enacted laws, which automatically consider Ukrainians from the occupied territories as citizens of the Russian Federation. Noteworthy is the change in the Russian Constitution following the so-called referendums organized by Russian authorities in parts of the occupied Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions of Ukraine from 23 to 27 September 2022.³⁰ On 4 October 2022, the President of Russia signed decrees formally accepting the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions of Ukraine into the Russian Federation.³¹ In essence, by transporting the Ukrainian children to Russia, the Russian authorities, in particular President Putin, claim that “the tragedy in Ukraine affects, of course, our very young citizens”.³² Thus, the frame used by Russia related to Ukrainian children is based on a protection rhetoric, which is part of supporting co-ethnics outside Russia, one of many frames used by Putin, becoming an important element of foreign policy as well.

In contrast to the Russian narrative, the Ukrainian narrative reports systematic abduction of Ukrainian children since 2014, involving their relocation to Russia, adoption by Russian families, and ideological re-education to erase their Ukrainian identity—a practice deemed genocide under the Genocide Convention (Article II-e). At a UN Security Council meeting on 23 August 2023, Ukraine's UN representative compared Russia's actions to Nazi Germany's Lebensborn program (Solomko 2023). Within this program, children with the proper ‘Aryan appearance’ in Nazi-occupied territories, predominantly from Central and Eastern Europe, were taken to Germany, placed in German foster families with new German names and surnames, and subjected to forced Germanization.³³ Ukraine's Prosecutor General, Andriy Kostin, who also likened Russia's crimes to those of Nazi Germany, emphasized that Europe has not witnessed such a large-scale deportation of children since World War II (Voloshyna and Nazarenko 2024). Speaking at a conference titled “Russia's War on Children” held in Riga in 2024, Kostin

stated that Ukrainian children are not only being displaced but also stripped of their Ukrainian identity, which contravenes international humanitarian law.³⁴

According to the authors of the analytical report “Forced Deportation of Children in the Russian Federation”, Russia seeks to solve its demographic problems by deporting Ukrainian children, thereby aiming to increase the number of Russian citizens of Slavic appearance.³⁵ Pavlo Lysianskyi, the director of the Institute for Strategic Studies and Security and founder of the Eastern Human Rights Group, which prepared the report, states, “Instead of conducting social programs and addressing the demographic problem with normal civilized tools, Russia has simply decided to steal Ukrainians, issue them Russian passports, and solve the demographic problem in this manner. This is the Nazi approach.”³⁶ Lysianskyi characterizes such forcible acts as elements of ethnocide.³⁷

To sum up the Ukrainian narrative and framing, Russia's goal in taking Ukrainian children away is twofold: to solve its own demographic problems and to destroy the Ukrainian identity by targeting the future generation. The “Bring Kids Back UA Project” is Ukrainian President's initiative to return all Ukrainian children illegally deported by Russia back to Ukraine.³⁸ *The Bring Kids Back UA* website collects information about the mass deportation of young Ukrainians and provides personal stories of some of the returned children. Since 2 February 2024, the International Coalition for the Return of Ukrainian Children has been operating on the joint initiative of Ukraine and Canada, which has included 33 countries as of September 2024.³⁹ Thus, unlike the Russian side, Ukraine explicitly defines the removal of Ukrainian children not as ‘evacuation,’ but as ‘abduction.’ Thus, Ukraine frames its narrative on the violation of international law, nonrecognition of Ukrainian identity and as a continuing imperial policy based on the myth that Ukrainians and Russians are ‘one people,’ which will serve to solve the demographic problems of Russians.

4 | Beyond Genocide, Ethnocide and Identicide

This article does not aim to discuss the terms genocide, ethnocide and identicide, but rather to draw attention to the fact that, while the kidnapping of Ukrainian children can be defined by these concepts, it is a more complex phenomenon and thus calls for a thorough discussion of historical and sociological perspectives. Raphael Lemkin coined the terms genocide and ethnocide in 1944 to describe the systematic murder of Jews by Nazi Germany. Although he used these two terms interchangeably, only genocide has been widely adopted in international law. Lemkin described genocide as ‘the destruction of a nation or of an ethnic group.’ (Lemkin 1944: 79; see Heiskanen 2021). According to the 1951 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, “any act committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group,” including “forcibly transferring the children of the group to another group,” constitutes genocide (Article II-e).⁴⁰ Thus, the transfer of Ukrainian children to Russia could be classified as genocide. Ethnocide, a term that had ‘remained essentially dormant’⁴¹ until anthropologists like Robert Jaulin and Pierre Clastres revived its use in the 1970s,

refers to the intentional destruction of a culture while keeping the people. This interpretation still preserves its validity⁴² and applies to the kidnapped Ukrainian children, who are not physically eliminated but subjected to an oppressive Russification policy aimed at erasing their Ukrainian identity.

The term identicide, first coined by Sarah Jane Meharg in 1999, refers to a war-fighting tactic aimed at destroying cultural elements through different ways to annihilate a group's identity (Meharg 2001, 2020). Although Meharg focused on the destruction of places, people, and practices when using the term identicide, she also defined it as the “killing of the relatedness between people and place, and eliminating the bonds which underpin individual, community and identity”. (Meharg 2020: 2). Thus, transferring Ukrainian children to Russia, automatically granting them Russian citizenship, and erasing their previous records constitute acts of identicide. Selectively attacking culturally and historically symbolic places in Ukraine is part of this act as well. This is taking us back to Lemkin because as mentioned by Azarov et al., according to Lemkin destruction of the cultural heritage is the first step of genocide which is “often followed by cultural assimilation and denial of the cultural distinctiveness of the oppressed group” (Azarov et al. 2023: 251). They give the example of the confiscation or destruction of historical and fiction literature in the occupied territories of Luhansk, Donetsk, Chernihiv and Sumy regions, which are not in line with the Kremlin's vision (Azarov et al. 2023: 251).

Declaring that the roots of Russian nation and identity are in Ukrainian lands, during these attacks, Russia tries to protect the cultural and historical structures that are important for the Russian history. According to Russian narrative, Ukraine is an integral part of the Russian World (*russkii mir*) and a place where the Russian nation was born and where many sacred places of Orthodox Christianity are situated. For this reason, Russia denies the sovereignty of Ukraine and the existence of a separate Ukrainian identity, and attacks places that are symbolic of the Ukrainian national culture and identity. The museums dedicated to Ukrainian folk artist Maria Prymachenko in Kyiv and to Ukrainian philosopher Hryhorii Skovoroda in Kharkiv were destroyed by Russia, just to name a few (Holder 2024). Places representative of the Ukrainian cultural identity are destroyed, so are the relatedness of places important for Ukrainians with Ukrainian identity. The remarks made the Russian actor and film director, Ivan Okhlobystin, in an interview to Radio Komsomolskaya Pravda plainly summarizes the Russian approach: “Ukraine should not exist, but this does not mean that we should destroy Ukrainians. Ukrainians are part of us.” (Yakunin and Fridrikhson 2024). This explains why people who do not accept the Russian narrative are killed and why children are forced to forget Ukrainian identity. Their identity and cultural elements, such as language, are being erased, but they are not killed, because they are ‘potential Russians’.

As seen in these past examples, the forcible transfer of children is indeed an act of identicide. The seriousness of the act is evidenced by the testimonies of kidnapped Ukrainian children. A Ukrainian child named Vitaliy stated, “they told us to speak Russian, they said we need to forget Ukrainian language. They said there would be no such language”.⁴³ Another Ukrainian child, Illia, said that he was not allowed to say “glory to Ukraine”

but “glory to Ukraine as part of Russia” and was compelled to write in Russian.⁴⁴ The children reported that they were forced to stand for the Russian National Anthem.⁴⁵ Yulia Ioffe (2023) points to the trauma of forcibly transferred children. According to her, Ukrainian children are isolated from their families, culture and identity to be subjected to a Russification policy, one similar to that used during the Soviet period on various national groups such as children of smaller peoples of Siberia or the Baltic states. Ioffe (2023) notes that such policies are not unique to Russia, citing examples like Native American and Australian children, the Yenish children in Switzerland and the Inuit in Danish Greenland. However, the transfer of Ukrainian children differs because Russian narrative claims them as Russians. Unlike other cases, where the ultimate objective was to erase the national identity of children and to assimilate them, Ukrainian children, are not regarded as an unwanted minority whose complete assimilation is not possible. This makes their case unique with deep historical and demographic roots. It also parallels Nazi Germany’s Lebensborn program which selected Aryan looking children, mostly Polish, for full assimilation through adoption. In contrast, cases like the Inuits Yenish and Saami involved cultural assimilation rather than a complete assimilation, as their physical traits and societal perceptions prevented complete absorption.

5 | Why is the Kidnapping of Ukrainian Children a ‘Strategic Imperial Demographic Policy’?

Putin’s (2021) assertions that Ukrainians and Russians are ‘one people,’ the Russification policies in Russian-occupied Ukrainian territories, and the abduction of Ukrainian children all stem from an imperialist perspective formed during the Russian Empire’s emergence and expansion. This worldview was shaped by the colonization of Ukrainian lands and the interactions between the imperial centre and the Ukrainian people. It is also evident in the 56-min speech Putin made on 21 February 2022, recognizing the so-called Luhansk and Donetsk People’s Republics. In this speech, Putin stressed that Ukraine has been, since the 17th century, historically, culturally, and spiritually an inseparable part of Russia, highlighting blood ties and kinship between the two nations.⁴⁶ Understanding the historical motives behind Russia’s invasion of its neighbouring nation is essential. In brief, Russia’s attack on Ukrainian identity is presumed to date far centuries before the invasion of Crimea in 2014.

In the Ukrainian historical narrative, neither the current Russian-Ukrainian war nor the policy of assimilating Ukrainians is anything new. Indeed, the words of Russian White General Anton Denikin, written as early as 1937, emphasize: “Never, under any circumstances, will any Russia—whether conservative or democratic, republican or authoritarian—allow the separation of Ukraine”.⁴⁷ According to the 1926 census, Ukraine’s rural population was much larger than its urban population, which was under Soviet control. Stalin recognized the threat posed by the Ukrainianization of cities as a result of industrialization. He addressed this issue at the Tenth Party Congress in 1921, citing examples of Hungary and Latvia, where the German character of cities had changed due to then migration of Hungarians and Latvians. To prevent Ukrainian identity from taking root

in the cities, the Soviet regime used all its power to suppress Ukrainianization of Ukrainian cities (Sahaydak 1976: 58). A few episodes from only the twentieth century Ukrainian history suffice to demonstrate this long-standing attitude towards Ukraine and Ukrainian people: Bolshevik and White Russian armies’ efforts to destroy the newly-proclaimed Ukrainian state in 1917–1921, the Kremlin’s Holodomor⁴⁸ policy in the early 1930s, mass executions of the national Ukrainian intellectuals (1920s–1930s) known as the ‘Executed Renaissance,’ the anti-Soviet guerrilla war of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) units during and after World War II, and Moscow’s Russification policy in Soviet Ukraine (1960s–1980s).

As the Moscow state expanded and transformed into the Russian Empire after 1721,⁴⁹ the concept of a ‘triune Russian people’, which included Great Russians, Little Russians and White Russians, took shape in the Russian imperial mindset. The old term of Greek origin, *Malorossia* (actually meaning Little Russia), began to be reinterpreted to refer to the lands of modern Ukraine. Consequently, Ukraine and Ukrainians were not recognized as an equal neighbouring country with rights to their own state and independent political and cultural development. Ivan Ilyin, a white émigré, who was later embraced as a guiding intellectual figure by the Putin regime, authored a number of texts portraying Ukraine as an artificial project devised by the Germans to dismember the ‘unified Russian people’ and the one and indivisible Russian State. When speaking about the Ukrainian state, Ilyin deliberately places the term in quotation marks (1938, 252–254). Ilyin’s views represent a distilled expression of the Russian Imperial narrative (1956).

In the Russian Empire, and later in the Soviet state, despite the official slogans of proletarian internationalism and the formal existence of the Ukrainian SSR, the primary objective of state policy was not so much to physically destroy Ukrainians but rather to persuade them that they were, in fact, ‘one people’ with Russians. Thus, physical destruction primarily targeted those who consciously identified with a separate Ukrainian identity. The policy of cultural assimilation proved more effective, enabling the empire to utilize human resources from Ukraine in its interests. In this sense, the fight against a separate Ukrainian identity and features, which were never recognized or tolerated, has been a priority since tsarist times. The Minister of Internal Affairs, Piotr Valuiev, infamously wrote in a memo to Tsar Alexander II that “there was no special Little Russian language, there is not and cannot be,”⁵⁰ while the tsarist authorities consistently banned the use of the Ukrainian language in educational, religious, and cultural spheres.⁵¹ The Russian tsarist government prohibited something that it had already perceived as non-existent. These attacks on the intangible cultural heritage of Ukrainians such as language and educational programs are also bringing us back to Lemkin who is evaluating these as mentioned by Azarov et al. (2023: 252) as important as attacks to tangible cultural heritage in terms of actions of genocidal intent.

Along with banning the recognition of a separate Ukrainian identity, the tsarist government also promoted the Russification of Ukrainian society. First of all, the Ukrainian elite, church and education were Russified. Even during tsarist times, the imperial centre utilized ethnic Ukrainians in various capacities such as high-level civil servants, diplomats, military officers,

or priests and extended the borders and spheres of influence of the Russian state, often employing natives of Ukraine. In particular, Ukrainians were used in the imperial army in all the colonial wars waged by the Muscovy/Russian/Soviet Empire in regions ranging from Finland to Japan, over the course of the 17th to 20th centuries. Similarly, in the Soviet era, talented Ukrainians were employed to execute Russian/Soviet imperial projects. As regards this, in the 1960s, the Ukrainian dissident Ivan Dziuba in his landmark work “Internationalism or Russification?” emphasized that typically all the joint achievements of the peoples of the USSR in the international arena were attributed to Russians (e.g., ‘Russians launched the Sputnik,’ ‘Russians built the Aswan Dam,’ ‘Russians help the peoples of Asia and Africa,’ the so-called ‘Russian aid’), while the contribution of Ukrainian scientists, engineers and workers in these projects, remained unknown to the world (Dziuba 1968).

The Russian imperial centre implemented a targeted demographic policy to Russify Ukraine through a twofold process: settling Russians in Ukraine and relocating Ukrainians elsewhere. Russians replaced officials and specialists, while Ukrainians were sent to develop industries in Siberia, Kazakhstan and other Soviet regions. Over time, many Ukrainians assimilated, as locals perceived them as Russians. Thus, the Moscow-driven demographic policy resulted in two interconnected trends: an increasing Russian population in Ukraine and the assimilation of relocated Ukrainians. The Russian population in Ukraine grew from 9.2% in 1926 to 22% in 1989,⁵² only reversing after independence. By 2001, the share of people identifying themselves as ethnic Russians was 8.3 million, 17.3%.⁵³

Despite waves of forced and voluntary resettlement of Ukrainians to Russia during the Soviet period, census data show that the number of Ukrainians in the RSFSR was decreasing or remained almost unchanged: 7.87 million in 1926 to 4.36 million in 1989. By 2010, only 1.92 million people identified themselves as Ukrainians in the Russian Federation (1.3% of the total population of Russia). Strikingly, by 2020, in just 10 years, this number halved to 884,000 (0.6% of the population).⁵⁴ At the same time, official Soviet and Russian statistical data show a steady decline of Ukrainians within Russia’s population throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries. Their share dropped from 7.8% in 1926 to 3% in 1939 and 1.34% in 2010, halving again to 0.6% by 2020, mirroring Stalin era demographic shifts.

The lack of opportunities for Ukrainian cultural development in Russia (Ukrainian schools, books, media) paved the way for the large-scale assimilation of whole regions within the Russian Federation that were once densely inhabited by Ukrainians (e.g., Belgorod/Bilhorod, Kursk, Voronezh/Voronizh, Starodub in Bryansk region, Taganrog/Tahanrih, Kuban, the North Caucasus, the Urals and the Far East). Despite the continuous influx of Ukrainians into Russia over several centuries, the percentage of people who identify as Ukrainians, as indicated by official Russian censuses, is inadequately minuscule. The censuses in the 20th and early 21st centuries demonstrate that the Russification of Ukrainians has continued throughout the imperial and Soviet periods, and persists in the present-day Russian Federation. After all, they were under the influence of the Russian systematic framing.

The same Russification policy is being pursued in the territories of Ukraine occupied since 2014. The Russian occupation administration in Crimea, Donbas and the Russian-controlled parts of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions disregards any mention of these territories belonging to Ukraine. The ethnic composition of the territory is changed by means of resettlement of the Russian population from Russia’s interior, removal of the Ukrainian language and history from school curricula, destruction of Ukrainian books in the school libraries of the occupied areas and *de facto* ban on the use of Ukrainian language in public space (Vorobyova 2023; Vas’kivs’ka et al. 2022). Ukrainians are exposed to the Russian imperial ideology, which asserts that the Russians and Ukrainians are the same people, that Ukrainians are Russians, and that the territory of Ukraine is a part of ‘historical Russian lands,’ which is meant to belong to the Russian Federation.⁵⁵ The Kremlin strategically aims to indoctrinate Ukrainian children with the Russian culture, instil in them a new Russian identity and engage them in militaristic education for future recruitment into the Russian army.⁵⁶ The purpose is to mould these children into patriots of the Russian Federation, sever all ties with Ukraine, instil hatred towards anything about Ukraine, and foster readiness to fight against Ukraine on behalf of Russia. Such ideological indoctrination has a genuine impact on children, making it easier to erase their cultural memory and replace it with a new one.

All these historical and sociological facts mentioned above clearly demonstrate the historical continuity of the strategic imperial policy implemented by Russia towards Ukrainians. The research made clear that concepts of genocide, ethnocide and identicide have the capacity to explain the kidnapping of Ukrainian children experienced since 2014, but are insufficient to explain the historical continuity of the general policy of Russification of Ukrainians. The concept of “strategic imperial demographic policy” however, includes in itself these three concepts and in addition clarifies the historical continuity and the demographic and strategic motives behind it.

6 | Conclusion

To conclude, the ethnic Ukrainian substrate has been exploited in the service of Russian imperial projects for centuries. In this respect, the illicit transfer of Ukrainian children to Russia for Russification and ideological re-education since 2014, along with the Russian imperial mentality’s refusal to recognize Ukraine as a distinct country and the Ukrainian people as a separate ethnic group with their own language and culture, are merely extensions of Russia’s long-standing tradition of assimilating Ukrainians. Therefore, with this continuing imperial mentality in consideration, the present study argues that the forcible transfer of Ukrainian children to the Russian Federation is a ‘strategic imperial demographic policy,’ which can be traced back to at least the Russian Empire era.

Based on the evidence collected in this research, testimonies of children who have managed to return to Ukraine, and the reports of international organizations, it is evident that the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide is violated by the Russian Federation. The forced transfer of Ukrainian children is not only a genocide but also

an ethnocide, for the Russian Federation is intentionally destroying a culture while holding the people captive. It is also an identicide because children are forced to forget their identity and cultural elements such as language. However, his article advocates that there is more to the kidnapping of Ukrainian children than these phenomena. The reason why these children are not killed is that they are ‘potential Russians.’ While spared, they are illegally treated as Russian citizens, both in the occupied territories and in the Russian Federation. Their ethnic and cultural identities are consistently eradicated to assimilate them into Russian culture and identity. This current act experienced nowadays is just one of those that occurred throughout history. As a result of the ‘strategic imperial demographic policy,’ which systematically obliterates the Ukrainian identity and imposes the Russian one, the number of people identifying themselves as Ukrainians in the Russian-controlled territories is declining, while those identifying themselves as Russians is increasing, without a mass physical destruction. Being under the influence of many different frames implemented by Russia, the kidnapped Ukrainian children, the new Russian citizens, will mostly identify themselves as Russians in the future and thus contribute to the increase of the Russian Orthodox population of the Russian Federation without knowing the realities of their past.

Endnotes

- ¹ Dity viyny, <https://childrenofwar.gov.ua/> (an online portal created with the support of the Office of the President of Ukraine, it includes only fully documented cases); Chislo pribyvshikh v RF bezhentshev s territorii Ukrainy i Donbassa prevysilo 5,4 mln chelovek, TASS, 13 March 2023, <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/17248303> (rough estimates by the Russian side of all those who arrived from Ukraine to Russia during the war, including 744,000 children).
- ² Situation in Ukraine: ICC judges issue arrest warrants against Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin and Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova, 17 March 2023.
<https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/situation-ukraine-icc-judges-issue-arrest-warrants-against-vladimir-vladimirovich-putin-and#>.
- ³ Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii, № 330, 30 May 2022, <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/47886>.
- ⁴ Semeyniy Kodeks RF 2024a. Stat'ya 134. Imya, otchestvo i familiya usynovlennogo rebenka, <https://skodeksrf.ru/rzd-6/gl-19/st-134-sk-rf>.
- ⁵ Semeyniy Kodeks RF 2024b. Stat'ya 135. Izmeneniye daty i mesta rozhdeniya usynovlennogo rebenka, <https://skodeksrf.ru/rzd-6/gl-19/st-135-sk-rf>.
- ⁶ Semeyniy Kodeks RF 2024c. Stat'ya 165. Usynovleniye (udochereniye), <https://skodeksrf.ru/rzd-7/st-165-sk-rf>.
- ⁷ Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii, № 183, 24 April 2019, <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/44190>.
- ⁸ Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii, № 187, 29 April 2019, <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001201905010004?index=1>.
- ⁹ This article analyses Russia's political, economic, military and cultural activities in Ukraine through the lens of imperialism. Serhii Plokh's concept of Pan-Russianism is highly illuminating, as it asserts that Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians constitute a single nation, thereby denying Ukraine's sovereignty (Plokh 2023, 2008, 2006). However, the concept of imperialism is broader in scope and capable of explaining various policies implemented both within the

former Imperial and Soviet borders. While imperialism extends beyond cultural and identity issues, this does not negate the fact that Pan-Russianism provides historical and cultural legitimacy for Russian expansionism. As a specific ideological and historical construct, Pan-Russianism serves as the ideological foundation of Russian imperialism, particularly in Slav Orthodox Ukraine and Belarus, while taking different forms in other post-Soviet states.

- ¹⁰ This issue was recently discussed at an international conference titled ‘Russia's War on Children’ held in Riga on 31 January–1 February 2024. See: <https://russiaswaronchildren.org/>.
- ¹¹ Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine to Human Rights Council—Advance Unedited Version, 16 March 2023, A/HRC/52/62, p. 16.
- ¹² PACE, “Legal and human rights aspects of the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine”, Resolution 2482, 26 January 2023, <https://pace.coe.int/en/files/31620/html>.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Council of Europe, “Annual Report 2023: Commissioner Mijatović calls for determined and collective efforts to regain lost ground and advance human rights”, 22 January 2024, https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/annual-report-2023-commissioner-mijatovi%C4%87-calls-for-determined-and-collective-efforts-to-regain-lost-ground-and-advance-human-rights?utm_source=miragenews&utm_medium=miragenews&utm_campaign=news.
- ¹⁶ Yale School of Public Health—Humanitarian Research Lab-A Conflict Observatory Report. “Belarus' Collaboration with Russia in the Systematic Deportation of Ukraine's Children”, 12 December 2023, <https://hub.conflictobservatory.org/portal/sharing/rest/content/items/b024b68ca6e54ecdadec2e79fa779f2d/data>.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Documentary: *UPROOTED: An Investigation into Russia's abduction of Children*, The Kyiv Independent, 0:31; 1:12. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cq2gEMhuDps>.
- ¹⁹ UkraineWorld, Zelensky on Ukrainian children deported by Russia, 20 February 2024, 6:48 pm, https://x.com/ukraine_world/status/1759968240476782719.
- ²⁰ Dity viyny, <https://childrenofwar.gov.ua/>.
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- ²² Dity viyny, <https://childrenofwar.gov.ua/>.
- ²³ Vospitanniki krymskikh detskikh domov i “Poyezd nadezhdy”, RIA Novosti, 20 October 2014, <https://ria.ru/20141020/1029097726.html>.
- ²⁴ MZS napravlyo Rosiyi notu cherez protypravne usynovlennyya ukraiyins'kykh ditey v Krymu, Radio Svoboda, 16 October 2014, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/26641040.html>.
- ²⁵ Deti-siroti iz DNR, LNR, Khersonskoy i Zaporozhskoy oblastey budut peredavat'sya v priyemnyye sem'i v obychnom poriyadke—detskiy ombudsmen [Orphans from the DPR, LPR, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhya Regions to Be Transferred to Foster Families as Usual, Says Children's Ombudsman], Interfax, 13 October 2022, <https://www.interfax-russia.ru/south-and-north-caucasus/main/deti-sirot-y-iz-dnr-lnr-hersonskoy-i-zaporozhskoy-oblastey-budut-peredavats-ya-v-priemnye-semi-v-obychnom-poriadke-detskiy-ombudsmen>.
- ²⁶ Vostochnaya pravozashchitnaya Gruppya. *Prinuditel'naya deportatsiya detey v RF* [The Eastern Human Rights Group. Forced deportation of children to the Russian Federation]. December 2022, p. 23, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1hChKv3DsrZPSWym-YdOhfrE4ySjcrX4/view?fbclid=IwAR0dG3GzV0dc9OxecPwe3zE-drvUBimolAyhilw6eILsN9gfkALuSRiPtvG>.

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