

Ukrainian Orphans Used as Propaganda Pawns

July 15, 2014



A group of orphans speaking to journalists on Monday about their planned relocation across the border to Russia.

Tamara Popova and her fellow orphans are adamant: They do not want to go to Russia. The separatist gunmen running this eastern Ukrainian city aren't asking. They are giving orders.

☒ As fighting between insurgent and government troops closes in on the city, the 130 or so children living at Donetsk Orphanage No. 1 find themselves in the middle of a tug of war.

☒ The insurgents say the children will be safer in Russia. Ukraine wants to move them to facilities in government-held territory, at least until the fighting dies down. It says taking them outside the country would be tantamount to a kidnapping.

☒ "Normal people would ask our opinion," the 16-year-old Popova said, as other orphans nodded in agreement. "We told them that this was against the law, that we have brothers and sisters here. But then they started to swear." ☒

The orphanage has children from age 7 into their late teens. It is clean and well-ordered. Pictures of stars from the local Shaktyar Donetsk football team hang in one room. Another is decorated with a fairytale tableau. Girls' bedrooms are decked in pink wallpaper and hung with floral pattern curtains.

☒ It is an image of peace undermined by the menace of violence. Men bearing automatic rifles arrived one recent day to lay down the law about moving to Russia, terrifying everybody.

☒ Yelena Im, 16, scoffed at insurgent claims they have the orphans' best interests at heart.

☒ "If they act like that when they want to take us — everybody was crying — then I don't know how they will treat us there," Im said. "They took away our passports. We told them to give us back our documents, that we need them. What right do they have to take them? But they do not answer. They just turn around and start screaming again."

☒ Both sides appear to be using the orphans for propaganda. ☒

"Under Ukrainian law, the actions of these scoundrels should be qualified as a criminal offense," Ukraine's Foreign Ministry said in a statement. ☒

"They are children of the Donetsk Republic," said Roman Lyagin, the social affairs minister of the separatist government. "We deem Ukraine an enemy. We are not Ukraine, so we evacuate children to secure places. In this case, we believe this to be the Russian Federation."

☒

Russia, meanwhile, touts the large numbers of child refugees heading toward Russia as proof that Ukraine cannot take care of them.

☒ Pavel Astakhov, Russia's children's rights ombudsman, said Sunday there were 22,000 Ukrainian child refugees in Russia. He urged Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko to "defend the most defenseless, the orphans of Ukraine." ☒

"Allow them to leave for Russia!"

☒ The orphans themselves remain caught in the middle. Orphanage director Olga Volkova said the insurgents made clear they must do as they are told.

☒ "We were told that if we do not comply, then this will be considered sabotage, because during wartime we must comply with orders," she said. "And if we do not, then we will be talked to in a different way."

See also:

[More Ukrainian Refugees Arrive to Russia](#)

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