



UKRAINE: CHILDREN'S EDUCATION IS ONE MORE CASUALTY OF RUSSIAN AGGRESSION

RESEARCH
BRIEFING

AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL



CONTENTS

Introduction	3
International legal framework	5
Methodology	6
The early weeks of the invasion and occupation by Russian forces	7
A new reality of “schooling in hiding”: bravery and the risk of reprisals	8
Threats to the right to education in areas that remain under Russian control	10
Recommmendations	14

A school left destroyed by as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, 2022. Mykolaiv region. © Amnesty International/Anna Wright

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine was followed by civilian deaths and injuries, mass displacement of people, and widespread destruction and damage of many civilian objects, including of schools and other educational facilities, and has resulted in widespread and systemic violations of children’s right to education. For prolonged periods of time all schooling stopped, and for many children in government-controlled territories it has since returned as online classes only. Those living under Russian occupation have risked brutal reprisals for seeking to continue Ukrainian education online, faced with threats of children being taken away to “re-education” institutions or for adoption in Russia. Having been enrolled into schools operating under the Russian curriculum, often forcefully, children who live under Russian occupation attend understaffed schools, face intimidating armed Russian personnel inside the school buildings, and are exposed to indoctrination.

“I taught the history of Ukraine all my life, real history, not those lies Russia told. How could I go and look my students in the eyes and tell them everything we knew was wrong? I was also afraid Russians would arrest me because I was a Ukrainian history teacher. I heard about similar cases happening in other occupied regions.”

Olena, teacher of the history of Ukraine from Kharkiv region who survived eight months of occupation in an interview to Amnesty International, 30 May 2023, Kharkiv region, Ukraine.

INTRODUCTION

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine started on 24 February 2022. For most families in Ukraine this day changed their lives forever. Relentless bombardments, air raid alerts, displacement and sheltering in freezing cold basements became the everyday reality for millions of Ukrainians. Countless lives have been destroyed, and homes lost. According to the UN, from 24 February 2022 to 24 September 2023, 27,449 civilian casualties were recorded: 9,701 killed and 17,748 injured. Among them, 1,741 were children, both injured and killed. It is believed that actual figures are significantly higher as some information on civilian casualties in certain locations is still pending corroboration which is impossible due to the volatile security situation or lack of access.

The loss of life is tragic but far from the only dire consequence with long-lasting effects that Ukrainians have had to endure due to the Russian war of aggression. Widespread and systemic violations of children’s right to education are among others on a long list.

Andriy, the Headteacher of a school in Odesa region said: “Physical safety of children was and is a priority. The quality of education is of secondary importance now. This is the reality and the tragedy as we are losing our main resource – an educated and qualified generation. We do not know who teachers, doctors and engineers in 10 or 15 years will be. The current gaps in education will have a long-lasting consequence for decades to come.”¹

Almost two years of Russia’s illegal war have put education in Ukraine through its greatest ever challenge. The educational communities – pupils, teachers, parents – are divided between those who have stayed and lived through the horrors of the bombardment and occupation, those who were displaced inside Ukraine and those who moved abroad. As described by the representative of the Odesa Regional Department of Education: “there is the abyss between all three categories, the abyss of the level of education and of the experiences lived.”²

Right from the start of the full-scale invasion and in the months that followed, Russia’s indiscriminate attacks resulted in widespread destruction and damage of many civilian objects including those

¹ Interview in person with Andriy, 30 August 2023, Bilozerka, Ukraine. Here and later, full name not disclosed, and the first name may be changed, to protect the interviewee’s identity and safety of their family members and associates who may still be in Russian-occupied territories and at risk of reprisals.

² Interview in person with Ms Olena Buinevych, Head of the Odesa City Department of Education, 1 September 2023, Odesa, Ukraine.

related to the provision of education.³ According to the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, as of 24 February 2023, 3,151 educational institutions for children of school age (schools, lyceums, etc.) had been damaged since the start of Russia's invasion, of which 440 were destroyed.⁴

Physical destruction of schools and other educational facilities has not been the only factor affecting the ability of Ukrainian children to enjoy the right to education. The less than ideal alternative of online teaching has sometimes been made impossible for many Ukrainian children and teachers by Russia's campaign of intentional attacks against energy infrastructure. This resulted in prolonged and frequent periods without electricity during the autumn/winter of 2022/23.⁵ Ukrainians are at the time of writing in December 2023 worrying this situation will resume with the advent of colder weather.

Furthermore, for children who live under Russian occupation, their right to quality education is also jeopardized by being exposed to indoctrination. At the same time the safety of these children is an ongoing difficulty, as they, their teaching staff and their families, all face threats of severe reprisals.

According to the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, as of 24 December 2022, around 918 educational institutions for children aged 6-17 were located in Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine.⁶ The massive re-opening of schools in Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine by the occupying authorities, at the beginning of the 2022/23 academic year, was characterized by widespread human rights violations. Russia turned education into a propaganda machine for the indoctrination of children, including through the misrepresentation of history and attempts to eradicate Ukrainian culture, heritage and identity.⁷

Attempts to resist or circumvent Russia's educational policies on the occupied territories, open or tacit, by the teaching staff, families and school children, exposes them to coercion and the risk of arrest and abduction. Despite these risks, as the interviews conducted by Amnesty International demonstrate, families and the teaching staff, and children themselves, have gone to extraordinary lengths and demonstrated true courage in their attempts to retain, or continue to access, Ukrainian schooling in the Russian-occupied territories. Some examples of their bravery are given below.

Many teachers were forced to return to work in newly reopened schools, while families of children had to take up Russian passports and send them to these schools. Yet, the schools remained critically short of qualified personnel, which in turn led to the recruitment of individuals who lacked any teaching qualifications and/or experience. According to parents and teachers interviewed by Amnesty International, such voluntary staff recruits lacking the requisite skills sought to impose discipline on their pupils by threatening to call in Russian uniformed personnel;⁸ meanwhile armed members of

³ Amnesty International, "Anyone Can Die at Any Time": Indiscriminate attacks by Russian forces in Kharkiv, Ukraine; Amnesty International, "Children": The attack on the Donetsk Regional Academic Drama Theatre in Mariupol, Ukraine (previously cited); Amnesty International, "Ukraine: Civilians killed by 'reckless' Russian attacks on Serhiivka apartment block and beach resort", 7 July 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/07/ukraine-civilians-killed-by-reckless-russian-attacks-on-serhiivka-apartment-block-and-beach-resort/>.

⁴ Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, Overview of the current state of education and science in Ukraine under Russian aggression, February 2023, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1cpn2M9_v7SK9idkiU42h1j9y8s2CFDA/view.

⁵ Amnesty International, "Ukraine: Devastating power cuts undermining civilian life as Christmas approaches", 21 December 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/12/ukraine-devastating-power-cuts-undermining-civilian-life-as-christmas-approaches/>.

⁶ Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, Overview of the current state of education and science in Ukraine in terms of Russian aggression, December 2022, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1wLmm2ongB9HNRlRQHqSdVrBsHECTNruV/view>.

⁷ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/09/ukraine-russia-new-history-textbook-is-a-blatant-attempt-to-unlawfully-indoctrinate-school-children-in-russia-and-russian-occupied-ukrainian-territories/>.

⁸ Video call interview with "Tetiana", 11 September 2023.

Rosgvardiya (National Guards, Russia's stand-alone militarized law enforcement agency) were placed at the school entrance and on higher floors.⁹

Further forms of intimidation and psychological abuse of children and their parents have included the threat to deprive the latter of their parental rights and have their children taken into institutions or for adoption in Russia for failing to enrol them into reopened schools. The same threat has been used to prevent children accessing Ukrainian educational platforms or studying online in Ukrainian schools. There is also the lingering risk of abduction or arrests and torture and other ill-treatment for disobeying the occupying authorities.¹⁰

INTERNATIONAL LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Under the laws of war, schools and energy infrastructure are civilian objects and may not be deliberately attacked unless they are being used for military purposes.¹¹ All those responsible for deliberate attacks on schools and other civilian objects, and for any other unlawful attacks, which may amount to war crimes, must be held accountable in fair trial proceedings.

Education is a fundamental human right which is crucial for the growth and development of a child as well as the exercise of other rights.

International human rights law, which remains applicable during wartime, provides for the right to education. Russia, as an occupying power, is obliged to “facilitate the proper working of all institutions devoted to the care and education of children.”¹²

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Ukraine and Russia are state parties, states: “*the education of the child shall be directed to:*

(a) The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential;

(b) The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations;

*(c) The development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own”.*¹³

Under the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), to which Ukraine and Russia are also state parties, parents have the right to choose schools for their children, other than those established by public authorities, and to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in line with their own convictions.¹⁴ General Comment 13 on the ICESCR Article 13

⁹ Interview in person with “Kseniya”, 2 September 2023, Mykolaiv, Ukraine.

¹⁰ Amnesty International has published extensively on this over the years, including, for example, see *Abductions and Torture in Eastern Ukraine*, 11 July 2014, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2014/07/ukraine-mounting-evidence-abduction-and-torture/> and “Russian Federation/Ukraine: Imprisoned nurse may fully lose hearing: Irina Danilovich”, Urgent Action, 24 November 2023 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur46/7464/2023/en/>.

¹¹ International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Customary International Humanitarian Law, Rule 9.

¹² Fourth Geneva Convention, Article 50.

¹³ Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 2.

¹⁴ ICESCR, Article 13(3).

Right to Education states that the form and substance of education "have to be acceptable (e.g. relevant, culturally appropriate, and of good quality) to students and, in appropriate cases, parents."¹⁵

In this context the harmful/damaging effect Russian aggression has had on the right to education is highly disturbing and will result in long-lasting negative consequences not only for individual children but for Ukrainian society as whole. In addition to the lack of access to education the atmosphere of fear, repression and persecution is detrimental for the development of each individual child, their personality, talents and mental and physical abilities. The cumulative effect of these abuses, together with the effects of propaganda and indoctrination, and the denial of the child's cultural and national identity, to repeat, will have a deep and lasting effect on not only each child but Ukrainian society as a whole.

To end the violations of the right to education of the children in Ukraine described in this document, Russia's war against Ukraine, which is an act of aggression under international law, must end. Russia must stop indiscriminate attacks against Ukrainian towns and villages, and those responsible for alleged war crimes must be held accountable in accordance with international law. In the meantime, the occupying Russian authorities immediately must stop the appalling practises of intimidation, coercion and discrimination against children, teachers and their families. Teachers should be able to choose freely whether to return to the newly-opened schools in occupied Ukraine and whether to teach in accordance with the Ukrainian or Russian school programme. They should be able to exercise the right to freedom of expression and academic freedom, including in relation to the contents of the programme and in such matters as history, national identity, language and culture.

Children and their families must be protected from threats, violence and other reprisals, and their right to choose the mode of studying and language of education must be fully respected, including the option of attending Ukrainian schooling online. All those suspected of responsibility for intimidation, psychological and other abuse of children, must be properly investigated and held accountable in fair trial proceedings. Education must be freely accessible, and provided in accordance with international law and standards including being of adequate quality and free from indoctrination.

METHODOLOGY

Amnesty International interviewed 23 education workers (headteachers and schoolteachers), three of whom are also mothers of schoolchildren themselves, and 14 families with children of school age (six to 17 years old) from Kyiv, Kharkiv, Sumy, Chernihiv, Zaporizhzhia, Kherson, Mykolaiv, and Odesa regions. The interviews took place between May and September 2023, and their content covers the period from 24 February 2022 to 7 September 2023. All the interviews in Ukraine controlled territory were conducted in person. The stories the 14 families shared were not only of their own but also of others' experience.

Amnesty International was separately in contact with two more families of schoolchildren, who still live in Russian-occupied territory at the time of writing, in particular parts of Zaporizhzhia region in the south of Ukraine. Due to high personal risks for families with children residing in the territories under Russian occupation, Amnesty International was not able to conduct in-person interviews. Their testimonies and other evidence were obtained via messenger-encrypted text messages and images, including photographs. Amnesty International was provided with a full set of original history textbooks, introduced by the occupying Russian authorities in the school years where history is taught under the Russian school programme.

¹⁵ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/resources/educators/human-rights-education-training/d-general-comment-no-13-right-education-article-13-1999>.

Names and precise locations are not disclosed for safety reasons. The content of all interviews and exchanges conducted for this publication is made public on strict condition of anonymity of the sources. While those who are in Ukrainian government-controlled territories at the time of writing may be in immediate safety, they have left members of their families and acquaintances in Russian-occupied territories, whose safety could be severely compromised if the identity of the informants, or the exact location of some of the schools, were to be disclosed. Where the relevant community is named, it includes several locations with schools.

THE EARLY WEEKS OF THE INVASION AND OCCUPATION BY RUSSIAN FORCES

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine led to the severe interruption and, in some cases, the complete discontinuation of the education process in Ukraine in the 2021/22 school year. Children were partially or fully deprived of their right to education and subjected to enormous physical and mental distress and trauma. Many headteachers and other education workers interviewed by Amnesty International agreed that the quality of education delivered for the 2021/22 graduates was significantly lower than of those who graduated in 2020/21, which, in turn, on the whole was lower than the quality of education received by pre-Covid-19 graduates. The 2021/22 end of year results were mainly based on the learning evaluations done in the first semester. Six months of school were missed by almost every child in Ukraine.

The fear of a full-scale Russian invasion was in the air for months before 24 February 2022, but it still came as a deep shock, particularly for those who found themselves under Russian occupation in the immediate hours and days that followed. Schools were operating as usual the day before. Students were back to in-person classes after two years of schooling from home during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, in many schools across Ukraine, 23 February ended up being the last day of the 2021/22 school year as the schools failed to reopen. First, an “extracurricular break for two weeks” was announced by the educational authorities. Then further temporary measures were put in place. On 28 March 2022, the Minister of Education and Science signed a Decree mandating all educational institutions to “ensure the safest mode of learning” while martial law, announced earlier, remained in place.¹⁶ In practice, this meant the closure of some schools, partial reopening of others, and the return to home-based online schooling for many.

Certain regions of Ukraine were not able to provide any type of education at all due to ongoing fighting that resulted in power cuts, an absence of Internet or mobile signal, and the displacement of teachers and students – whose whereabouts were often unknown. Speaking about her pupils, Hanna, a primary school teacher from the part of Kharkiv region that promptly fell under occupation, told Amnesty International: “My village was occupied for eight months. All this time I did not know whether my children were dead, forcefully taken to Russia or hiding in their freezing basements.”¹⁷

Olena, a mother of two boys of 13 and six from Kharkiv, recalls that she woke up as usual on 24 February 2022 and had started cooking breakfast when she heard planes flying over their apartment block. “I cooked the breakfast, fed my children, and told them they would stay at home. For the next few months, there was no studying. We had to concentrate on running to the bomb shelter and getting food, not on education.”¹⁸

Nataliia, from Chernihiv, a mother of an 18-year-old son, shared that there was “no school in any form or shape” from 24 February to late May 2022 (when the Russian forces were pushed back in the

¹⁶ Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, Minister's Decree of 28 March 2022, <https://mon.gov.ua/ua/npa/pro-deyaki-pitannya-organizaciyi-zdobuttya-zagalnoyi-serednoyi-osviti-ta-osvitnogo-procesu-v-umovah-voyennogo-stanu-v-ukrayini>.

¹⁷ Interview in person with “Hanna”, 30 May 2023, Izium, Ukraine.

¹⁸ In person interview with Olena, 30 May 2023, Kharkiv, Ukraine.

north of Ukraine including Chernihiv region). “We did not have electricity, heating or the Internet from 10 March 2022 until mid-April. The city was under 24-hour bombardment and siege. My son did not know if his teachers and school friends were alive.”¹⁹

A nine-year-old resident of Mykolaiv, a city in southern Ukraine that has been heavily bombarded since the start of the full-scale invasion, was asking his grandmother every day: “Granny, my birthday is in a few months. Will we still be alive to celebrate?”²⁰

A NEW REALITY OF “SCHOOLING IN HIDING”: BRAVERY AND THE RISK OF REPRISALS

At the peak of their offensive before being pushed back, Russian forces managed to occupy around a quarter of Ukraine’s territory. Several regions in the north, north-east, east, south-east and south of the country have experienced Russian occupation lasting from several weeks to several months. Almost two years later, many remain under the control of Russian forces, as do Crimea and part of the Donbas occupied since 2014, amounting to just under a fifth of the country.

The horrors of modern warfare were unleashed on Ukraine with the start of Russia’s full-scale invasion. These included the fast-moving front line during much of 2022, urban fighting, long-distance shelling and bombardment, and mines and unexploded ordnance scattered throughout the country including in schoolyards. However, these were not the only physical risks and threats faced by Ukrainian children and educational staff. In occupied territories, where online schooling has not been possible, access to education has been minimal or non-existent, unless the teachers, parents and schoolchildren were prepared to accept considerable risks and organize schooling secretly.

Alla Vylykhovskaya, the Director of the Department of Education and Science of Mykolaiv regional state administration (in the south of Ukraine bordering the occupied areas that have suffered heavy bombardment), told Amnesty International that there were six territorial administrative units under her supervision with 452 educational institutions (118, 973 students). Four territorial units (26 schools) were occupied for nine months, from 4 March to 11 November 2022. She stated that her main priority in these communities during occupation was to ensure the safety of teachers, children and parents – even if it meant suspending the education process completely. Some schools chose to do so. Others, despite incredible safety risks, tried to keep the educational process going.

The Ukrainian authorities’ decision to suspend any Ukrainian education in the areas under Russian control was justified by them on the grounds of security. This was in the context of numerous reports that civilians were being persecuted for opposing occupation or displaying enmity or disloyalty to Russian forces or Russian-appointed de facto authorities. Harassment, arrests and enforced disappearance, detention in inhuman and degrading conditions, and interrogation with the use of torture and other ill-treatment by the Russian forces, security personnel and their proxies were widely reported. In the education field there were reports of threats of and of physical assaults on Ukrainian teachers for continuing their work, as well as on other adults and children.²¹ Nearly all parents interviewed by Amnesty International spoke of their fear of their children being taken away from them for attending Ukrainian schools online.

¹⁹ Interview in person with Nataliia, 24 May 2023, Poltava, Ukraine.

²⁰ Interview in person with Alla, 1 September 2023, Mykolaiv, Ukraine.

²¹ For instance, see Дарія Поперечна, “‘На уроці моєму учневі з 2-го класу повідомили про загибель тата’. Як це – бути вчителем під час війни”, *Українська правда*, 1 October 2023, <https://life.pravda.com.ua/society/2023/10/1/256834/>; <https://life.pravda.com.ua/society/2023/10/1/256834/>.

Describing the nine months of occupation, Alla Vylykhovska said that the teachers, students and parents who tried to keep education going turned into “partisans digging holes in their gardens to hide laptops and mobile phones or hiding in the attics and old sheds to catch the mobile signal.”²²

One of the villages in the occupied Shevchenkivska community in Mykolaiv region saw 29 school children remain during the occupation. The village had no electricity, mobile or Internet connection from March 2022 to January 2023. The only possibility to study was by using books from the school library. The school librarian, Uliyana, told Amnesty International that she had secretly arranged meetings with students to give them the books. It was dangerous to move around the village with Ukrainian textbooks so the librarian and children had to be extremely cautious to avoid getting stopped and searched.²³

Russian military patrols were regularly seen in the village, and could stop and search anyone, including children. Despite no reported cases of this happening, all students and parents interviewed by Amnesty International in the village were afraid of children being taken away from their families and sent to Russia “for re-education” if they were caught using Ukrainian textbooks or other educational materials. Maryna, a mother of two, said: “It is better for our children to be uneducated, but safe.”²⁴ Another mother, Polina, shared that her two children were outside of their house only a few times during nine months of occupation due to the fear of them being taken to Russia.²⁵

In a different village of the same community, the headteacher, Kateryna, told Amnesty International that her teachers and students decided to continue education. They could not use the school building as it would have been too visible. Instead, the 12 schoolteachers arranged classrooms in their homes. Some parents also volunteered to host children and teachers in their houses. The biggest risk was being caught by a Russian military patrol on the way to a lesson or if a house was checked while there were teachers and children in it. Kateryna explained that children were told, if stopped by a Russian patrol, not to say they were on the way to attend a lesson.²⁶

In Snihurivka community, the situation was similar. Olena, the headteacher of one of the schools and a mother of a 17-year-old girl, decided with teachers and parents to try and complete the academic year “in any way we can”. Their village did not have electricity from 11 March 2022 to 19 January 2023. Some of the residents had fuel generators and the whole village contributed what fuel they had to run them. Mainly, they were used to charge mobile phones. Olena managed to identify the only spot up a hill in their village where it was possible to gain some mobile connection. Her husband built a small shed from old wood on the site, from which Olena and her daughter studied from March to May 2022. As the mobile signal was very weak, it was very difficult to access the online education platforms, and almost impossible to upload any work. Olena and her daughter had to take a picture of a completed task, then make and upload a screenshot of the picture.²⁷

The situation was very similar for the other 40 children (out of 92) who remained in the village during occupation. Olena told Amnesty International that only after de-occupation did she realize the risk that she and her daughter had taken. She remembered the Russian military personnel’s threats to shoot people for wandering around the village looking for mobile signal or to arrest teachers for continuing Ukrainian education.

²² Interview in person with Ms Alla Vylykhovskaya, the Director of the Department of Education and Science of Mykolaiv regional state administration, 1 September 2023, Mykolaiv, Ukraine.

²³ Interview in person with “Uliyana”, 31 August 2023, Shevchenkivska community, Ukraine.

²⁴ Interview in person with “Maryna”, 31 August 2023, Shenchenkivska community, Ukraine.

²⁵ Interview in person with “Polina”, 31 August 2023, Shevchenkivska community, Ukraine.

²⁶ Interview in person with Kateryna, 31 August 2023, Shevchenkivska community, Ukraine.

²⁷ Interview in person with Olena (quoted before), 6 September 2022, Snihurivka community, Ukraine.

Secret online learning, and the constant fear of being caught and facing grave consequences, continues to be the reality for those remaining under Russian occupation who choose to continue with Ukrainian schooling for their children. A parent from the occupied Berdiansk community in Zaporizhzhia region shared via text message that his son studies online in Ukrainian school in the afternoons. The parents and the child were very afraid of anyone finding out about the online classes. Sporadic house searches and visits from occupying authorities to check electronic devices is a regular practise in their community. To minimize the risk, the family had to invent a whole secret signs system. The father goes on a watch outside, with his wife standing by the window watching her husband in case he gives her a sign of someone approaching the house. In this case, the father would try to detain the visitors outside the house for as long as possible to give his wife and child enough time to hide the laptop and erase the evidence of online studying in the Ukrainian school. The parents were very worried about being arrested and having their child taken away if the occupying authorities found out about the Ukrainian schooling.²⁸

THREATS TO THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION IN AREAS THAT REMAIN UNDER RUSSIAN CONTROL

Many people in Ukraine are experiencing that the Russian aggression against their country takes place on more fronts than just the battlefield. The de facto Russian military-backed authorities in the occupied territories have tried to ensure that educational institutions reopen and children receive education – but only on the de facto authorities’ terms. In practice this means full adoption of the Russian national curriculum, and where possible co-opting the past teaching staff members into teaching it. Much of the curriculum is manifestly based on indoctrination, while the staff are often subjected to coercion and, together with the students, regular threats and intimidation. As a result, the quality of education has continued to suffer.

COERCION OF TEACHERS

The reopened schools in occupied Ukraine were given no choice but to use the Russian curriculum and, starting from September 2022, to use the newly supplied Russian textbooks. For many teachers, like those interviewed by Amnesty International, this was a key reason behind their decision not to return to teaching.

According to school staff interviewed by Amnesty International, the Russian-backed de facto local authorities started inviting headteachers and teachers for meetings in May 2022 to discuss the new 2022/23 academic year. Initially, the invitation was circulated through mobile text messages and social networks.

Hanna, a primary school teacher from a community in Kharkiv region which was occupied from March to September 2022, recalled hearing an announcement on the Russian radio calling on all the teachers to attend a meeting in the local de facto education department in May 2022.²⁹

Olena, a history teacher from the same community, told Amnesty International that they also heard rumours that Russians were taking teachers from the occupied Kherson region to Crimea for re-qualification and forcing them to teach the Russian curriculum.³⁰

²⁸ Text message seen by Amnesty International, 10 September 2023.

²⁹ Interview in person with “Hanna” (quoted before), 30 May 2023, Izium, Ukraine.

³⁰ Interview in person with “Olena”, 30 May 2023, Izium, Ukraine.

Both Hanna and Olena received text messages from their respective schools' headteachers trying to convince them to return for work and teach the Russian curriculum when they re-opened in September 2022. However, both refused.

Out of fear of being forced to accept "the offers", both went into hiding. Olena had to abandon her apartment and moved to live with neighbours. Hanna stayed in her house but at the expense of not registering for any humanitarian assistance (packages of food) provided by the Russian occupational authorities. During her interview with Amnesty International she admitted that it was very difficult to survive eight months of occupation without any income and support.

Olena recalls: "I taught the history of Ukraine all my life, real history, not those lies Russia told. How could I go and look my students in the eyes and tell them everything we knew was wrong? I was also afraid Russians would arrest me because I was a Ukrainian history teacher. I heard about similar cases happening in other occupied regions."

Olena's fears were realised in August 2023, when Russia presented a new history textbook for the final year of the secondary school, compulsory for the entire Russia territory and the Ukrainian territories it occupied. The textbook was full of Russian official propaganda clichés including vindicating Russia's illegal actions ranging from the annexation of Crimea in 2014 to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which it claimed to be an act of self-defence. In addition, it misrepresented the Ukrainian people's history and propagated the view that they were not worthy of national statehood, attacking the Ukrainian people's rights to cultural heritage and identity. As such it amounted to indoctrination and clearly violated children's rights to appropriate and quality education.³¹

QUALITY OF TEACHING

According to the headteachers interviewed by Amnesty International, the enrolment of students into the reopened schools depended greatly on the former teachers' willingness to work in these schools. Parents trusted their teachers and would send a child into school only if the teacher was there. In many cases, the refusal of teachers to cooperate resulted in low enrolment rates and low attendance. Some parents opted to keep their children at home and receive education online.

The quality of teaching offered by the reopened schools under the occupying authorities, described as "very low" by those interviewed by Amnesty International, was also a key factor in low enrolment.³² Again, this was explained by the extreme shortage of teaching personnel.

According to five teachers who left five different, and still occupied at the time of writing, villages of Berdiansk community not long before September 2023, children were given textbooks and told to read them, without any explanation or interaction with the teacher during lessons.³³ Discipline in under-staffed schools also suffered and severely impacted learning. A mother of two boys of primary school age from Sofievska community, occupied at the time of the interview, shared in a text message seen by Amnesty International that her sons' class used to be left unattended for a whole lesson. One and the same person in the school was teaching the primary school classes and teaching Maths to older children, while also acting as the deputy headteacher at the same time, and as a result was not

³¹ Amnesty International, "Ukraine/Russia: New history textbook is a blatant attempt to unlawfully indoctrinate school children in Russia and Russian-occupied Ukrainian territories", 1 September 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/09/ukraine-russia-new-history-textbook-is-a-blatant-attempt-to-unlawfully-indoctrinate-school-children-in-russia-and-russian-occupied-ukrainian-territories/>.

³² In person interview with Oleksandr, 13 September 2023, Zaporizhzhya, Ukraine.

³³ Interviewed in person, independently, from 11 to 15 September 2023, Zaporizhzhya, Ukraine.

able to be present in all the required lessons. This resulted in fights between children. One of the sons suffered a concussion, while the other had three fingers broken.³⁴

The Russian occupying authorities were only too well aware of the impact of the Ukrainian teaching personnel refusing to return to work in the reopened schools. They deployed a range of enticing, coercive and deceitful tactics to bring the staff on-board.³⁵

INTIMIDATION AND INDOCTRINATION OF FAMILIES AND SCHOOLCHILDREN

Apart from a combination of coercive and deceitful tactics used against professional education workers, the occupying authorities have also resorted to overt intimidation and covert coercive practices targeting schoolchildren's families to ensure school attendance.

Kseniya, the mother of a 15-year-old boy, Kyrylo, from a village in Kherson region, remembered a home visit from their Physical Education teacher in spring 2022. He cycled to their house asking about Kyrylo and whether he would attend the school in September. Kseniya said that Kyrylo would not go to the school. The teacher left. At the beginning of September, men dressed in Russian military uniform came to Kseniya's house and warned Kyrylo in front of her: "In case you do not show up at the school tomorrow, the bus will come the following week and take you to an orphanage in Russia". On 6 September 2022, Kseniya met the school Headteacher to sign Kyrylo in. During the meeting she was warned that in case of Kyrylo's "bad behaviour, he will be dealt with by Rosgvardiya", a reference to the armed uniformed Russian National Guards present in the school.³⁶

Kyrylo went to the school on 7 September 2022. He recalled the school decorated with Russian state symbols throughout, and intimidating armed guards at the school gates and inside. "As soon as you enter the building, you can hear the Russian national anthem playing," Kyrylo recalled.³⁷ He was given newly printed Russian textbooks. The main challenge for him was to write in the Russian language, as he had studied in Ukrainian before. At the time of the interview, the family was residing in a shelter in Mykolaiv. Their home village had been de-occupied in October 2022. They left it on 12 December 2022 due to the volatile security situation.

Halyna's 12-year-old daughter attended a reopened school for two months in occupied Kherson, from 1 September 2022 until its liberation by the Ukrainian forces on 11 November. Halyna was working as a cleaner in the school before the war and decided to continue working there when the school reopened in September 2022 to have some income. Halyna recalled during her interview with Amnesty International that the Russian occupying authorities were providing an incentive for parents, 10,000 Russian Roubles (around US\$ 112), "to get the children ready for school". "For people living under occupation for seven months, with no income or support, it was a lot of money," recalls Halyna. Her daughter was shocked at the number of armed guards at the reopened school: "They were at the school gates, at every floor. Teachers always threatened us with them when we misbehaved."³⁸

Oksana, the mother of a 10-year-old boy and 14-year-old-girl from Kherson, hid her children at her home and did not allow them outside from summer 2022 to October 2022. Between May and

³⁴ Text message seen by Amnesty International, 14 September 2023.

³⁵ Amnesty International plans to publish details of the respective practices in a separate publication, in early 2024.

³⁶ Interview in person with "Kseniya" (quoted above), 2 September 2023, Mykolaiv, Ukraine.

³⁷ Interview in person with Kyrylo in his mother's presence, 2 September 2023, Mykolaiv, Ukraine.

³⁸ Interview in person with "Halyna", 2 September 2023, Mykolaiv, Ukraine.

September 2022, she was repeatedly visited by the school Headteacher who asked her about her children. Every time Oksana had to lie that her children were not in Kherson.³⁹

A teacher from the occupied Berdiansk community in Zaporizhzhia region, who left the occupied territories in July 2022 but continues to give online classes to children who are still living in the occupied community, shared with Amnesty International that children at her school are forced to learn and sing the Russian national anthem. Those refusing are threatened with being taken away from their parents for “re-education in Russian orphanages”. At the same school, a notice (a photographed copy is with Amnesty International) was distributed to all the students saying: “Look around you. You can see that Ukraine has destroyed Kharkov,⁴⁰ Mariupol and other cities. If you do not want Ukraine to kill you, tell us everything you see and know about it.”⁴¹

According to the same teacher, informants have been appointed from among the school students whose task is to identify and report on those children who speak Ukrainian. Such reported “offenders” have been summoned to the Headteacher “for a re-educational chat” during which they were warned about “punishing the parents for [their] improper upbringing” and being “sent to Russia for re-education.”

All those interviewed for this publication, and specifically those who have been directly exposed to schooling under the Russian occupation stated that anti-Ukrainian, pro-Russian indoctrination was the clear direction of the Russian-imposed curriculum and other school changes. In the words of one of the headteachers, who fled the occupied village in Berdiansk community, interviewed by Amnesty International, the ultimate idea was “elimination of the Ukrainian identity”⁴².

At the beginning of the new academic year, in September 2023, the teachers, headteachers and parents from the occupied parts of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions, some of whom were still living in the occupied territories, independently informed Amnesty International, that it has become almost impossible to avoid sending children to the reopened schools. Eleven teachers who at the time of the interviews were in the territories controlled by Ukraine, taught online classes for students living in the occupied territories. They all independently shared that the classes for these students were scheduled in the afternoon as in the morning they all had to attend the re-opened schools. Names and other personal information of the children attending online classes from the occupied territories is strictly confidential and is known only by the headteachers. According to the same 11 teachers, parents who did not enrol children in the re-opened schools, were subjected to intimidating questioning and threats at their places of work by their superiors who were supporting the occupation. This information was confirmed by two parents from the occupied territories via text messages. The commonly used threat of having their children taken away, and taken to orphanages in Russia, forced the parents not only to enrol their children into the reopened schools, but also to take up Russian passports. As of September 2023, the occupying authorities made it obligatory for any family sending their child to school, which is compulsory in itself, to have Russian passports.

While access to quality education is every child’s right, residents of Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine are being coerced to send their children to schools which do not meet the criteria of quality education. In these schools, reopened under the occupying Russian authorities, the children as well as their teachers are subjected to intimidating practices, are forced to study in Russian, and receiving poor-quality schooling some of which amounts to indoctrination. Such abusive practices must immediately stop.

³⁹ Interviewed in person with Oksana, 2 September 2023, Mykolaiv, Ukraine.

⁴⁰ The Russian name for Kharkiv.

⁴¹ Video call interview with “Tetiana”, 11 September 2022.

⁴² Interview in person with Oleksandr (quoted above), 13 September 2023, Zaporizhzhya, Ukraine.

RECOMMENDATIONS

THE RUSSIAN AUTHORITIES MUST:

- End the war in Ukraine, which is an act of aggression under international law;
- End all direct attacks on civilians and civilian objects, indiscriminate attacks and other serious violations of international humanitarian law;
- In areas under Russian control, end immediately all violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law, including such abusive practices towards the local population as intimidation, coercion of teaching staff into educational activities and coercion of local population into acquisition of Russian passports, unlawful deprivation of liberty, torture and other ill-treatment;
- Ensure that teaching staff are recruited from among competent and duly qualified professionals, and that they are given the freedom to provide quality education in accordance with the Ukrainian national standards and curricula if they, and those they teach, so choose;
- Remove all armed personnel from children's educational institutions which has been placed there solely for the purpose of intimidation and control of any display of disloyalty to the occupying authorities;
- End the practice of recruitment of informers among children and other persons;
- Remove Russian state symbols from the educational institutions, and withdraw any textbooks, other literature and teaching materials and points of curricula that expose children to indoctrination or in any way violate their rights to appropriate and quality education, or seek to eradicate Ukrainian culture, heritage and identity;
- Ensure that the children and their families are free to choose the language of their education, and that schooling in Ukrainian is freely available throughout all the Ukrainian territory currently under Russian control, including in eastern and southern Ukraine and Crimea;
- Ensure that all those responsible for any serious violations of international humanitarian and international human rights law that amount to crimes under international law be brought to justice in fair trial proceedings, without resort to the death penalty;
- Provide full and effective reparations, in accordance with international law and standards, to all those who have suffered violations of their human rights.

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CALLS ON THE GOVERNMENT OF UKRAINE:

- To ensure systematic monitoring and data collection on the existing educational provisions and needs of all school-age children, including and in particular, as much as possible, those who remain in the territories under Russian control. Based on the information collected and constantly updated, conduct needs assessments and design targeted programmes that will seek to address the gaps in their education, by means available at present and that may become available in future, including following their possible relocation or liberation of the respective territories;
- Consider and put in place measures that would allow local authorities, and in particular educational authorities, in the most conflict-affected areas to respond more flexibly to such needs, at present and in future;
- Evaluate and update online-based and other educational resources, and seek their further development, to ensure their accessibility to children and families who are forced to rely on

remote schooling, and in particular consider and facilitate as much as possible their safe and reliable use, including via discreet access online and without reliance on high-speed, high-volume internet traffic;

- Ensure that families across Ukraine, including in Russian-occupied territories, are informed about such resources or about the safest and most reliable ways of accessing them;
- Ensure through diplomatic channels that children's right to quality education is mainstreamed in all discussions with Ukraine's international partners, including donors, in all relevant bilateral and multilateral forums.

UKRAINE'S INTERNATIONAL PARTNERS, INCLUDING FOREIGN GOVERNMENTS AND DONORS, SHOULD:

Allocate discrete funding to support the right of children in Ukraine to quality education, and support and work with the Ukrainian government in designing means and tools for making quality education accessible and safe for Ukrainian children and their families who live under Russian occupation.

Amnesty International is a movement of 10 million people which mobilizes the humanity in everyone and campaigns for change so we can all enjoy our human rights. Our vision is of a world where those in power keep their promises, respect international law and are held to account. We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion and are funded mainly by our membership and individual donations. We believe that acting in solidarity and compassion with people everywhere can change our societies for the better.

Contact



info@amnesty.org



facebook.com/
AmnestyGlobal



@Amnesty



amnesty.org



Amnesty International
Peter Benenson House
1 Easton Street
London WC1X 0DW, UK

Except where otherwise noted, content in this document is licensed under a Creative Commons (attribution, non-commercial, no derivatives, international 4.0) licence (see creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode).

Where material is attributed to a copyright owner other than Amnesty International, this material is not covered by the Creative Commons licence.

For more information, visit the [permissions page](#) on Amnesty International's website.

Index: **EUR 50/7508/2023**

Publication: **December 2023**

Original language: **English**

© Amnesty International 2023