



EUROPEAN COURT OF HUMAN RIGHTS
COUR EUROPÉENNE DES DROITS DE L'HOMME

“Rebirth: Empowerment and Rehabilitation of Girls in Armed Conflict”

Welcome address by Mattias Guyomar

Strasbourg, 27 April 2026

*Madam UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict,
Madam Special Envoy of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe on the situation of children of
Ukraine,
Madam Secretary-General of the Universities Network for Children in Armed Conflict,
Secretary General of the European Parliament Intergroup on Children’s Rights,
President of the Universities Network for Children in Armed Conflict,
Dear fellow Judges, dear Registry colleagues,
Dear professors, members of the academic community,
Dear young representatives, dear students,
Distinguished guests,*

It is an honour and a great pleasure to welcome you all this morning to the European Court of Human Rights for this conference dedicated to the important issue of the protection, empowerment and rehabilitation of girls in armed conflict.

Your presence, and I am looking in particular at the young people in the audience, fills me with optimism, despite the extremely serious matter at hand.

I would first like to express my sincere thanks to all those behind the *Rebirth* project, and to Judge Sancin, *dear Vasilka*, for bringing this major event to our Human Rights Building.

Projects like *Rebirth* are deeply inspiring – as is the work of the many actors gathered here today: international institutions, legal practitioners, members of academia – all involved in addressing the widespread and devastating consequences for children affected, directly and indirectly, by armed conflict. Through your work, you contribute directly to the evolution and enrichment of international legal standards.

I would like to take the opportunity to acknowledge the remarkable work of the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Ms Frazier, and the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General of the Council of Europe on the situation of children in Ukraine, Ms Reykþjorð Gylfadóttir, alongside whom I am pleased to speak this morning.

The complementarity between your respective mandates and the Court’s own contributions, through its case law, to the protection of children’s rights, ensures that advocacy goes hand in hand with accountability.

Two weeks ago, I was in Ukraine, with Judge Gnatovskyy and Deputy Registrar Abel Campos.

The night our delegation left Kyiv, Ukraine faced the deadliest missile and drone attack this year, which killed many people, including a 12-year-old child.

Since Russia's beginning of the full-scale invasion, 3,200 children were killed or injured in Ukraine, according to UNICEF.¹

By the same source, one out of every 5 children worldwide are living in, or fleeing from, conflict zones.²

In Kyiv, I gave a university lecture in which I asked the rhetorical question that some of you might be asking yourselves today:

What can the European Convention on Human Rights, and the Court, do to prevent armed conflict?

Of course, "[t]he Convention cannot (...) stop military hostilities"³, as observed by former Court Vice-President, Judge Angelika Nußberger.

However, one thing is clear: without human rights, there can be no peace.

Human rights and fundamental freedoms "are the foundation of justice and peace in the world", according to the Preamble to the European Convention on Human Rights.

On the wall behind you, you can read the words of former Court President and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, René Cassin:

"There will never be peace on this planet as long as human rights are violated in any part of the world".

These words serve as a constant reminder of the purpose of the work of the Court: to protect peace by protecting law, justice, human rights, and human dignity.

In peacetime, as well as in war.

In wartime, children are particularly vulnerable.

They are less able than adults to protect themselves from violence, displacement, and trauma.

Often, they are among the war's most voiceless victims.

This is why it is so important and urgent to protect their rights.

"Not only (...) on paper; (...) Now, not sometime in the future,"⁴ as you said, *Ms Frazier*, last month in your statement to the Human Rights Council.

¹ [More than a third of Ukraine's children remain displaced four years into war – UNICEF](#)

² UN Global humanitarian overview 2026

³ Angelika Nußberger, 'Promoting Peace and Integration among States' (70th anniversary of the European Convention on Human Rights Conference, Strasbourg, 18 September 2020, https://echr.coe.int/Documents/Speech_20200918_Nussberger_Conference_70_years_Convention_ENG.pdf

⁴ Statement to the Human Rights Council by Vanessa Frazier, SRSG for Children and Armed Conflict Tuesday, 10 March 2026

Let me first say a word about how the Court interprets the Convention to protect children's rights and their "best interests", including in the context of armed conflict.

And then, I will say a word about how the Court has protected the rights of children in the context of the war in Ukraine.

The Court has consistently interpreted the general provisions of the Convention in light of other international treaties, including, of course, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)⁵, but also provisions of international humanitarian law.⁶

The Convention on the rights of the child (CRC) in particular, considering its unanimous ratification by all Council of Europe member States, provides evidence of a broad consensus on the principles that should guide the Court's interpretation of the nature and scope of the rights children may benefit from under the Convention.⁷

A striking illustration of this cross-fertilization is the central role of the notion of the child's "best interests". This principle, affirmed by Article 3(1) of the CRC, has significantly influenced the Court's case law within the framework of the technique of harmonious interpretation of the Convention.

Let me mention, as an example, *Y.S. and O.S. v. Russia* (2021), a case concerning an order to return a child under the Hague Convention to conflict-affected eastern Ukraine.

The Court held that there had been a violation of Article 8 of the Convention on account of the domestic courts' failure to take into account the documented situation of armed conflict, serious human rights violations, bombardments, and civilian casualties in the region of Donetsk.

This meant that the child's best interests had not been adequately assessed.

The principle of the child's best interests now serves firmly as the Court's guiding light.

Now, turning specifically to the Court's judicial work in the context of armed conflict:

Over the past decades, the Court has often been called upon to examine many situations of conflict in Europe, through various inter-State and individual cases concerning human rights in times of armed conflict.⁸

⁵ See for instance § 1545 of *Ukraine and the Netherlands v. Russia* "In his report on children and armed conflict published in June 2023, the UN Secretary General explicitly confirmed the verification of the transfer of 46 children to the Russian Federation from occupied areas of Ukraine. This number included children forcibly separated from their parents, children removed from schools and institutions without the consent of their guardians and a child who had been given Russian citizenship (...). The Secretary General urged "the Russian Federation to ensure that no changes are made to the personal status of Ukrainian children, including their nationality". Similar findings and calls were made by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly and Commissioner for Human Rights and the Committee of the Parties to the Council of Europe Convention on the protection of children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse (Lanzarote Committee) (...)."

⁶ E.g., by referring to Article 78 of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Convention, it recalled the prohibition on the evacuation by a State party to the conflict of children who are not its own nationals to a foreign country, except on a temporary basis for imperative reasons of health or safety. The Court also relied on Articles 50 and 136 of the Fourth Geneva Convention concerning the identification and protection of children, as well as Article 74 of Additional Protocol I on the reunification of families separated by armed conflict.

⁷ ECtHR, *T and V. v. United-Kingdom*, n° 24888/94, 16 December 1999, §75.

⁸ There have been over 30 inter-State cases since the European Convention entered into force in 1953. In addition to inter-State cases, the Court has, over the course of its history, received well over 18,000 individual applications concerning various international armed conflicts between different Member States. Currently, 7,500 such individual applications are pending before the Court and their vast majority is related to the armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

While the Council of Europe has been at the forefront of the accountability efforts in support of Ukraine following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine since 2022, a special role falls to the Court.

It currently remains the only international judicial body holding Russia accountable for violations of the human rights protected by the Convention⁹.

This is thanks to the Court's historic decision, adopted in March 2022, to retain residual jurisdiction over Russia even after the country's expulsion from the Council of Europe.

The most emblematic examples of the Court's judicial role are its historic rulings in the two inter-State cases: *Ukraine v. Russia (re Crimea)*, delivered in 2024; and, arguably the most significant judgment in the Court's history: the ruling in inter-State cases *Ukraine and the Netherlands v. Russia*, delivered in July last year¹⁰.

In these unanimous judgments, the Court's Grand Chamber held Russia responsible for gross and widespread human rights violations committed in the context of the conflict in Ukraine since February 2014 and since the full-scale invasion in February 2022.

The *Ukraine and the Netherlands v. Russia* judgment serves as a particular example of the Court's attentiveness to the situation of children affected by armed conflict.

As you said, Ms Reykfyrd Gylfadóttir, in your speech at the High-Level Meeting on Abducted Ukrainian Children, last November: "The abduction and forcible transfer of children is one of the most devastating wounds inflicted by this war"¹¹

In its judgment, the Court found, among other violations, beyond reasonable doubt, a systematic administrative practice of transferring and adopting Ukrainian children in Russia between 2014 and 2022, amounting to violations of multiple provisions of the Convention (Articles 3, 5, and 8).

The Court found that:

- children were separated from their parents "without legal consent,"
- that the measures were neither "in accordance with the law" nor temporary,
- and that no steps were taken to "secure their return or family reunification."

It held that such actions — involving "deprivation of liberty," "long-term trauma," and "permanent uprooting" — met the severity threshold of Article 3.

In its reasoning, the Court also reaffirmed that the pursuit of family unity and reunification following separation is inherent in Article 8 of the Convention, which protects private and family life.

And, in the paragraph which concerns the binding force and execution of the Court's judgments, it ruled that the respondent State – Russia – had to cooperate without delay in the establishment of an international and independent mechanism to secure the identification of all children transferred from Ukraine to Russia, and their safe reunification.

⁹ The Court has communicated on 25 March 2025 and 23 March 2026 to the Government of the Russian Federation of the application *Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union on behalf of ten Ukrainian children v. Russia* (application no. 6719/23). The case concerns ten Ukrainian children who were in childcare in Crimea in 2014 when Russia asserted jurisdiction over the peninsula. According to the association (UHHRU) acting on their behalf, Russian nationality was forced on the children and they were put up for adoption and may have been adopted. There has been no information on their whereabouts since 2014, despite the Ukrainian authorities' repeated requests.

¹⁰ There are four more inter-State applications lodged by Ukraine against Russia. In addition, since Russia's expulsion from the Council of Europe, the Court has handed down more than 15,000 judgments against Russia, and almost 6,000 conflict-related individual applications directed against the country remain pending.

¹¹ [High-Level Meeting on Abducted Ukrainian Children: A Call for Collective Action – Secretary General](#)

During my recent visit to Ukraine, I had the opportunity to raise this issue with officials from the Ministries of Justice and of Foreign Affairs, who told me about the register and a commission established to verify information about such children and to help in their return.

The above-mentioned examples clearly illustrate how the Court, within its own judicial function, ensures the continued protection of children's fundamental rights.

Through its dynamic and evolutive interpretative approach, the Court ensures:

- that the Convention is read and applied in light of children's "best interests"
- that proper account is taken of children's vulnerabilities – whether linked to age, gender, poverty, displacement, or armed conflict.
- and that violations of rights of children affected by armed conflict do not go unaddressed but result in concrete, legal accountability.

Alongside other actors – including the UN Special Representative; the Council of Europe Special Envoy; or the Council of Europe Consultation Group on the Children of Ukraine¹² – and nourished by their work, the Court continues to fulfil its judicial mission of protecting children's rights and dignity.

In peacetime, as well as in war.

Not only in theory, but through judicially enforceable accountability.

Thank you.

¹² The Council of Europe Consultation Group on the Children of Ukraine (CGU) is a multilateral platform that brings together representatives from member states, international organisations, civil society, and independent experts. Its mission is to support professionals working for and with the children of Ukraine affected by Russia's war of aggression, to ensure that their rights are upheld. Throughout its first mandate, it revealed itself as an important peer-review platform and rapid response mechanism, fostering discussions on the most acute issues facing the children of Ukraine, whether they are in Ukraine, Council of Europe member states or have returned following unlawful deportation to Russia, Belarus or are residing in temporarily occupied territories.

The CGU's mandate has been extended until December 2026, reaffirming its role as a flexible mechanism, reacting rapidly to evolving issues, and delivering impactful and practical support to member states and all relevant actors working with children of Ukraine.