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## **THERE IS ALWAYS HOPE: PREVENTING UKRAINE'S IMPENDING HUMAN TRAFFICKING CATASTROPHE**

**MARK WADDINGTON, CEO**

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, two thirds of all the country's children have been displaced<sup>1</sup>. Hope and Homes for Children has been supporting some of the most vulnerable among them, including their families, with emergency provisions such as food, medicines, mattresses and blankets. In particular, we have sought to ensure children evacuated from orphanages located in some of the worst conflict affected locations are protected and cared for. We have also worked hard to bring attention to the children associated with that huge and deeply harmful orphanage system.

Ukraine's orphanage system confines children, regiment their lives, routinely chemically restrains them, and neglects them as individuals, while institutionalising them as objects. The impact on many is horrendous, often worsening the condition of those with disabilities while triggering special needs in those who did not have them. Their poor health, educational and well-being outcomes have lifelong consequences and provide clear evidence that such a system has no place in society. Anywhere.

Over the last few weeks, I have been repeatedly asked by journalists whether these and other children are at risk of trafficking. The answer is an obvious yes. But the more important questions are: how many children are at risk, who are those children, where are they and what can be done to protect them? The lack of any coherent system to provide up to date information to ensure we have answers to these questions is, in and of itself, a threat to their lives.

Globally, we have clear evidence<sup>2</sup> concerning the links between children's institutions and human trafficking - links that were formally recognised by the United Nations General Assembly in 2019 in its Resolution on the Rights of the Child<sup>3</sup>. In brief, orphanage trafficking works in two ways: children being trafficked out of families and into orphanage systems to be exploited for fundraising, begging etc, and then out of orphanage systems into the sex industry or forced labour.

To get a handle of the trafficking risk facing children associated with Ukraine's orphanage system, we need to assess the scale of this insidious form of exploitation. Context is important here. Research undertaken in the US indicates that the incident rate of trafficking far exceeds reporting, with only 6% of cases actually captured in police records<sup>4</sup>. More alarmingly, the United Nations' International Office for Migration (IOM) suggests that,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.un.org/press/en/2022/sc14857.doc.htm>

<sup>2</sup> [https://lumos.contentfiles.net/media/documents/document/2021/12/LUMOS\\_Cycles\\_of\\_exploitation.pdf](https://lumos.contentfiles.net/media/documents/document/2021/12/LUMOS_Cycles_of_exploitation.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). (2019). Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 18 December 2019. A/RES/74/133

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/252520.pdf>

globally, the number of identified victims of human trafficking represents less than 1% of the total<sup>5</sup>.

In consideration of such low detection and reporting rates, the country profiles published in the fifth report<sup>6</sup> on trafficking by the UN's Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), released in 2020, present a worrisome picture for Ukraine. Actual detected trafficking incidents in Ukraine number between 1,100 and 1,200 per year<sup>7</sup>. If we use the IOM global figure of a rate of only 1% of cases being detected, it suggests that the incident rate of trafficking in Ukraine is actually approximating 120,000 per year.

Trafficking is very often transnational in its scope. Trafficking incidents in neighbouring countries are an indicator of this. For example, Romania detects some 500 trafficking cases per year, meaning that the actual number could be nearer to 50,000, and Moldova<sup>8</sup> detects some 200 cases per year, suggesting a possible full incident rate of 20,000.

Neighbouring Poland, Belarus, Slovakia, and Hungary have lower detection rates<sup>9</sup>. But this too is a cause for concern, because another key finding of the UNODC report was that people from countries with low detection rates were identified in larger numbers as victims of trafficking in countries with higher detection rates, suggesting that actual incidents of trafficking from Poland, Slovakia, Belarus, and Hungary are in reality likely to be more significantly elevated. Although no data was presented for the Russian Federation in the 2020 UNODC report, there are major concerns about the large scale forced deportation of children out of Ukraine and into Russia. The Ukrainian Ombudswoman for Human Rights has claimed that 121,000 Ukraine children have already been moved by Russian forces into Russia where the government is fast-tracking adoption laws that, if implemented, will constitute a violation of the rights of the children and of the parental rights of their mums and dads<sup>10</sup>.

Even if the global figure of 1% detection does not apply specifically to Ukraine and its neighbours, they are unlikely to have higher rates than the US, a country with only two land borders and significant law enforcement capabilities. So at an equivalent 6% detection rate this would still mean some 20,000 people are being trafficked in Ukraine every year.

Although we are unable to be specific about the numbers, what all this points to is that very significant and well-established domestic and transnational human trafficking infrastructures already existed within and surrounding Ukraine leading up to the point of invasion.

So to the 24<sup>th</sup> February.

There are four critical considerations we need to bear in mind.

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<sup>5</sup> [https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl486/files/our\\_work/DMM/MAD/A4-Trafficking-External-Brief.pdf](https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl486/files/our_work/DMM/MAD/A4-Trafficking-External-Brief.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tip/2021/GLOTIP\\_2020\\_15jan\\_web.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tip/2021/GLOTIP_2020_15jan_web.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tip/2021/GLOTIP\\_2020\\_CP\\_Eastern\\_Europe\\_and\\_Central\\_Asia.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tip/2021/GLOTIP_2020_CP_Eastern_Europe_and_Central_Asia.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tip/2021/GLOTIP\\_2020\\_CP\\_Eastern\\_Europe\\_and\\_Central\\_Asia.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tip/2021/GLOTIP_2020_CP_Eastern_Europe_and_Central_Asia.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Approx 80 for Poland (suggesting a possible full incident rate of 8,000), approx 90 for Belarus (suggesting a possible full incident rate of 9,000), approx 30 for Slovakia (suggesting a possible full incident rate of 3,000), and approx 30 for Hungary (suggesting a possible full incident rate of 3,000).

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.businessinsider.com/russia-to-fast-track-adoption-of-deported-ukraine-orphans-kyiv-officials-2022-4?r=US&IR=T>

Firstly, armed conflict and displacement are key drivers of human trafficking. They disrupt established protection mechanisms such as social networks and schools, and dislocate people from what they know and can influence to help make themselves safe. Children's institutions and the infrastructure they depend upon have suffered widespread damage in Ukraine. This is of deep concern because the UN had already reported that in other conflict settings:

forcibly displaced populations (refugees and internally displaced families) have been specifically targeted (by traffickers): from settlements of Syrian and Iraqi refugees, to Afghans and Rohingya fleeing conflict and persecution<sup>11</sup>.

According to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 7.1 million people have been internally displaced since the invasion of Ukraine, and a further 4.3 million as refugees across its borders<sup>12</sup>. Within the context of an already well-established human trafficking infrastructure, this places a massive population at a heightened level of risk.

Secondly, the invasion comes on the back of a persistent global pattern in which women and girls remain the overwhelming majority of detected trafficking victims<sup>13</sup>, albeit the proportion of boys is increasing. In 77% of all trafficking cases involving women and 72% of those involving girls, the purpose is for sexual exploitation. For 66% of trafficking cases involving boys, the purpose is forced labour.

In Ukraine, the vast majority of displaced and refugee populations are women and children because of the conscription of men between the ages of 18 and 60. I have seen this first hand on the borders of northern Romania and Moldova where Hope and Homes for Children is supporting local authorities to meet the needs of the mainly women and children who make the crossing.

Thirdly, Ukraine has a large population of children associated with its orphanage system. Between 2015 and 2016, Hope and Homes for Children undertook a comprehensive national survey. We collected data from 663 residential facilities for children administered by three government Ministries (Ministry of Social Policies, Ministry of Health, and Ministry of Education). In addition, we carried out an in-depth study of ten different types of institutions and assessed their specific impact on children's rights. While not all the children were confined in these institutions around the clock, there was considerable evidence to prove they nevertheless endured the deeply harmful impact of institutionalisation because of the regime of care/treatment they experienced. In total, we estimated that 100,000 children were associated with the Ukraine orphanage system. Shockingly, we found that 92% of them were not orphans, and had one or both parents still alive.

Our findings were formally recognised by the government when we published them in Kyiv on Friday 2nd December 2016, at an event we co-organised with the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine. It was attended by the Prime Minister who gave a public commitment to putting child protection reform on the government's agenda. Our report, *The Illusion of Protection*<sup>14</sup>, presents the findings, and the figures in it were subsequently confirmed by UNICEF<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/01/1031552>

<sup>12</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/ukraine-humanitarian-impact-situation-report-1200-pm-eet-6-april-2022>

<sup>13</sup> [https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tip/2021/GLOTIP\\_2020\\_Global\\_overview.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tip/2021/GLOTIP_2020_Global_overview.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> [https://www.hopeandhomes.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/The-illusion-of-protection\\_eng.pdf](https://www.hopeandhomes.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/The-illusion-of-protection_eng.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/ukraine/en/child-protection-programme>

Then in January 2021, the Ukraine government back-pedalled on its commitment to shut down its soviet style orphanage system, one of the largest state-run systems of its kind in the world, and replace it with family-based alternatives. Some 60,000 staff are associated with this system, many of whom will understandably be concerned about their livelihoods. Collectively, they will have an enormous influence as a voting constituency. But with a clear vision for the transformation of the system – a vision which should include new roles for this huge staff workforce, who can be re-trained as social workers and carers in the community – and a commitment to harness the vast amount of funding that is already locked into the orphanage economy, there is no reason why the government’s commitment cannot be fulfilled.

The opposition to the reform was led by a group of Ukrainian MPs which by 2021 persuaded the Government to issue a Ministerial Order to exclude special boarding schools, education and rehabilitation centres, and sanatorium boarding schools from the scope of the reform. In so doing, they halved the number of children which the government had previously recognised were being subjected to the harmful process of institutionalisation.

Very worryingly, the figures used were not clearly verifiable, thereby establishing immediate concerns about large numbers of children falling through the cracks and being left behind. So by the time of the invasion, there was no coherent or functioning system to accurately identify the number of children confined in orphanages, or their status. Many staff associated with those orphanages inevitably turned their attention to their own safety and the safety of their families, which raised immediate concerns about neglect and the heightened protection risks this incurred for the children left behind, while making it almost impossible to get an accurate view across the whole system.

Fourthly, in subsequent research we undertook<sup>16</sup>, we revealed how vulnerable children in Ukraine are often misdiagnosed with medical conditions and prevented from attending mainstream schools. We showed how some parents were then coerced into sending them to institutions, far away from their families. Our study found that 86% of babies in one orphanage were misdiagnosed with serious illnesses. Sadly, a lack of one-on-one care had caused 90% of them to suffer developmental disorders. This is important because for every three months that a child under three spends in an orphanage, they lose one month of physical growth<sup>17</sup>. Institutionalisation is a process which actually forms disability where it might never have occurred. The organisation, Disability Rights International, had already exposed how children living with disabilities in Ukrainian institutions endured forced labour, routine beatings, sexual abuse, forced abortions, drugging, shackling, exposure to brothels operating from orphanage basements and trafficking for illegal organ transplants<sup>18</sup>.

Many children who have been institutionalised struggle to form healthy attachments with adults, which makes them especially vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. In the context of armed conflict, children with disabilities are more impacted by the ensuing crisis, but less included in the humanitarian response. Women and girls with disabilities are three times more likely to suffer physical and sexual abuse, and all children with disabilities are more

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<sup>16</sup> [http://hopeandhomes.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/zvit\\_2020\\_eng-stysnuto.pdf](http://hopeandhomes.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/zvit_2020_eng-stysnuto.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Williamson, J. & Greenberg, A., Families, not orphanages, New York: Better Care Network (2010), referring to Johnson, D. E., Medical and Developmental Sequelae of early Childhood Institutionalisation in Eastern European Adoptees (2000)

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.driadvocacy.org/wp-content/uploads/No-Way-Home-final2.pdf>

prone to injury, exposed to increased threats in public spaces, and risk losing the specific care and attention they need<sup>19</sup>.

So the challenge is both complex and grievous: we have a very large but currently unknown population of children, many of whom we are unable to locate and determine whether they are safe, some placed back with their families without the support needed to overcome the reasons why they were taken from them in the first place, some under the responsibility of a depleted number of carers, some on the move, many living with some form of disability, all acutely vulnerable to a well-established trafficking infrastructure that almost certainly continues to operate within the wider theatre of war.

Something must be done. Now. Today.

Here are just six things:

1. Establish a comprehensive monitoring and information management system – that utilises technologies such as mobile phones – to track the location and status of children without parental care and those vulnerable to trafficking. This system must incorporate case management capabilities to ensure that specific protection measures and care plans are in place and being implemented for each child. The complexity and challenge of doing this in a war situation is not a reason not to try.
2. Major bilateral donors should work together to leverage the aid they provide to ensure the wider humanitarian response recognises children previously and currently associated with Ukraine’s orphanage system as an especially vulnerable group, and tailor programmes of support to strengthen their protection and improve their care. This is important because quality care improves protection. Therefore such aid must also support programmes which strengthen family capabilities to care for their children – the subsequent strengthening of family resilience is one of the most significant ways of preventing the separation of children from their parents and carers at a time of protracted crisis. Whenever children have been separated from their families, aid must be sustained to ensure they can be re-united or that alternative forms of family care can be developed to avoid re-institutionalisation.
3. We face a fast-moving situation. The drivers of trafficking are dynamic in this context. It is important to identify these drivers and develop special measures to target and address them. For example, international adoption is a lucrative trade that financially exploits would-be parents by trafficking vulnerable children. Moratoria on practices such as international adoption must be expedited and enforced. A commission of governmental, EU and humanitarian agencies should be established to identify, monitor and take robust action with regard to these drivers.
4. Significant resources need to be invested in raising awareness of the risk of trafficking, especially among women and children. This should include practical advisories on what they can do to stay safe, and improving referral mechanisms to relevant support agencies within the humanitarian system, including access to hotlines.

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<sup>19</sup> [https://odihpn.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/HE-78\\_disability\\_WEB\\_final.pdf](https://odihpn.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/HE-78_disability_WEB_final.pdf)

5. Law enforcement personnel must be trained to enable them to better detect trafficking cases, report them and respond to them more effectively. This should involve their closer cooperation with other agencies, including health, education and social service providers – both governmental and non-governmental. Coordination mechanisms should be put in place to do this where they are absent.
6. The President of the EU Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, has agreed that Ukraine's membership should be expedited. This is an opportunity to challenge Ukraine to re-commit to reforming its child protection and care systems by eliminating orphanages and investing in alternative forms of family care. We know this works because it was made a condition of Romania's accession, a country that has reduced the number of children confined in its state orphanage system from over 100,000 to less than 4,000. And the evidence is clear about the consequences of this: children are safer, happier and enjoy significantly better outcomes.

Amid this horrendous tragedy is the spark of opportunity - the opportunity to both address a long-standing, egregious injustice, and an opportunity to prevent a human trafficking catastrophe. With the right support, we can help to achieve that.

12<sup>th</sup> April, 2022

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