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RUSSIA: Mother Russia: Maria Lvova-Belova, Putin's ally deporting children

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France24 (13.01.2023)/ HRWF (27.02.2023) – Vladimir Putin's commissioner for children's rights, Maria Lvova-Belova, claims to be the "saviour" of children caught up in the war in Ukraine. Her compassionate rhetoric conceals a sinister plan to deport Ukrainian children from territories occupied by

Russia's invading forces.

A blonde woman in a floral dress kneels beside a teenage girl in a wheelchair. She helps a blind boy hang a garland on a Christmas tree. She hugs a huge teddy bear in the corridors of an airport as she welcomes a group of Ukrainian children arriving in Russia.

Maria Lvova-Belova, 38, Russia's commissioner for children's rights since 2021, relentlessly flaunts her "good deeds" on her Telegram channel and on Russian state television.

Face of the forcible removal of Ukrainian children

In her floaty dresses with high-buttoned collars, blonde hair swept neatly from her face, she looks every inch the demure and devout mother, coming to the rescue of children all over Russia and Ukraine.

Lvova-Belova has five biological children with her husband, a computer scientist turned Orthodox priest, and has adopted five more, including an Ukrainian teenager she adopted from the besieged Ukrainian city of Mariupol.

She is also the legal guardian of 13 disabled children placed within charitable organisations she herself founded, some of which have been accused of misuse of funds in the Russian press.

In Russia, where the birth rate is falling, Lvova-Belova's large family, religious zeal and commitment to charitable works make her the ideal muse for both United Russia – Vladimir Putin's party – and for the Orthodox Church.

In Ukraine, Lvova-Belova claims to be "saving" displaced or orphaned children but she plays a key role in their forcible removal to Russia.

She has organised the transfer of hundreds of Ukrainian children from their country's occupied territories to the very

country that is waging war on their homeland.

Thousands of Ukrainian children missing

Videos of children arriving in Russia fall in quick succession on her Telegram account.

Children from the eastern Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Donbas are welcomed by their “new families” with brightly coloured balloons and cuddly toys.

The children’s names are usually changed and they are given new Russian passports in exchange for their old identities.

Hundreds, or even thousands (it is difficult to establish the precise number) of Ukrainian children are being “sheltered” by Russia, thanks to her efforts, she proudly claims on social media and state television.

For Lvova-Belova prefers to use words like “rescue” instead of “deportation” and “guardianship” rather than “adoption”.

But in reality, children from orphanages, hospitals, social centres or foster homes in Ukraine’s occupied territories are being offered to Russian families along with payment by the Russian state.

The forced mass deportation of people during a conflict is classified by international humanitarian law as a war crime.

In a report published last November, Amnesty International said: “Russian authorities forcibly transferred and deported civilians from occupied areas of Ukraine in what amounted to war crimes and likely crimes against humanity”.

In December 2022, the French association *Pour l’Ukraine, pour leur liberté et la nôtre* (“For Ukraine, for their freedom and ours”), asked the International Criminal Court to examine allegations of “genocide” amid the deportation of Ukrainian children.

Moscow has made no attempt to conceal its policy of child deportation. Removing Ukrainian children from occupied territories is part and parcel of the Kremlin's propaganda, and in keeping with the "de-Ukrainisation" called for by Putin, who passed a law in May 2022 that made it easier for Russians to adopt Ukrainian children. It also made it harder for Ukrainian families to reclaim their kidnapped children.

In early December, Ukraine claimed that 13,000 children had been deported to Russia, adding that it was unlikely to be the "final figure".

For its part, Russia says it has welcomed five million refugees from Ukraine.

Rehabilitation centres

The children's "assimilation" in their adopted country takes place at "re-education" and "psychological rehabilitation" centres in Moscow, Rostov and Tuapse, a town on the northeast shore of the Black Sea. According to Belarusian state news agency Belta, roughly a thousand children from the Donbas, aged between six and 15, have been taken in by a centre in Belarus to allow them to "rest and recover".

The children attending these centres receive both "care" and "daily lessons in Russian language and history", Lvova-Belova tells her Telegram subscribers. Adaptation can sometimes take time, she explains. At first, she says, Filip, her adopted Ukrainian son, displayed "a certain negativity". He insisted on singing the Ukrainian anthem and talking about his attendance at demonstrations in support of the Ukrainian military. But his behaviour has now changed and he is "grateful" to the "great Russian family" that saved him.

A dazzling career

The war in Ukraine has been a boon for Lvova-Belova's career, allowing the former guitar teacher to continue her meteoric

rise within Russia's institutions.

In 2008, alongside her predecessor as children's rights commissioner Anna Kuznetsova, she founded a charity called Blagovest in the Penza region, 650 kilometres southeast of Moscow. The two women are both the mothers of several children and devout followers of the Orthodox Church.

Following in Kuznetsova's footsteps, she joined the ruling party, United Russia, in 2019.

From then on, her career took flight. After winning the prestigious "Leaders of Russia" competition in 2020, she was appointed a senator before being named children's rights commissioner by Vladimir Putin at the end of Kuznetsova's mandate.

No sign of stopping

The war in Ukraine has now put her firmly in the spotlight.

When she was sanctioned by the European Union, the United States, Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom in September "for her alleged involvement in the forced transfer and adoption of Ukrainian children", Putin himself sprang to her defence.

"This fragile woman is singlehandedly doing more for children and peace than those disgraceful Americans who draw up lists of sanctions," said the Russian president.

And Lvova-Belova shows no sign of stopping.

After visiting each of the annexed regions this past autumn, she plans in 2023 to open "centres for adolescents" to "give them special attention", and to deploy teams to reach out to "street children" in the occupied territories.

UK sanctions Russian linked to forced transfers and adoptions

On 16 June 2022, the UK announced a new wave of sanctions, including Russian Children's Rights Commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova sanctioned for the forced transfer and adoption of Ukrainian children.

The measures include the sanctioning of Russian Children's Rights Commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova for her alleged involvement in the forced transfer and adoption of Ukrainian children.

Lvova-Belova has been accused of enabling 2,000 vulnerable children being violently taken from the Luhansk and Donetsk regions and orchestrating a new policy to facilitate their forced adoptions in Russia.

Foreign Secretary Liz Truss then said:

"Today we are targeting the enablers and perpetrators of Putin's war who have brought untold suffering to Ukraine, including the forced transfer and adoption of children.

We will not tire of defending freedom and democracy, and keeping up the pressure on Putin, until Ukraine succeeds.

Putin's allies continue to choose to turn a blind eye to alleged war crimes and support his bloody offensive."

Photo: La Prensa

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