



Moscow is waging war on Ukrainian identity, and Belarus is helping

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Russia's war on Ukrainian identity is intensifying. For nearly two years now, the Kremlin has been attempting to dominate its western neighbor through military means. Over time, however, it has become clear that another objective of this campaign is the wholesale erasure of Ukrainian identity and culture.

To be sure, this struggle didn't start in February 2022. A tug-of-war over Ukrainian identity (and history) has taken place in some fashion between Kyiv and Moscow since Ukraine's independence in 1991 — and in earnest since Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine and its subsequent unilateral annexation of Crimea. Nevertheless, this contest has intensified dramatically since the start of the Kremlin's "special military operation."

To wit, Moscow has intentionally targeted Ukrainian schools, according to Ukrainian sources, in order to hit "soft targets" and disrupt education in Ukraine. A spring 2023 report by the Center for Information Resilience documented more than 350 of attacks by Russia on Ukrainian educational institutions, such as schools and universities, and posited that these facilities were not collateral damage but the "main target of specific strikes."

Russia is also decimating Ukraine's cultural and linguistic heritage. Russian military strikes have "damaged thousands of cultural heritage sites, including those protected by UNESCO," *The Insider*, a Russian opposition news portal, reports. In places like Kherson, Russian forces have destroyed Ukrainian language books, while in Donetsk, local Kremlin-approved authorities have stopped offering instruction in the Ukrainian language in schools altogether.

Most directly, Russia has begun the large-scale deportation and reeducation of Ukrainian minors from occupied Ukrainian territories. As of mid-2023, the Russian government itself officially estimated that "more than 700,000" Ukrainian children had been forcibly transferred to Russia, a practice that it justified as necessary for their own protection. But the alleged safekeeping of Ukrainian children seems to be the farthest thing from Moscow's mind. Rather, Russia has been internationally condemned for operating multiple "reeducation" camps designed to instill loyalty to Moscow, and hatred of Kyiv, among Ukraine's youngest prisoners of war — something that constitutes a grave breach of the international laws of armed conflict.

These efforts follow a certain twisted logic. Russian President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly intoned that Russians and Ukrainians constitute "one people." His efforts are therefore designed to ensure that no alternative identity is available to Ukrainians who believe otherwise.

Moscow, moreover, is not alone. Russia's aggression against Ukraine, and its efforts to erase Ukrainian identity, have found a willing accomplice: the government of Putin's close ally, Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko.

A new study by Yale University has found that, between September of 2022 and May of 2023, more than 2,400 children were deported from Ukraine's Russia-occupied Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions — not into Russia, but onto the territory of neighboring Belarus. According to the study, at least some of those minors have reportedly been subjected to military-style training designed to teach them "how to behave in extreme conditions," raising worries that they might be enlisted to fight against their homeland in the future, either by Minsk or by Moscow.

So what, precisely, is the international community prepared to do about all this?

The Council of Europe has condemned the "forcible transfer and Russification of Ukrainian children," deeming it to be "evidence of a genocide." And the International Criminal Court has issued arrest warrants for Russian President Vladimir Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova, Russia's ironically named Commissioner for Children's Rights, for their roles in the forcible wartime transfer of children. The warrants require the Court's 123 nation state members to detain Putin and Lvova-Belova and transfer them to The Hague to stand trial if they ever set foot on their soil.

These measures have had at least some effect; last summer, after much deliberation, Putin ultimately scrapped his visit to attend the BRICS summit in Johannesburg, South Africa in order to avoid any potential international consequences.

None of these costs have so far been passed on to Belarus, however. Despite the growing role it is playing in Russia's war on Ukraine, the Lukashenko regime has largely avoided sustained international attention, or any sort of meaningful pressure.

This needs to change. As Moscow's war on Ukrainian identity intensifies, the international response should naturally also expand to target its enablers, including Minsk. Doing so would not only send a strong signal to Belarus itself. It would also put other rogues currently assisting the Kremlin on notice that their support for Russia's war of choice is not, in fact, cost-free.