



THE BULLETIN

**Activities of the Russian Federation
Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights
Maria Lvova-Belova to protect children during
a special military operation**

Issue#2/October 13, 2023

Dear readers!

In front of you is the second issue of the bulletin on the activities of the Russian Federation Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights to protect children during a special military operation (SMO). The first one was presented on April 4, 2023.

From the very beginning of the SMO, our institution became promptly involved in rescuing and supporting the children of Donbass. During this time, there were nine of my working trips to the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, Zaporozhye and Kherson regions, which since September 30, 2022 became a part of the Russian Federation.

In the very first months the priority was to provide emergency assistance to children in the «here and now» mode, at present, together with the authorities, we are working to create a full-fledged child protection system in the new regions of the country, including the implementation of our strategic programmes.

In addition, according to a consistent algorithm we continue to work on reuniting children with their relatives in Ukraine and Russia, and on all appeals we are painstakingly working, rejoicing at every meeting.

In the second issue of the bulletin we have updated the data so that the information about our activities in the realization of the rights and interests of minors affected by the military actions would be more complete.

*Maria Lvova-Belova,
Russian Federation Presidential Commissioner
for Children's Rights*

On the institution of Commissioners for children's rights

The position of the Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights was established by Presidential Decree No. 986 of September 1, 2009.

A significant step in the development of the institution was the adoption of the Federal Law of 27.12.2018 № 501-FZ «On Commissioners for Children's Rights in the Russian Federation». Among other things, it established the legal status of federal and regional commissioners.

The activities of the Commissioner are aimed at guaranteeing state protection of the rights and legitimate interests of children, the realization and observance of the rights and legitimate interests of children by state bodies, local government bodies, and officials.

The Commissioner promotes:

- ▶ restoration of violated rights and legitimate interests of children;
- ▶ improving legislation in the Russian Federation concerning the protection of the rights and legitimate interests of children;
- ▶ international cooperation in protecting the rights and legitimate interests of children;
- ▶ improving the forms and methods of protecting the rights and legitimate interests of children.

The Federal Commissioner acts as a coordinator of the activities of commissioners in the constituent entities of the Russian Federation.

At the regional level, the position of a Commissioner for Children's Rights has now been established in 86 regions, including the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR). In the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Zaporozhye region, the protection of children's rights is currently the responsibility of regional head's specialized advisers. The Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics have adopted laws on the commissioner for children's rights.

In the Kherson and Zaporozhye regions the establishment of a corresponding positions is only planned.

Goals of the Russian Federation Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights in the framework of the SMO:

- ▶ assistance in ensuring the safety of children who find themselves in war zones;
- ▶ assistance in the realization of children's rights to education, medical care, social security, family environment, etc;
- ▶ assistance in reuniting children with parents and other loved ones who were separated for various reasons during the period of SMO;
- ▶ provision of humanitarian aid;
- ▶ assistance in organizing psychological support for children affected by military actions;
- ▶ assisting executive authorities of the DPR, LPR, Zaporozhye and Kherson regions in building child protection systems;
- ▶ interaction with international organizations on child protection issues during the SMO.

Principles of the Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights work within the framework of the SMO:

- ▶ the interests of children and families are the top priority;

- ▶ promptness: assistance to children in a war situation must be provided quickly;
- ▶ family environment - a key condition for the harmonious development of a child;
- ▶ transparency: all of the Commissioner's work is covered in the mass media and social media.

Protection of Children's Rights in Temporary Accommodation Facilities (TAF)

Regional commissioners for children's rights are involved in providing assistance to families and children living in TAFs.

The Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights holds regular meetings to develop systemic solutions to urgent issues of assistance to children and families in the new regions.

For more details, see Issue#1 of the bulletin «Activities of the Russian Federation Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova to protect children during a special military operation».

Today, the institution of commissioners for children's rights provides medical, psychological, legal, material and educational assistance when necessary and at the request of citizens living in TAFs.

For example, in June 2023, Maria Lvova-Belova sent humanitarian aid totalling over 700 kg to 135 children from the Shebekinsky Urban District who were staying with their families in one of the TAFs in Belgorod due to shelling from Ukraine. The humanitarian cargo included bed linen, clothes, baby food, hygiene products and educational toys.

Protecting the Rights of Evacuated Residents of Social Institutions in the DPR, LPR, and Kherson region

In February 2022, the Heads of the DPR and LPR appealed to the Russian authorities to accept civilians on their territory.

Among those arriving in the Russian Federation in February 2022 were the pupils of the republican boarding institutions for orphans and children without parental care (about 2 thousand people in total), whose legal representatives were the directors of the above institutions.

Children from the DPR were subsequently placed in foster care with Russian citizens or transferred from the border TAFs to children's institutions in other regions of Russia. The fate of each of these children is known. The protection of their rights is under the control of the commissioners in the regions.

Children from the LPR have returned to their institutions in their entirety. Then, at the request of the Republic's authorized guardianship and custody agencies, some of them were placed under the care of Russian foster families.

A total of 380 orphans from the DPR and LPR were placed in Russian foster care families. For more details, see the section «Placement of children left without parental care, under foster care in the families of Russian citizens».

In November 2022, the Alyoshkin orphanage in the Kherson region was in close proximity to the front lines. With the assistance of the commissioner, 52 children with severe pathologies were temporarily transferred to safe territory in the Republic of Crimea. During their stay there, the children were provided with everything they needed by regional executive authorities, non-profit organizations, philanthropists.

At the end of August 2023, due to the assistance of the Russian Federation Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights, a boy from the Alyoshkinsky orphanage was handed over to his grandmother from Ukraine. It took a long time for the woman to get her own grandson out of the orphanage because it was impossible to determine his parentage from the documents. The boy was left at the orphanage by his parents before the start of the SMO. In order to reunite the grandmother and grandson, the Office of the Commissioner organised a DNA examination with the assistance of the Russian Centre for Forensic Medical Expertise of the Ministry of Healthcare of the Russian Federation. When the kinship was confirmed, the child was handed over to the grandmother in the presence of Maria Lvova-Belova.

All the residents of the Alyoshkin orphanage have already returned to their native region, to a new specialized social institution in Skadovsk.

The Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights' Assistance to Family Reunification

It doesn't matter where or in what status a child is in Russia, in an orphanage, in a foster family, whether he or she has Russian citizenship or not. If he has a parent with full parental rights, the family has every opportunity to be reunited.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has made his position on family reunification clear: «We have never been against children being reunited with their families, if, of course, their relatives are declared. There have never been any obstacles to this, there are none and, of course, there never will be»

In the vast majority of situations, the child is with a parent or relative. In this case, there is a need for reunification with other family members. Difficulties may be due to lack of necessary documents, lack of funds for travelling expenses or family disputes.

There are several ways of reunification:

- ▶ families resolve the issue on their own or with the help of volunteer organisations, and no administrative assistance is required;
- ▶ families or volunteer organizations apply to the Russian Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights;
- ▶ families apply to the official structures of Ukraine, which pass information to Russia, to the Office of the Russian Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights.

The Commissioner's Office promptly assists all legal representatives of children. Such work has been done since the beginning of the SMO and is of an individual nature.

To this end, the Office of the Commissioner maintains a database of wanted children. A working channel for co-operation with the Ukrainian side has been organised, which makes it possible to deal with each request. The necessary documents and information are exchanged through this channel, and the process of family reunification is co-ordinated. Children can be in both Russia and Ukraine; there are situations when we are talking about children in third countries, such as the EU.

The algorithm of processing a request by the Commissioner's Office consists of six steps:

1. Obtaining the full name of the wanted child and data about the applicant, as well as the presumed place of stay.
2. Sending a request to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia for clarification of the place of stay, additional requests to other departments of Russia and other countries.

3. If the child is in Russia, the Office of the Commissioner sends a request to the subject of the Russian Federation with a request to visit the minor and clarify the information.

4. Coordination of the position and the list of documents with the authorised bodies of the constituent entity of the Russian Federation.

5. Request from Ukraine the necessary documents confirming the legal grounds for reunification.

6. Coordination of transfer details with the Ukrainian side; if necessary, co-operation with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

In the process of reunification, the Commissioner's Office helps with translation and notarisation of documents, transport costs, hotel accommodation, provision of food and mobile communication, DNA analysis, if it is not possible to document the kinship.

Within the framework of cooperation between the Commissioner's Office and the Ukrainian side, the Russian-Latvian and Russian-Estonian borders are most often used for family reunification to enter Russia, while exit can be via them or via Belarus directly to Ukraine. At the same time, both relatives and authorized persons can come to pick up children.

As at 13 October 2023, 35 children from 24 families had been reunited with their relatives living in Ukraine and other countries with the direct involvement of the Commissioner's Office. These figures do not include data on children who were sent by their parents from the Kherson, Zaporozhye and Kharkov regions and other territories to holiday resorts in the south of Russia in the autumn of 2022 (see the section entitled «Assistance from the Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights in reunification of children sent on recreation in the Republic of Crimea and Krasnodar Region and their parents»).

Example 1. On January 31, 2023 a resident of Ukraine was reunited with her two younger teenage sisters living in a social rehabilitation center in Ryazan region. Earlier, the girls, along with their mother, had been evacuated to Russia from the territory where active hostilities were taking place, and lived in a TAF. Mom became seriously ill and died. The older sister, who lived in the Volyn region, wanted to take the custody of the girls. The older sister turned to the Commissioner's Office. The staff members of the Commissioner's Office counseled her on necessary documents, and provided assistance in contacting the guardianship agencies, and also provided escort from Moscow to Ryazan, where the three sisters were reunited. Subsequently, with the help of volunteers, the family returned Ukraine.

Example 2. The mother of five minors, a citizen of Ukraine, left for work several months prior to the SMO. As a result, the children were temporarily placed in an institution. Due to the increased danger to the lives of the local population, by order of the Ukrainian children were placed under the guardianship of a Ukrainian citizen. Subsequently, the guardian and the children voluntarily decided to move to the territory of the Russian Federation. The mother, wanting to be reunited with her children, contacted the guardianship

authorities and the Commissioner's Office. Volunteers paid for her tickets to Moscow, and the Commissioner's Office provided her with transportation to the children's location. The family was successfully reunited in January 2023.

Example 3. The parents of two children lived in different countries for several years: the father in Ukraine and the mother in Russia. The children lived with their mother, but she became seriously ill and died in November 2022, raising the question of the future arrangements for the children. Both their grandmother, who lived in Kursk region, and their father, who lived in Kiev, were ready to take the children. The father sent the corresponding application to the guardianship and custody agencies at the place of the children's residence, executed a power of attorney to his mother to bring the children to Kiev. The family was reunited at the end of November 2022.

Example 4. At the beginning of March 2022, a girl arrived in Russia with her maternal aunt. Her mother and grandmother knew about it and were in touch with her. As a result of a number of factors, the girl ended up in a social rehabilitation centre and also got into a bad story, which caused various kinds of legal restrictions that took time to resolve. In April 2023, from the rostrum of the UN Security Council, the girl's mother Nina Vlasova stated that the child was being held in Russia. She herself could not go to pick up her daughter, as she is associated with the Ukrainian armed forces.

The Commissioner's Office started to deal with this case even before the mother's statement. On April 26, an employee of the Commissioner's Office in Lipetsk region met with the girl. Already on May 3, Maria Lvova-Belova's advisor contacted the girl's mother to coordinate the details of her return home.

The girl's own grandmother came to pick her up. The Commissioner's Office helped with the hotel and transfer to Lipetsk region, translation of all necessary documents, and subsequent transfer to the Russian-Latvian border. The woman was accompanied by the Presidential Com-

missioner's advisor and a representative of the ICRC. The Russian Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights gifted the girl a new cellphone. In May, the girl and her grandmother returned to Ukraine.

Example 5. In July 2023, the Presidential Commissioner's Office helped a grandmother and her two granddaughters, aged 12 and 5, from Donetsk to visit the children's mother in Ukraine. The Ukrainian side asked for assistance. The Presidential Commissioner's Office worked out a safe route in detail - through several regions of Russia, then to Belarus and Ukraine. At each stage of the journey, regional ombudspersons for children's rights were involved: they met the children, accompanied them on the road, and saw them off to their hotels and trains. The ICRC provided transport support across Russia and Belarus, as well as accommodation expenses.

Example 6. In September 2023, the Presidential Commissioner's Office facilitated the reunification of a 15-year-old teenager with his mother. The boy and his dad came to Russia after the start of the SMO, they lived in the south of the country, but the child missed his mother, his native school, and his classmates in Ukraine very much. A mother from the Mykolaiv region decided to take her son home. The Presidential Commissioner's Office accompanied her at all stages: it co-operated with the Ukrainian side to draw up the necessary documents, helped the woman with logistics, and partially paid for travel and accommodation. The commissioner for children's rights in the Krasnodar, Leningrad and Smolensk regions also contributed. Specialists from the ICRC helped her with transportation across the territory of Belarus and accompanied her to the Belarusian-Ukrainian border.

The child's stay in the family, with close relatives, and even more so with blood relatives, has been and remains the priority of the institution of commissioners for children's rights.

The Presidential Commissioner monitors the situation in the regions to take prompt action to reunite families if necessary (not all families need additional assistance). To find a child in Russia, a person can contact the Commissioner's Office by e-mail: obr@deti.gov.ru or by using the form on the www.deti.gov.ru website.

In addition, the Commissioner's Office receives appeals from parents and close relatives living in Russia who are trying to reunite with children who have found themselves on Ukrainian territory. For example, on October 11, 2023, with the support of the Commissioner's Office and the Ukrainian side, a mother was reunited with her daughter, who had been living in a Ukrainian social rehabilitation centre. The girl had been placed there by the Ukrainian authorities of the system for the prevention of child neglect, having been taken from her father, who had failed in his parental duties. The Commissioner's Office is working on 18 such appeals.

Assistance from the Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights in reunification of children sent on recreation in the Republic of Crimea and Krasnodar and their parents

In January 2023, the Commissioner responded to information from regional authorities and open sources about difficulties in reuniting children sent on vacation to the Republic of Crimea and Krasnodar region and their parents (legal representatives) - citizens of Ukraine. The Commissioner decided to get involved in the process of family reunification.

In the late summer and fall of 2022, due to the situation on the front lines, parents from Kherson, Zaporozhye, Kharkov regions and other territories voluntarily sent children on vacation, including to protect them from military action. Children together with their attendants, by proxy of their parents, were admitted to sanatoriums and health camps in Crimea and Krasnodar region.

The situation on the front line did not always allowed the children and their escorts

to travel safely home at the end of their shifts. Therefore, it took time for the children to return.

A safe route around the front lines went through neighboring states. Reunification was also difficult because not all parents could come to pick up their children on their own. Conscript-age fathers were not allowed out by the Ukrainian authorities, the mothers had other children in their arms, and the state of their health prevented the parents from going. Not everyone was able to find a trusted person to pick up their children and the necessary funds for the trip. Families living in both Russia, Ukraine and the EU were assisted by volunteers from both Russia and Ukraine.

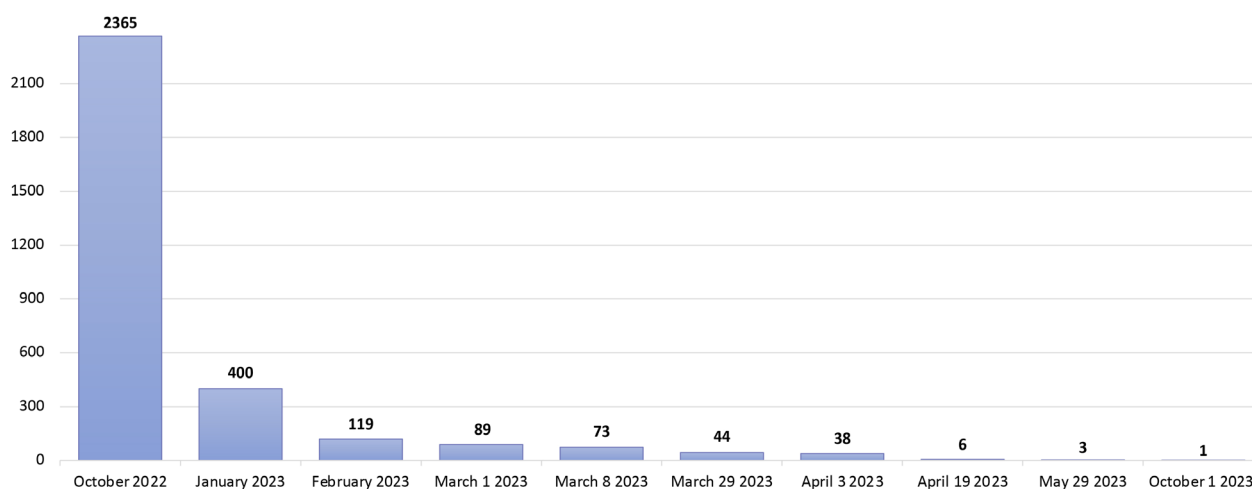
Staff members from the Commissioner's Office personally visited children in Crimea to take additional measures for those who stayed longer than others. There was a plan of action for each child. Two children from the group in Crimea were discussed with representatives of the ICRC about assistance in finding their parents who lived

in EU countries. Volunteer organizations in Russia and Ukraine played an active role in family reunification. The latter were afraid to address the Russian authorities and the Commissioner's Office directly.

Inter alia, owing to the Commissioner's efforts, to date all children of Ukrainian citizens who had been on vacations in the Krasnodar region and were delayed in returning have been reunited with their families.

In the Republic of Crimea, of the 2,360 children who had been sent by their parents for recreation, 38 children remained as of April 3, 2023, 6 as of April 19 and 3 as of May 29. The decision that it was better for the children to stay on the peninsula for the time being was made by their parents. As a result, 2 children were taken away by their parents in September, and only one child remains in Crimea as of October 1, 2023 - by the decision of his family. This is a 17-year-old teenager, and he is studying at a Russian university.

The number of children on vacation in the Republic of Crimea, by decision of parents who are citizens of Ukraine



During the spring of 2022, the Russian military in Mariupol discovered neglected children and turned them over to the social services of the city. Subsequently, the children were taken to the children's social Center in Donetsk as neglected children.

In May, a group of 31 children with the consent of their legal representative - head of the Children's Social Center - was sent for recuperation to a sanatorium in the Moscow region. Upon completion of the recuperation course the authorized bodies in the sphere of guardianship and custody of the DPR petitioned the authorized bodies in the sphere of guardianship and custody of Moscow region about their further placement under provisional guardianship in the families of Russian citizens.

From the group of 31 children:

- ▶ 3 children at the request of their father, who arrived after the filtration measures, were handed over to him the next day after contacting the Commissioner through a volunteer organization;
- ▶ 6 children were placed in family centers at their request, almost all of them subsequently wished to be placed with foster families;
- ▶ 22 children were placed in provisional guardianship by residents of Moscow region. 1 girl was later placed in the custody of a neighbor who lived next door to her family in the DPR.

With each of the remaining 28 children, in addition to their readiness to be placed with foster families, the possibility of finding and returning them to families of relatives or close acquaintances was discussed. In addition, the children were informed of the Ukrainian side's interest in their return. Many children expressed their reluctance to return to Donetsk, because the city was not safe. Some reported that they were ready to return after the end of hostilities. Those who wanted to return were assisted in their return.

To date, seven of the 27 children have reached adulthood and continue to live in Russia by their own decision.

In autumn 2022, the Russian military found 13 children from a correctional boarding school in Kupyansk (Kharkov region of Ukraine) in basements and took them out from under shelling. The children were without teachers and tutors, only three of them had documents. Information about the rest of the children was written with their words.

The administration of the boarding school where they were placed, as well as LPR Ministry of Internal Affairs officers, began searching for the parents and other legal representatives of the remaining children. The Office of the Presidential Commissioner, as well as the commissioner for children's rights in the Luhansk People's Republic, Inna Shvenk, became involved.

Some relatives were found quickly: in November one child was handed over to his mother, in December a boy and a girl were handed over to a guardian-grandmother, in January four siblings were handed over to their father, and in March another boy was handed over to his mother.

In May 2023, there was a reunion of a mother from Ukraine and her son, who was taken from the Kupyansk boarding school. After the volunteers' appeal, the Commissioner's Office helped with logistics, bought air and railway tickets, and provided a hotel. At various stages, the family was also accompanied by the commissioners for children's rights in Rostov region and LPR, and staff of the ICRC.

In June 2023, the brother and sister were picked up by their mother. The last children from this group - also a brother and sister - were reunited with their mother in early September this year. As of today, all children from the correctional boarding school in Kupyansk are in their families.

Placement of children left without parental care, under foster care in the families of Russian citizens

In April-October 2022, 380 orphans and children left without parental care from the DPR and LPR were placed to Russian foster families from 19 regions of the country.

Most of the children have been in republican orphanages for a long time. Basically, these children are siblings, that is, they make up family groups of 3-9 people, some of the children are with special health conditions. The placement of such children is traditionally difficult. In addition, due to the current situation in the DPR and LPR, it is quite difficult to find families willing to accept children.

It is important to understand that the territories of the DPR and LPR have been shelled by the Ukrainian Armed Forces for many years, and most orphaned children from social institutions in the republic are aware of this. Children do not perceive Russia as an enemy and expect protection and help from us, so being placed in safe territory with Russian foster families is not a traumatic circumstance for them.

All the work was done at the request of and with the active participation of the leaders and authorized bodies of the Donbass Republics. In April 2022, the first group of 27 children was placed under foster care in families in Moscow region by the DPR's guardianship authorities.

Assistance in placing children in foster care was temporary and urgent: it was necessary to remove children promptly from under fire and give them a family environment. An alternative would have been to place children in orphanages or TAFs in safe areas, but this creates additional risks

associated with collective stay in institutions, and does not correspond to the world, including the Russian, vector of deinstitutionalization. Among the children placed in care there are 22 minors found neglected in Mariupol.

All children who were placed under foster care acquired Russian citizenship, retaining the citizenship of the LPR, DPR, or Ukraine. Needless to say, that it is important to distinguish between the forms of family placement of children without parental care that exist in Russia.

Under Russian law, foster care (guardianship and custody) allows to place promptly a child without parental care into a family, by decision of the guardianship and custody agency. Adoption, on the other hand, leads to the establishment of a relationship between the adoptive parent and the adopted child, similar to the relationship between the parents and the children born to them, and is carried out by court order.

Foster care has been identified as the preferred form of placement given the potential reunification of minors with their blood relatives, if any are discovered, and in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which recognizes that the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding,

In April-October 2022 adoption was not used as a form of family placement with respect to children from the DPR and LPR.

The Day After Tomorrow Shifts

The Commissioner holds shifts for teenagers from war-affected areas. Since August 2022, eleven such camps have taken place. Their participants were 1,980 children from Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, Kherson, Zaporozhye, Belgorod, Bryansk, and Kursk regions.

The two-week program is designed for intensive social and psychological rehabilitation of adolescents.

All shifts have a psychological support service and an educational program with an emphasis on career guidance, since the participants - are high school and graduate school students. Teenagers attend trainings, master classes, sports sections, go on excursions, get acquainted with the history and culture of Russia.

The program of the shifts does not include military training.

The shifts showed their effectiveness in solving teenagers' requests and problems, which is confirmed by the results of psychological diagnostics, as well as feedback from children and their parents. The psychological state of the children is stabilizing, they are mastering ways to selfhelp. Thus, according to the psychologist's conclusions, 36% of the participants of one of the shifts understood their strengths, found new behavioural strategies, and gained an understanding of what they needed to develop in their dream profession. 28% of the children decreased their anxiety, they learnt to fight internal aggression and felt proud of themselves.

«The psychologist was the only one I opened up to and told absolutely everything that was bothering me, and she helped me to solve my problem. We had very interesting trainings that I wanted to attend!»

Vladislav S., 17, DPR

«It was very interesting to be in a new place, to meet and make friends with people from different cities. The counselors and the psychologist really helped a lot to become one big family in just 14 days. It's an accomplishment that makes me delight».

Yegor N., 16, Zaporozhye region

«I liked the shift very much because of the kind counsellors who were always on the same wavelength with us and the rich programme. We managed to unite and become a real team. Every day there were interesting circles - in maths, analytics. The camp gave me an impetus to change myself!».

Artem M., 15, Belgorod region

I am very glad that I went to this camp! I have unforgettable impressions about it! The squad became a big family for me. I will always remember my two counsellors! Thank them very much! If I have an opportunity, I would like to go there again.

Artem V., 17, Kursk region

The shifts are held at the expense of benefactors, and transportation and lodging are free for participants. Children participate in the shifts only of their own free will and with parental consent, and the Presidential Commissioner receives many requests from those wishing to participate and gratitude afterwards.

Humanitarian Action «To the children's hands»

At the beginning of April 2022, in cooperation with the Russian Humanitarian Mission, an autonomous non-commercial organization,

and other partners, we launched the humanitarian mission of the Presidential Commissioner - the action «To the children's hands».

Its main idea is targeting: work with on concrete requests from concrete families. Humanitarian convoys are delivering supplies to TAFs and operational headquarters of the action in the new Russian regions. At the moment, five humanitarian headquarters are operating - in Donetsk, Mariupol, Luhansk, Melitopol and Genichesk. From there, humanitarian aid is distributed to needy minors, families with children, and children's institutions, including in areas of active hostilities.

In 2023, the headquarters received about 3,000 requests from families with children. They concerned targeted assistance - provision of food packages, personal hygiene products, clothes, stationery, household appliances and furniture, assistance in improving housing conditions, obtaining documents and processing social payments.

As part of the humanitarian action 27 humanitarian convoys were organized, and targeted aid was provided to more than 12800 people. A total of about 240 tonnes aid worth more than 164 million rubles.

The humanitarian cargo included medicines and vitamins, specialized food for children with disabilities, wheelchairs, verticalisers, exercise equipment for disabled children, clothes and shoes, bedding, personal hygiene products, stationery, and food. In winter the list of critical needs was topped by everything that keeps you warm - warm blankets, portable heaters, generators for autonomous power supply.

In addition, charitable funds were used to equip computer classes and family-type TAFs, deliver necessary medicines and equipment to children's medical facilities, and help to prepare schoolchildren

in the DPR, LPR, Kherson and Zaporozhye regions.

In August 2023, musical instruments were purchased and delivered to two art schools in Melitopol, Zaporozhye region. Also in Mariupol, a master class in classical choreography was organised for young ballerinas, which was requested by one of the local residents to the Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights.

In September this year, a charitable campaign «Schoolchild to Schoolchild» took place. 1.5 tonnes of notebooks, diaries, pens, pencils, paints, felt-tip pens, albums and other stationery for 250 children were sent to new regions.

In addition, as part of «To the children's hands» humanitarian action, a sports ground is planned to be installed in Mariupol (DPR) in Rodina park.

«Happy Childhood» Charity Project

Since January 2023 the Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights and the St. Basil the Great Charitable Foundation implements the «Happy Childhood» project. It involves raising charitable funds and directing them toward the needs of children's social institutions, as well as targeted aid to children and families with children in new regions of Russia.

At present, support under the project is provided to three institutions. These are the Shakhter Orphanage (DPR), the Krasnodon Orphanage (LPR), and the Terpenyevsk Boarding School (Zaporozhye region). About 450 children and young adults are currently in their care. Many of them have disabilities and have been left without parental care.

Part of the funds collected under the project goes to the improvement and repair of institutions. In addition, funds are used to build a staff of specialists with the necessary competencies to work with children with serious health problems. Generators, washing and sewing

machines, furniture and hygiene products were purchased and delivered at the request of the heads of the institutions using project funds. A ten-seat minibus was purchased for the Terpenyev boarding school.

In March 2023, a team of highly qualified doctors from Moscow and the Moscow region worked at the Shakhter and Krasnodon boarding schools. They gave recommendations on care, treatment and rehabilitation of children. Assistance was also provided to other social institutions.

The charity event also raised RUB 750,000 to purchase expensive specialised equipment for the Republican Psychological-Medical-Pedagogical Commission (LPR), in particular, an interactive speech therapy mirror, sensory plates, simulators, as well as tests to study children's intelligence and methodological materials.

On June 1, 2023, the Happy Childhood charity festival - the first festival of safe content for children of all ages - was held in Moscow. It was attended by more than 6,000 people - the proceeds from ticket sales were used to support the charity project of the same name.

During her working trip in August 2023, Maria Lvova-Belova handed over a new car to the Donetsk Republican Specialised Children's Home (Care Centre), a new car to the Republican Trauma Centre of the Ministry of Healthcare of the DPR, devices for treating wounds with negative pressure, and also presented a RUB 5 million certificate to representatives of the LPR to create a new teenage space where children will be able to spend their time in an interesting and useful way.

Additionally, targeted aid is provided to families with children.

For example, a minivan was purchased for a family with many children from Zaporozhye region. The couple is raising ten children, seven of whom are under foster care. A mother from the DPR with many children

received a certificate for a two-story house. The woman is raising eight children alone, since their father, a serviceman, died last April. In September 2023 a spacious house was bought for a single father of many children who lost his leg during the SMO.

The «White Handkerchief» campaign was a success: it raised 3 million roubles, which were allocated to the needs of displaced persons from war zones, families with children, and organisations promoting the interests of children.

Assistance in rehabilitation and treatment of children

A separate area of the Commissioner's Office work is assistance in the rehabilitation of children affected by Ukraine's military aggression. Two visits have already taken place for children from the DPR for medical rehabilitation and health resort treatment:

- ▶ 23 children with disabilities underwent a programme of comprehensive psychological, medical and social support at the Sozvezdiye centre in Krasnogorsk, Moscow region;

- ▶ 12 children with motor disorders due to diseases of the central nervous system, including cerebral palsy, together with their parents and legal representatives, were treated at the Ogonek Health Centre in Elektrostal, Moscow region.

In August 2023, Maria Lvova-Belova visited 16-year-old Kirill, who had come under Ukrainian shelling in Horlovka and suffered extremely serious injuries, at the Republican Children's Clinical Hospital in Donetsk. The boy's mother had earlier asked the Presidential Commissioner to help with further treatment and rehabilitation in Moscow.

In early September, Kirill was hospitalised in a federal medical centre in Moscow. At the same time, two children from Shakhtersk orphanage, DPR, arrived for rehabilitation.

The Commissioner's Office assists in organizing the treatment and medical rehabilitation of children with mine blast injuries, including prosthetics. With the Commissioner's assistance, children are sent to metropolitan and federal children's clinics, which are the best in the country in their field. For example, to the Russian Children's Clinical Hospital and the Research Institute of Emergency Paediatric Surgery and Traumatology.

For example, a boy from the DPR suffered a severe mine blast injury and was urgently hospitalised at the Research Institute of Emergency Children's Surgery and Traumatology. The doctors did everything possible to treat him, to carry out all the necessary stages of complex rehabilitation with him and to prepare him for prosthetics. Thanks to specialists from Motorika LLC, the teenager received a bionic prosthetic hand with a hand-painted design, which was made by hand and according to his sketch. After learning all the functions of the prosthesis, the boy will be able to use both hands again. The costs of the bionic prosthesis totalled RUB 1.5 million and were paid for from charitable funds raised by the Presidential Commissioner.

In July 2023, the Commissioner assisted in the transport, hospitalization and subsequent rehabilitation at the Research Institute of Emergency Children's Surgery and Traumatology of a 13-year-old boy from the DPR.

The Commissioner is open for interaction with representatives of international organizations. Several meetings were held with representatives of international organizations during the period of the SMO. Thus, in October 2022, the Commissioner met with Karim Atassi, Head of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in the Russian Federation. The Commissioner provided detailed information on social support for orphans and children left without parental care from the territories affected by the SMO. In addition, the representative office, at its request, was provided with additional information.

In January 2023, a meeting was held with UNICEF Regional Director for Europe and Central Asia Afshan Khan. The Commissioner spoke about the relocation of children from the shelled areas, their placement, finding relatives and reuniting families, etc.

In addition, the Commissioner's office discusses with the International Committee of the Red Cross issues related to the search for and reunification of children with families in third countries. The ICRC received lists of children and contacts of their relatives in EU countries.

At present, some cases involving the reunification of children with their families are being worked out with the active support of the ICRC. Its representatives assist in organising transfers and payment for accommodation, a humanitarian corridor from Russia to Ukraine via Belarus, as well as in finding children who are in third countries and reuniting them with their parents who are in Russia.

On April 5 2023, Maria Lvova-Belova spoke at an informal UN Security Council meeting on the «Arria Formula» on the topic «Children and armed conflict: the Ukrainian crisis. Evacuation of children from the conflict zone». Reports on the situation in Donbass were also presented by Daria Morozova, Commissioner for Human Rights in the DPR, Eleonora Fedorenko, advisor to the head of the DPR on children's rights, and Evgeny Zhilitsyn, a trauma doctor from Donetsk. Aleksey Petrov, head of the humanitarian action «To the children's hands», shared the current results of the campaign.

On May 16, 2023, Maria Lvova-Belova had a working meeting with the leadership of the ICRC delegation in the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus. The issues of searching for children and their parents or other close relatives were discussed in detail. An agreement was reached to continue co-operation.

On May 19, 2023, the Commissioner met with the Special Representative of the UN Secre-

tary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Virginia Gamba. The key topic of the conversation was the protection of the rights of children affected by conflict. Measures to prevent possible violations against minors were discussed.

On June 29, 2023, Maria Lvova-Belova held a working meeting in Moscow with Cardinal Matteo Zuppi, President of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Italy. The parties discussed humanitarian issues related to military action and the protection of children's rights.

On July 4, 2023, the Commissioner met with the Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Qatar to Russia, Ahmed Ben Nasser Ben Jassim Al-Thani. The topic of the conversation included the actions of the Russian side to protect the health and lives of minors facing military action, as well as the reunification of children and parents separated during the SMO.

Interaction between the Commissioner and Ukrainian authorities

Since the beginning of the SMO, representatives of Ukrainian authorities have not officially contacted the Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights. It should be noted that Maria Lvova-Belova is open to interaction with the Ukrainian side, and if official requests were received, they would be considered.

Over time, a working channel of communication has developed between the Commissioner's Office and Ukraine for the exchange of information, verification of data, and coordination of the reunification process. Work through this channel is regular and constructive.

However, there is still a lack of co-ordinated actions between the authorities in Ukraine, which complicates the reunification process. The lists of children provided through other channels and intermediaries do not reflect the real situation, and their information is not always up-to-date and reliable.

In addition, the Ukrainian side does not agree on a faster and more optimal transfer of relatives

or trusted persons travelling for children from Ukraine to Russia via Belarus, although this would speed up the reunification process.

Ukraine's actions against the interests of children

Ukraine's actions against the interests of children

The work of the Commissioner's office directly in SMO zones, communication with children and their parents and analysis of publications in the press show that Ukraine acts against the interests of children:

- ▶ Children are not evacuated from dangerous zones, including those where active military actions are taking place. Children act as human shields for the Ukrainian military and neo-nazi forces. Ukraine is now conducting a mandatory evacuation - without the right to choose which side to move to, although, according to information we have received, a number of families would like to leave for Russian territory.

- ▶ Ukraine harasses Russian families and the orphans of Donbass they have taken into their care, as well as Russian specialists involved in providing humanitarian aid to children in the new regions of Russia, and their families. Threats are made to them by telephone and through social networks. The personal data of the families and specialists is publicly available on the Internet. Volunteers, humanitarian project workers who help in the process of reuniting children with their families are harassed too.

In April 2023, an orphaned teenager from Mariupol living in a foster family in Russia was attacked with phone calls and messages from Ukraine. He was forced to say that he had been placed in a family against his will and wanted to go back.

In response to the boy's refusal, the attackers began threatening the lives of his sisters. To save them, the teenager had to return to Ukraine. The provocation was prevented.

► Ukraine puts pressure on parents, whose children have been sent on vacation to recreation camps and returned from recreation camps on the territory of the Russian Federation.

► On the Ukrainian side, there are non-profit organisations, such as Save Ukraine, which, without coordinating their actions on reunification with their Russian counterparts, instruct relatives and invent legends, which they in turn tell to border guards. As a result, the time required to cross the Russian border and wait for the preparation of documents necessary for the transfer of children increases, which is not conducive to rapid family reunification. It also leads to difficulties in crossing the border, in particular when people pretend to be someone they are not.

► Ukraine is systematically shelling populated areas in the Belgorod, Bryansk and Kursk regions, as a result of which children, among others, are suffering. The Presidential Commissioner is taking part in providing assistance to civilians in border areas.

► Ukraine supports initiatives to track children using open data.

► Ukraine creates fakes that complicate the work to reunite children with their families, in particular, by creating distrust in the actions of Russia among parents and relatives. For example, it publishes information about allegedly wanted Ukrainian children on the www.childrenofwar.gov.ua website. The Commissioner's Office has repeatedly checked the information posted there and found inconsistencies: for example, the children have long since returned home from the health camp and the family has been reunited, but the data about them still remain on the website. Some relatives wrote requests to the site in the first months of the SMO, when for some reason they lost contact, but now the children have been found. Thus, the information contained on this resource about 19 thousand children allegedly forcibly displaced to Russia is not true and cannot be trusted.

Misinformation in the public space

Unfortunately, information about the work of the Russian Federation and the Russian Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights in rescuing and protecting children's rights during the SMO is misrepresented by foreign media and politicians, as we assume, in some cases deliberately, in some cases due to ignorance of the situation or unprofessionalism.

Ukraine has launched an unprecedented disinformation campaign in which the issue of child protection is being politicized to the maximum extent possible. It seems that the Ukrainian side needs not so much to help families as to create a mythological system.

Analysis of the foreign media shows that the authors of the materials draw conclusions regarding the work of the Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights based on unsubstantiated data. Their arguments are abstract, with no names or addresses, and therefore impossible to verify. In essence, the media are creating fakes.

Frequent statements by foreign media that do not correspond to reality include: «Russia deports children» (about children who have arrived in safe regions), «Russia prevents parents and children from reuniting» (the Commissioner's Office is not aware of such cases, on the contrary, various efforts are being made to remove any barriers).

Let us also note the problem of the misuse of terms. For example, foreign media often use the term «adoption» to refer to the placement of orphans in foster care in Donbass, when the term «guardianship» or, with a large degree of convention, «foster care», «custody», should have been used.

We assume that such an error may be caused by significant differences in the approaches to this issue in the legislation of the Russian Federation and Western countries.

In addition, hackers attack Russian Internet resources in order to plant inaccurate information in the net and in the press.

For example, on August 23, 2022 the publications Meduza and Mediazona, citing the website Krasnodar's Department of Family and Childhood Affairs reported the following: «More than 1,000 babies from liberated Mariupol have already found new families in Tyumen, Irkutsk, Kemerovo, and Altai region. More than 300 more babies are in temporary custody at specialized institutions in Krasnodar Krai and are looking forward a to meet their new families». On August 24 the state agency published a rebuttal to this information, saying that the material had been posted unauthorizedly, using a vulnerability in the server software, and that subsequently the site had been subjected to a DDoS attack. Nevertheless, the article was the reason for the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry's statement about the illegal adoption of Ukrainian children by Russian citizens.

At the same time, the activities of the Russian Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova to protect children during the SMO are as transparent as possible. Information about this work is easily available on the Internet - on the official website of the Commissioner www.deti.gov.ru, on the Commissioner's personal pages and the «Children's Ombudsman» communities in the social network Vkontakte and Telegram. In addition, on a regular basis, the Commissioner gives press conferences, interviews and comments for the Russian and foreign media.

Thus, on April 4, 2023, the press centre of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation hosted a press conference of the Commissioner. Maria Lvova-Belova gave a detailed account of her work and answered questions from journalists,

mostly foreign. The event was held in person and online.

In addition, in 2023, the Commissioner gave exclusive interviews and assisted in filming to a number of foreign media outlets. These included the American news channel Vice News, the Japanese television channel NHK, the Italian television channel RAI, the Spanish newspaper El País, the Swiss magazine Weltwoche, the Spanish video blog 100 Giorni da Leoni, the Colombian radio station W Radio, and the British television channel ITV.

Predominantly the same questions were asked in the interviews. It is important to note that some of the publications used the incorrect terms «adoption» and «deportation» again.

The main fakes created by Ukraine and its supporters regarding the protection of children during the SMO include the following.

Fake #1 «Russia is deporting and exporting children»

It is not true. Since February 2022, the Russian Federation has not deported but has taken in about 4.8 million residents of Ukraine and the Donbass republics, more than 700,000 among them are children. The overwhelming number of children came to the safe regions of Russia together with their parents or close relatives. Children's social institutions in Donbass travelled out from under shelling to ensure the safety of their pupils.

Fake #2 «Russia has a programme for adopting children»

The Russian Federation does not have a programme for adopting children from the SMO zones. Information about thousands of adopted children is inaccurate. 380 orphans and children left without parental care - large family groups and children with disabilities - were placed under guardianship and custody in Russian families with the assistance of the Commissioner. According to the Commissioner's Office, no children from the DPR and LPR were adopted when the republics were sovereign states. For more details, see the section «Placement

of children left without parental care, under foster care in the families of Russian citizens».

Fake #3 «Russia does not return children from Ukraine»

We have been dealing with the reunification of families separated for one reason or another since the beginning of the SMO, consistently and openly. We promptly process the appeals we receive: we help in finding a child, if necessary, although more often children are with close relatives and their whereabouts are known to their parents. We provide assistance in drawing up documents. We accompany a mother, grandmother or other close person on the territory of Russia, often paying for hotel and travel expenses and organising a meeting. We carry out these activities in co-operation with the ICRC.

We also note that a significant number of families are reunited independently or with the help of volunteer organisations. For more information, see the section «The Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights Assistance to Family Reunification»

Fake #4 «Russia does not co-operate with the Ukrainian side on the return of children»

Russia has a working channel for co-operation with the Ukrainian side, which makes it possible to deal with individual requests. The necessary documents and information are exchanged and the process of family reunification is coordinated. Children may be on the territory of both Russia and Ukraine. For more information, see the section «The Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights Assistance to Family Reunification».

Fake #5 «Children from the SMO zones are forced to change their citizenship to Russian»

After the four new constituent entities became part of the Russian Federation, their residents, including minors, were recognized as citizens of Russia and were given the opportunity to obtain Russian passports. Children from 14 to 18 years old make the decision

independently. For children under 14 years old the application is made by their legal representatives - parents or guardians. For orphans and children left without parental care, the legal representatives are the heads of social institutions where they are being raised.

New Russian citizens also retain their Ukrainian citizenship, if they had it before and have not voluntarily expressed a desire to renounce it. Thus, there is no question of changing citizenship.

Before becoming part of the Russian Federation, the DPR and LPR were independent states. Children born there after the formation of the republics received citizenship of the DPR and LPR respectively. Children born before April 7, 2014, mostly had Ukrainian citizenship.

Before the referendum, residents of the DPR and LPR (from 2019), Zaporozhye, and Kherson regions (from May 2022) and their minor children could acquire Russian citizenship through a simplified procedure in order to receive the rights and guarantees provided to Russian citizens, including social benefits.

The simplified procedure for acquiring citizenship does not limit children's rights, but expedites access to new opportunities, such as enrollment in educational institutions in the Russian Federation.

In the absence of citizenship, families with children and orphans can claim only a limited set of social guarantees. When children reach the age of majority (18 years of age), they will be able to independently decide for themselves whether they want to remain citizens of Russia. Right now, according to our data from families, if people want to return to Ukraine, they have to give up their Russian citizenship.

Fake #6 «There are re-education camps for children from the SMO zones in the Russian Federation. Military training is organized for children there»

There are no re-education camps in Russia, including camps for children from the SMO zone.

The form of recreation for children in health centers and recreation camps is popular in the country and has been developing for 100 years, during which time an extensive infrastructure has been created. It is only logical, that this type of recreation also includes children from SMO zones.

As a rule, the program of camp shifts involves not only recreation, but also educational and developmental activities. In November 2022, at the initiative of the Commissioner and the head of the Chechen Republic, a new format camp for teenagers in conflict with the law was held for the first time. The content of the shift is sports and patriotic. The format is aimed at socialization of underage boys, who are on the preventive registry of law enforcement agencies. There were 192 participants from 15 regions of the Russian Federation. Among them were 30 teenagers from the DPR and 15 from the LPR - all of them came with the consent of their parents. The families have a pro-Russian stance and are interested in the patriotic upbringing of their children.

Since August 2022, at the initiative of the Commissioner, rehabilitation shifts «The Day After Tomorrow» have been held for teenagers from the SMO zone. Initially, the participants were children from the DPR, then there were participants from the LPR, Zaporozhye and Kherson regions, and since 2023 – from Belgorod, Bryansk and Kursk regions. The format of the «The Day After Tomorrow» shifts is designed to help children recover from the stress they've been through, adapt to new conditions, and find opportunities to build their own futures. After the recreation children return home to their families.

For more information, see the section «The Day After Tomorrow Shifts».

Fake #7 «The International Criminal Court (ICC) order has intensified Russia's measures to reunite families»

This thesis is not true. Prior to the International Criminal Court (ICC) warrant against Russian President Vladimir Putin and Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova, the Commissioner's Office was also working on family reunification.

The ICC warrant, by contrast, has only increased the flow of misinformation and created tension by erecting unnecessary barriers, which is clearly not in the interests of children and families. Parents and relatives who really want to be reunited with their children are afraid to contact the Presidential Commissioner and the Russian authorities, although the Commissioner's Office was working to protect children's rights before the ICC warrant, is doing so now, and will continue to do so in the future.

To date, the Russian Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights does not know what exactly the charges of the ICC are and what they are based on. The Presidential Commissioner or her Office has not been contacted by representatives of the ICC, nor have any documents been received or requested.

The wording «unlawful deportation of population (children)» used in the official communication on the ICC website is puzzling.

The Russian Federation does not recognise the jurisdiction of the ICC, and its representatives are wanted in our country.

The Commissioner continues to work as usual.

Prepared by the Russian
Presidential Commissioner's
for Children's Rights Office

obr@deti.gov.ru

www.deti.gov.ru

t.me/malvovabelova

vk.com/malvovabelova