

PROTECTING THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD IN ARMED CONFLICTS: INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS AND THE UKRAINIAN CONTEXT

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INTRODUCTION

The issue of protecting children's rights in the modern world is becoming particularly urgent in the context of military conflicts, which significantly affect the lives of millions of children in different regions of the world. According to international organizations, children constitute a significant part of the civilian population, which suffers most from hostilities, armed violence and humanitarian crises. War deprives them of the right to security, education, medical care, normal development and psychological well-being.

The international community has been developing mechanisms to protect children's rights in situations of armed conflict for several decades. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), its Optional Protocols, the Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocols, as well as numerous UN Security Council resolutions aimed at combating child recruitment, sexual violence and other violations of international humanitarian law, play a key role in this process. Also important are the initiatives of UNICEF, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the European Union and regional organizations that provide humanitarian assistance, monitoring and restoration of children's rights.

Despite the existence of a developed international legal framework, in practice children continue to experience systematic violations of their rights during war. Among the most common challenges are death and injury, use in armed formations, forced displacement, separation from families, limited access to quality education and health care, as well as long-term psychological trauma. The problem of digital inequality and access to educational resources in crisis conditions is also becoming increasingly tangible.

Studying international experience allows not only to systematize existing practices of child protection in conflict zones, but also to identify effective approaches for their implementation in the national legislation and humanitarian policy of Ukraine. In this context, it is important to analyze legal mechanisms, humanitarian programs and rehabilitation strategies used in the world, as well as outline the prospects for their adaptation to modern Ukrainian realities.

The relevance of the topic is due not only to the increase in the number of military conflicts in the world, but also to the need to develop universal strategies for protecting children's rights at the global level.

The purpose of this article is to study the international experience of protecting children's rights during military conflicts, identify key challenges, and generalize practices that can be used to strengthen the national system of protecting children's rights in Ukraine.

1. Prerequisites of the problem and problem formulation

The large-scale aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, which took place in 2022, has led to an unprecedented humanitarian crisis and a significant drop in the number of children. Ukrainian children have become one of the most vulnerable groups of the population, facing the risk of wasted life, trauma, psychological disorders, forced displacement and violation of fundamental rights¹. The issue of protecting the rights of children in the minds of military conflicts is one of the key topics of current international law and humanitarian action. Emerging conflicts of varying proportions that occur in the world, including inter-power wars, internal armed conflicts and terrorist threats, directly affect the lives and development of children. In such situations, children become the most diverse group of the population, even though they suffer from violence, loss of family life, violation of the right to education, medical care and protection from exploitation. According to data from UNICEF and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, over the past decade, thousands of children have become victims of either war atrocities, primus transfers, or embroiled in moldings.

The historical prerequisites for protecting children's rights in wartime conditions are laid down in international documents of the 20th century, including the *Geneva Conventions of 1949* and the Additional Protocols to them², which consolidate the status of the civilian population and convey special legal protection for children, including the protection of attacks on civilian objects, obligations of the powers to provide humanitarian assistance and evacuation of children from combat zones; *UN Convention on the Rights of Children*, 1989³, which states the right of every child to life, protection from exploitation and violence, as well as access to medical care; Also, the Optional Protocol is part of the *Children in World Conflicts of 2000 Protocol*

¹ Nikitin Y., Nikitina I. War as a mean of political crime and national security threat: Psychological and criminology aspects. – 2023.

² Додатковий протокол до Женевських конвенцій від 12 серпня 1949 року, що стосується захисту жертв міжнародних збройних конфліктів (Протокол I), від 8 червня 1977 року URL: https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/995_199#Text

³ Резолюція Генеральної Асамблеї ООН від 21.12.95 N 50/155 (Про зміну до Конвенції про права дитини. URL: https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/995_b10#Text

on the Involvement of Children in World Conflicts⁴, which introduces a minimum age limit and an obligation on the state to refrain from recruiting minors. Resolution 1998 (2011) declared schools and hospitals “zones prohibited from military operations” and their damage a “grave breach.”⁵

However, the increase in the number and intensity of modern conflicts has revealed the inadequacy of existing protection mechanisms and the need to update practical approaches to protecting children's rights.

Particular attention should be paid to the following aspects:

- changing nature of military operations: modern conflicts are often waged in areas with dense civilian populations, which leads to massive violations of children's rights;
- the growing number of internally displaced persons and refugees: children are often left without adequate care, access to education and health services;
- cyber threats and information wars: even outside the combat zone, children are subject to psychological pressure and manipulation through the media space;
- the need for international cooperation: violations of children's rights in wars often have a transnational character, which requires effective cooperation between states, international organizations and human rights institutions.

Thus, there was a need for a comprehensive international investigation to develop current strategies and mechanisms for protecting the rights of children in situations of violent conflicts.

The problem is that, despite a significant number of international legal acts and declarations, the actual level of protection of children's rights in conflicts remains low. The existing instruments often do not ensure effective control over compliance with humanitarian law, and the mechanisms for bringing to justice for war crimes against children are not always effective. In addition, there is an imbalance between the norm-setting activities of international bodies and the real possibilities for implementing these norms in national legal systems.

In this context, an urgent task is to analyze successful international practices, the experience of individual states and international organizations in minimizing the negative consequences of wars for children. It is necessary to study the issues of preventing violations of children's rights, systemic

⁴ Факультативний протокол до Конвенції про права дитини щодо процедури повідомлень (Факультативний протокол ратифіковано із заявою Законом № 1026-VIII від 16.03.2016) URL: <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/1026-19#n5>

⁵ "Security Council adopts text expanding criteria for Secretary-General's list 'naming and shaming' violators of conflict-affected children's rights". United Nations. 12 July 2011. URL: <https://www.un.org/News/Press/docs//2011/sc10319.doc.htm>

psychological and social support, rehabilitation of child victims, as well as improving the legal mechanisms for bringing perpetrators to justice.

Thus, the problem can be formulated as follows: there is a gap between international legal norms and the actual provision of children's rights in military conflicts, which requires generalization and implementation of effective international experience in national human rights protection systems. The study of this issue will allow for the development of proposals for improving the legislative and institutional framework, will contribute to a more comprehensive approach to the protection of children in emergency situations and ensuring an adequate level of protection for the most vulnerable category of the population – children.

2. Comparative analysis of international experience in protecting children's rights

Comparing the approaches of different countries and international organizations to protecting children's rights during armed conflicts allows us to identify both common features and specific features of human rights protection mechanisms.

The most developed systems for protecting children's rights in conflict zones operate in countries that actively cooperate with international structures and implement international standards in national legislation. For example, in the countries of the European Union, considerable attention is paid to the creation of centers for rehabilitation and psychological support for refugee children, as well as programs for integration into the educational process.

In African countries where military conflicts are protracted, demobilization and resocialization programs for former child soldiers are actively implemented. International humanitarian organizations play a leading role here, as the resources of national governments are often limited.

In the Middle East, the emphasis is on protecting refugee and internally displaced children, ensuring access to basic education and health care even in areas of active conflict. At the same time, the implementation of these programs faces difficulties due to the difficult political situation and limited access for humanitarian missions.

Particular attention should be paid to the experience of the UN, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and International (Non-Governmental Organizations) NGOs, which ensure the unification of standards for the protection of children's rights at the global level. Their activities demonstrate that an effective human rights protection system is possible only with close cooperation between governments, international structures and civil society.

Comparative analysis shows that:

- *The European approach* focuses on the legal protection and social integration of affected children.
- *The African experience* emphasizes the demobilization and psychological rehabilitation of children involved in hostilities.
- *The Middle East approach* focuses on humanitarian assistance and support for educational programs in crisis regions.
- International organizations ensure comprehensive coordination of actions and form international standards.

Thus, an analysis of international experience shows that a universal model for protecting children's rights in armed conflicts should combine legal, humanitarian, educational and psychological tools adapted to the specifics of each region.

a) Peculiarities of the European approach to protecting children's rights

The issue of protecting children's rights in armed conflicts is extremely relevant for Europe, especially given the lessons of the historical wars of the 20th century and modern conflicts on the continent. European states have developed a complex of legal, social and humanitarian mechanisms to ensure the safety, physical and psychological health of children. Europe's experience can serve as an important reference point for other regions of the world. The European approach to protecting children's rights was formed under the influence of the general values of human rights enshrined in the system of the Council of Europe and the European Union. Unlike universal international documents, the European model focuses on practical mechanisms for ensuring children's rights, systemic monitoring and close integration of childhood protection into the general human rights policy.

The cornerstone of the European framework for the protection of children's rights in situations of armed conflict is constituted by:

The European Convention on Human Rights (1950), together with the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights, which enshrine the prohibition of torture and inhuman or degrading treatment, as well as the right to education⁶.

- Here's the academic English rendering of your second point:
- the Council of Europe Convention on the Exercise of Children's Rights (1996), which establishes the obligations of States to safeguard the rights of children, including in situations of armed conflict.⁷

⁶ Європейська конвенція з прав людини. URL: <https://www.echr.coe.int>

⁷ Конвенція Ради Європи про права дитини. URL: <https://www.coe.int>

– the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2000), which affirms the right of children to protection from violence and exploitation.⁸

– The Revised EU Guidelines on Children and Armed Conflicts (2024), which set out specific measures for the protection of children in conflict zones.⁹

Key features of the European approach:

– Institutional security: the presence of the European Court of Human Rights, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, and Commissioners for the Rights of the Child.

– Case law: the case law of the ECHR forms a dynamic and flexible protection mechanism.

– Comprehensiveness: the protection of childhood is considered in connection with issues of social policy, education, gender equality and digital security.

– Emphasis on child participation: European documents emphasize the right of the child to be heard and to participate in decisions that concern him/her.

– Monitoring and reporting: regular reports from states, monitoring by the Council of Europe and the European Commission.

European countries are implementing various programs to protect children in conflict zones. First of all, these are humanitarian initiatives: providing medical care, housing and education for refugee children. Then comes psychosocial support: creating children's centers, providing psychological assistance to children who have experienced trauma. If necessary, the child is provided with legal assistance: ensuring access to justice for children affected by conflicts. And finally, educational programs are offered: organizing education for children in temporary shelters and camps.¹⁰

Thus, the European experience of protecting children's rights during military conflicts demonstrates the importance of a comprehensive approach combining legal guarantees, social programs and the active participation of state and international organizations. This experience can serve as a reference point for other regions of the world in ensuring children's rights in crisis situations.

⁸ Хартія основних прав Європейського Союзу. URL: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu>

⁹ Оновлені керівні принципи ЄС щодо дітей та збройних конфліктів. URL: <https://www.eeas.europa.eu>

¹⁰ Офіційний сайт Європейського суду з прав людини. URL: <https://www.echr.coe.int>

b) An African Approach to Protecting Children's Rights

The African case for the protection of children's rights has its own peculiarities in the face of military conflicts, and this continent itself has been the epicenter of violent conflicts, huge wars and other events for decades. In such minds, children become one of the most diverse social groups.

Children's rights in Africa face a number of unique challenges due to the socio-economic, political and cultural context of the region. Despite the existence of international and regional protection mechanisms, such as the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, the implementation of these rights is often hampered by a variety of factors.

Children in Africa are often victims of armed conflict, violence, and exploitation. In countries such as Mali, Nigeria, and South Sudan, children are subject to threats from armed groups, including recruitment into child armies and sexual violence. In many African countries (Sierra Leone, Liberia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Southern Sudan, Chad, Central African Republic), children are recruited into organized crime groups. They are called fighters, couriers, spies, or "living shields." This grossly violates the UN Convention on the Rights of Children and the Optional Protocol on the Participation of Children in Emergency Conflicts. In Mozambique, for example, more than 120 children have been kidnapped by militants and used as soldiers, slave labor or are forced into marriage.¹¹

The war will lead to mass displacement of child refugees, increased hunger, lack of access to medical care and high mortality rates among children. In the Sahel region, millions of children suffer from a lack of basic services.

African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990) – the first regional document that obliges African states to adhere to standards of protection. African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC): monitors compliance with rights and makes recommendations to states. Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes for child soldiers: implemented with the support of UNICEF, the African Union and local governments.

It (ACRWC) was adopted by the Organization of African Unity in 1990 and entered into force in 1999. The document takes into account the

¹¹ AP. World News. At least 120 children have been abducted by insurgents in Mozambique, rights group says URL: <https://apnews.com/article/mozambique-shabab-insurgents-child-kidnap-ebb0df840676355f7e261d132ec49d91>

peculiarities of the African continent and in some provisions goes further than the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.¹²

The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990) pays special attention to the protection of refugee children and children affected by armed conflicts. According to Art. 22, states are obliged to prevent the recruitment and participation of persons under the age of 18 in military operations, to ensure their protection in accordance with the norms of international humanitarian law, and to take measures to rehabilitate victims of war. Thus, the African Charter goes further than the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, because the Convention (Article 38) sets a threshold of 15 years for the participation of children in military operations, and the African Charter – strictly 18 years, which gives children a higher level of protection. Art. 23 enshrines special guarantees for refugee children and displaced persons, including equal access to medical care, education and social support. These provisions make the Charter stricter than the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, establishing a higher level of protection for the most vulnerable categories of children.

In practice, the African Charter often remains a declarative document: its norms are not always implemented, especially in countries with conflicts and poverty. But thanks to the Charter and the work of the African Committee, as well as pressure from NGOs and international organizations, attention to children's issues is gradually increasing – especially in the area of combating child marriage, child soldiering and access to education. For example, in 2020, the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC), under the African Charter, examined the situation of children in northern Nigeria. In northern Nigeria, the extremist group Boko Haram kidnapped children and used them in combat and for sexual exploitation. Although the Charter's implementation remains problematic in practice, the complaints mechanism works and holds states accountable. The Committee's decisions are not always implemented quickly, but they create precedents and put pressure on governments.

c) A Middle East Approach to Protecting Children's Rights

The protection of children's rights in the Middle East has developed within a unique context shaped by cultural traditions, religious values, socio-economic challenges, and ongoing conflicts in several states. While international frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989) provide the foundation, implementation is

¹² Organization of African Unity (OAU). *African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child* (CAB/LEG/24.9/49), 11 July 1990. – URL: <https://www.refworld.org/legal/agreements/oau/1990/en/13798>

uneven due to ongoing conflicts, traditional legal systems, and varying degrees of commitment to international human rights norms.¹³ Middle Eastern countries have also developed regional mechanisms and legal commitments tailored to their circumstances focusing on legal frameworks, religious and cultural influences, and practical mechanisms addressing children's welfare in times of peace and conflict.

One of the distinctive aspects of the Middle Eastern approach is the integration of Islamic principles into legal frameworks for child protection. Many states draw on *Sharia*-based family law, which emphasizes children's rights to care, education, and protection, while also creating tensions with universal human rights standards, particularly regarding child marriage and gender equality.¹⁴

At the same time, civil society organizations and international agencies have played a critical role in strengthening child protection systems. UNICEF's Regional Office for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) coordinates initiatives on early childhood development, education in emergencies, and psychosocial support for children affected by conflict.¹⁵

Armed conflicts in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and Palestine have placed children at particular risk, with widespread violations including recruitment by armed groups, lack of access to education, and exposure to violence (Save the Children, 2022). In response, regional organizations such as the League of Arab States have developed strategies, including the *Arab Charter on the Rights of the Child (2019)*¹⁶, which seeks to harmonize international obligations with regional traditions. The Arab Charter on the Rights of the Child contains a number of provisions aimed at strengthening the regional protection mechanism. The Charter explicitly prohibits the recruitment and participation in armed formations of all persons under the age of 18, without any exceptions. This provision is stricter than universal international standards, which allow for some exceptions.

The Charter pays particular attention to the protection of refugee children and internal displacement of persons. The document secures the right of these categories to education, medical assistance and social support to provide superior minds. In addition, the powers are strongly encouraged to ensure the psychological and social rehabilitation of child victims of war, their integration into marriage and return to normal life.

¹³ UNICEF. (2023). *The Convention on the Rights of the Child: Progress and Challenges in the Middle East and North Africa*. New York: UNICEF.

¹⁴ Al-Dawoody, A. Islamic Law and International Humanitarian Law: An Introduction to the Main Principles. *International Review of the Red Cross*, 99(906), pp. 995–1018.

¹⁵ UNICEF MENA. *Regional Framework on Child Protection in Humanitarian Action*. Amman: UNICEF Regional Office.

¹⁶ League of Arab States. *Arab Charter on the Rights of the Child*. Cairo.

Thus, it can be argued that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child formulates universal standards, while the Arab Charter on the Rights of the Child takes a more specific and strict regional approach. This explains the need to take into account the realities of Arab countries, where children are among the most vulnerable victims of military operations. The Arab Charter imposes a strict ban on the participation of children under the age of 18 in war and prescribes social support for victims in detail, which is related to the realities of Arab countries where armed conflicts most acutely affect children.

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d) Review of international sources on the protection of children's rights in wartime in Ukraine

The protection of children during armed conflict has been widely covered in reports by international organizations. UNICEF documents emphasize the need for comprehensive support for refugee and internally displaced children. The organization identifies access to education, health care, psychosocial support, and family reunification as priority areas¹⁸.

Save the Children's report *Back to School: Ukraine 2023–2024* highlights that millions of children in Ukraine face difficulties in accessing education due to the destruction of infrastructure and lack of technical resources. Among the recommendations are the expansion of distance learning programs, the creation of “safe classrooms” and the provision of psychological support to schoolchildren¹⁹.

ReliefWeb's analysis shows that children in frontline regions of Ukraine are at risk of forced displacement, psychological trauma and increased levels of child labor. The organization emphasizes the need for increased monitoring and coordination between state and international structures²⁰.

The International Committee of the Red Cross focuses its recommendations on protecting children from recruitment and participation in armed groups, as well as on compliance with international humanitarian law. Particular emphasis is placed on demobilization and reintegration programs

¹⁷ UNICEF MENA. *Regional Framework on Child Protection in Humanitarian Action*. Amman: UNICEF Regional Office

¹⁸ UNICEF. *Guidance for protecting displaced and refugee children; Humanitarian Action for Children: Ukraine 2023*. – New York, 2023.

¹⁹ Save the Children. *Back to School report: Ukraine 2023–2024*. – London, 2023.

²⁰ ReliefWeb. *Child protection in Ukraine: December 2023 reports*. – Geneva, 2023.

for children affected by war, as well as on ensuring their access to health care and education²¹.

3. Protecting Children's Rights in Wartime: The Ukrainian Context

“During war, all the rights of the child are violated: the right to life, the right to be with family and community, the right to health, the right to personal development, and the right to care and protection,” states the 1996 UN report “The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children.” The armed conflict in Ukraine has become a challenge for the system of child rights protection. The experience of international and regional mechanisms for the protection of children in crisis situations allows us to identify a number of effective practices that can be adapted to Ukrainian realities. With the beginning of the full-scale invasion, Ukraine intensified its work on child protection. Special bodies were created and new mechanisms were developed.

On March 17, 2022, the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine established the Coordination Headquarters²². Its main task is to collect and analyze information on the condition and needs of children in the combat zone and those who have already been evacuated. Based on this data, the headquarters develops algorithms for actions for the authorities.

For example, the headquarters developed an algorithm for evacuating children from the zone of active combat, their placement and ensuring proper care. This helps save children's lives and provide for their basic needs in extreme conditions.

Let's consider new mechanisms on child protection in more detail.

Legal framework and protection of the status of the child. It is important to enshrine in national legislation the special status of "child affected by war", which ensures access to rehabilitation, education, social benefits and medical care. It is also necessary to criminalize cases of forced removal and recruitment of children, establishing effective mechanisms for their return.

Family care and reunification systems. As reported, according to official data from the Ukrainian authorities, 19,546 children have been deported from Ukraine to Russia since February 24, 2022. These are only those cases that were officially recorded – when the parent, guardian, or witness to the child's deportation reported it to the National Information Bureau of Ukraine. So far, 386 children have been returned to Ukraine²³. Centralized child registration and tracking systems, including databases for family tracing, allow for rapid identification and reconnection with relatives. The priority should be to return

²¹ ICRC. Children affected by armed conflict: Guidelines for protection. – Geneva, 2022.

²² Міністерство соціальної політики України. Процедура надання статусу «дитини, постраждалої від війни». – Київ, 2022

²³ УКРІНФОРМ. URL: <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-world/3742632-u-rosii-zaavlauto-so-vivezli-ponad-700-tisac-ukrainskih-ditej.html>

children to their families or to safe alternative care, which significantly reduces the risk of exploitation and psychological trauma²⁴.

Education in emergency conditions. Education is a fundamental right of the child, guaranteed by international treaties and the Constitution of Ukraine. The conditions of full-scale war have created unprecedented challenges to ensuring access to quality education. Systematic shelling, destruction of infrastructure, mass migration and psychological trauma of children have significantly affected the functioning of the education system. At the same time, Ukraine has demonstrated its ability to adapt to the realities of war, using digital technologies, international support and innovative learning models²⁵.

The Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine has adopted a number of regulations on the organization of the educational process in blended and distance forms, and has also developed methodological recommendations on safety in schools. First, the destruction and damage to educational institutions has led to a significant reduction in the number of safe educational spaces. According to UNICEF and the Ministry of Education, thousands of schools have been destroyed or partially damaged. Second, the forced displacement of children both within and outside the country has created a situation where large numbers of students are forced to integrate into new education systems. Thirdly, the psychological state of students and teachers has become an additional barrier to learning, as constant anxiety and stress significantly reduce concentration and the effectiveness of the learning process.

Ukraine has implemented a number of innovative solutions to ensure the continuity of education:

1. Distance learning: the platforms “All-Ukrainian School Online”, Google Classroom, Zoom have become the main tools²⁶
2. Blended learning: a combination of face-to-face and distance learning²⁷
3. Educational hubs for IDPs: special spaces have been created for internally displaced children.
4. International integration: the opportunity to receive education in Ukrainian schools remotely even abroad. As of January 2025, 355,747 Ukrainian children abroad were studying simultaneously in two schools: remotely in Ukrainian schools and in person in schools in the host country.

²⁴ UNICEF. Guidance for protecting displaced and refugee children; Humanitarian Action for Children: Ukraine 2023. – New York, 2023.

²⁵ Ishchenko T., Nikitina I., Das B. Innovations in Law Enforcement Education: The Impact of Artificial Intelligence Tools. – 2024.

²⁶ UNICEF. Education under attack in Ukraine: 2023 report. – New York, 2023.

²⁷ Save the Children. Back to School report: Ukraine 2023–2024. – London, 2023.

Such data is provided by the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine in response to a request from the media outlet “New Ukrainian School”²⁸.

5. Psychosocial support: assistance programs and adaptation courses in schools. Mobile multidisciplinary teams, integration of psychological support into schools, medical facilities and refugee registration centers allow children to be provided with comprehensive assistance after experiencing violence and war trauma.

International partners support initiatives to create safe shelters in schools, train teachers to work in crisis situations, and fund programs to digitize education.

Ukrainian experience shows that even in the extraordinary conditions of war, the state is able to guarantee the right to education, using modern technologies and international support. However, key tasks remain the restoration of destroyed infrastructure, the expansion of psychological assistance programs, and the integration of Ukrainian students abroad into a single educational space.

Protection from recruitment and participation in armed formations. One of the most acute challenges of the Russian–Ukrainian war is the prevention of child recruitment and the protection of minors from forced involvement in armed groups. In the Ukrainian context, national legislation strictly prohibits the involvement of children in military activities. The Law of Ukraine “On Protection of Childhood” (2001, with amendments) and the Law “On Military Duty and Military Service” clearly define the minimum age of recruitment and ensure legal safeguards against the militarization of minors. Despite these measures, documented cases have revealed that children, particularly in the temporarily occupied territories, face risks of ideological indoctrination, militarized propaganda, and coercive involvement in paramilitary organizations established by occupation authorities²⁹.

Thus, protecting children from recruitment in the current war remains both a legal obligation and a humanitarian priority. Strengthening international cooperation, ensuring accountability for war crimes, and expanding rehabilitation efforts are critical to safeguarding the rights and the future of Ukrainian children.

Safe infrastructure and humanitarian support. Protecting civilian infrastructure (schools, hospitals), constructing evacuation corridors, bomb

²⁸ НУШ. Майже 356 тисяч українських дітей навчається одночасно у двох школах: дистанційно в українській і очно за кордоном – МОН. URL: <https://nus.org.ua/2025/02/05/majzhe-356-tysyach-ukrayinskyh-ditej-navchayetsya-odnochasno-u-dvoh-shkolah-dystantsijno>

²⁹ UNICEF. Children in Armed Conflict. – New York: UNICEF, 2023. – URL: <https://www.unicef.org/protection/children-in-armed-conflict>

shelters and providing basic services (water, heat, food) reduce indirect risks to children and ensure a minimum level of safety.

Monitoring and documenting violations. In the context of a full-scale war in Ukraine, the issue of child protection is particularly urgent. Children are at risk of deportation, physical violence, sexual exploitation and recruitment into armed groups. To effectively respond and ensure the rights of children, it is necessary to create systems for collecting, verifying and analyzing data on violations of their rights. Such systems should ensure not only a prompt response, but also documenting evidence for national and international legal proceedings.³⁰ Such a system ensures timely response and assistance to victims, documentation of evidence for national and international investigations, generation of reliable statistics for planning protection measures, and integration with international platforms for coordination and reporting.

The experience of international organizations and regional mechanisms demonstrates that protecting children in war requires a comprehensive approach: a combination of legislative guarantees, social support, safe access to education and medical care, psychological rehabilitation and monitoring of violations. It is important for Ukraine to adapt these practices, taking into account the specifics of war and internally displaced persons, ensuring the safety and full development of children even in crisis conditions.

However, there are still weak points in the Ukrainian system of child protection. Let's name some of them.

- The destruction of schools and limited access to distance learning reduce children's opportunities to continue their education. There are not enough adaptation classes and programs for internally displaced children.

- There is a lack of qualified psychologists and social workers. Assistance is provided sporadically without a systematic and long-term approach.

- In frontline regions, there is a risk of adolescents being recruited into armed groups. Prevention and control systems are not effective enough.

- There are not enough resources to collect data on gross violations of children's rights, which makes it difficult to respond and hold perpetrators accountable.

- Financial instability of families increases the risk of child labor and exploitation. Social benefits and support programs often do not cover all the needs of displaced families.

³⁰ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine. – Geneva, 2023. – URL: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/countries/ukraine>

CONCLUSION

Analysis of international experience in protecting children's rights in armed conflicts shows that modern challenges require comprehensive approaches that combine legal, institutional and practical mechanisms. International humanitarian law (the 1949 Geneva Conventions and the 1977 Additional Protocols), the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (2000) constitute a universal legal framework that prohibits the recruitment, use and all forms of violence against children. However, the effectiveness of these norms depends on their practical implementation by states and international organizations.

A key aspect of international experience is the development of specialized protection programs aimed at psychosocial support for children, the reintegration of former child soldiers, the prevention of sexual violence and ensuring access to education even in crisis conditions. Successful practices in Africa, the Middle East and Europe prove that combining humanitarian aid with educational and social programs creates conditions for the restoration of children's basic rights.

An important tool is the activities of international organizations – UNICEF, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Human Rights Watch and others, which monitor violations, create databases and provide recommendations to states. A special role is played by the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM), introduced by the UN Security Council to record six categories of gross violations of children's rights in armed conflicts.

International experience also shows that the protection of children in war is impossible without intersectoral interaction. This requires cooperation between state institutions, educational and medical institutions, law enforcement agencies, local communities and public organizations. Many countries have established national coordination mechanisms that integrate data on violations and allow for a faster response to cases of violence or forced displacement.

However, practice proves the presence of serious challenges: lack of resources, the difficulty of verifying data in war zones, the problem of impunity for crimes against children, as well as secondary traumatization during the documentation of crimes. Solving these problems requires not only political will and international pressure, but also the development of innovative digital tools for data collection and analysis, as well as the expansion of training programs for specialists in the field of child rights protection.

For Ukraine, which is currently facing unprecedented challenges, international experience can become the basis for:

- creating a national system for collecting and analyzing data on violations of children's rights;
- improving mechanisms for reintegration and support for children who have survived deportations, violence or other forms of exploitation;
- developing flexible educational programs that will ensure the continuity of education in conditions of martial law;
- strengthening international advocacy to hold perpetrators of crimes against children accountable.

Thus, international experience in protecting children's rights in armed conflicts demonstrates that effective protection is possible only with an integrated approach that combines international law, state policy, humanitarian and social programs. It is important for Ukraine to use this experience not only to overcome current challenges, but also to form a sustainable system for protecting children in the future.

ABSTRACT

The article explores international experience in protecting children's rights during armed conflicts, focusing on legal, institutional, and humanitarian mechanisms. It analyzes the role of key international instruments, including the Geneva Conventions, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and UN Security Council resolutions, in shaping global child protection standards. Special attention is devoted to the European, African, and Middle Eastern regional approaches, which emphasize legal safeguards, rehabilitation of child soldiers, psychosocial support, and access to education in crisis settings. The study also highlights the contribution of international organizations such as UNICEF, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and Save the Children in developing monitoring systems, emergency responses, and long-term reintegration strategies. Based on comparative analysis, the article identifies common challenges—forced displacement, militarization of children, sexual exploitation, and limited access to essential services—that remain critical across regions. The findings suggest that Ukraine can benefit from adopting best international practices by establishing a national data collection and monitoring system, strengthening legal frameworks, expanding educational and psychological support programs, and enhancing international cooperation to ensure accountability for war crimes against children.

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