

# A HEAVY TOLL



Save the Children

The impact of one year of war on children in Ukraine



A toy sits on a destroyed swing in a heavily damaged residential area on the outskirts of Kharkiv, Ukraine. Photo taken on July 17, 2022 by Oleksandr Khomenko / Save the Children.

## The dramatic escalation of war in Ukraine in February 2022 has affected every person in the country.

In the year since February 2022, at least 18,657 civilian casualties have been verified by the UN: 7,110 killed and 11,547 injured. The true figures are likely significantly higher.

In Ukraine, those who are hit hardest are those who are least responsible — the country's children. More than 4 children a day are killed or injured, and this number is assumed to be a gross underestimate. Reports of sexual violence, killing, torture and other degrading treatment of children continue to emerge, with very little regard to International Humanitarian Law and International Human Rights Law.

At least 17.7 million people, including 4.1 million children, are in need of humanitarian assistance — around 45 per cent of the pre-February 24 population in Ukraine, and triggered an unprecedented wave of displacement both inside Ukraine and to other countries in Europe. By January 2023, 6.2 million Ukrainians remain internally displaced, and some 8 million are refugees in neighbouring and other countries.

Mines and unexploded ordnance are also a deadly risk for over 2 million children. Over 250,000 explosive remnants of war have already been removed and destroyed since March 2022, but millions more remain, with explosive ordnance potentially present in all areas affected by the war.

Towards the end of 2022, attacks on energy infrastructure intensified, forcing millions across the country to endure winter while rationing electricity and water. In areas that have recently seen active fighting, reports emerged of families melting snow and collecting water from puddles, or queuing for hours to receive basics like bread and drinking water just to survive.



**4 children are killed and injured each day in Ukraine on average.**



The fighting has forced school closures across the country, leaving children with online education as their only option. However, less than 30 per cent of children have access to an individual device in Ukraine. Frequent electricity cuts pose problems for children that do have devices. Many have missed years of education after years of conflict in the east, the COVID-19 lockdown and now active hostilities across the country.

Children have spent more than 900 hours hiding in bunkers across the country, with this number going significantly higher in areas closer to active hostilities.

In total, the UN estimates that more than 3.5 million children in Ukraine live under severe to catastrophic levels of needs across the country. Children in non-government-controlled areas (NGCA), often close to conflict lines and with the least access to help, are amongst the most at risk. And the conditions for those who were vulnerable even prior to the escalation — such as the 100,000 children who were in institutional care — have been exacerbated either by the ongoing fighting or by being deprioritised both in policy and assistance.

One year of war has been a catastrophe for children in Ukraine. Children live with constant

fear and with the psychological distress of having witnessed violence, separation from parents, family members and friends, fleeing across borders or seeing their loved ones killed. Too many are going without the assistance they need and all are at grave risk of harm.

With no end to the war in sight, Save the Children is calling for needs of children, and their need to be protected, to be prioritised. For that to happen, the war must be conducted in line with international humanitarian law. The indiscriminate bombardment and targeting of civilian infrastructure — including schools — must come to an end. Those who are responsible for breaching these laws and violating children's rights must be held to account.



**An estimated 50% of children in institutions have disabilities.**

## Key recommendations

- Parties to the conflict need to ensure full, unhindered humanitarian access to families impacted by the war.
- Parties to the conflict must adhere to their obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law, including by respecting the principles of proportionality and distinction between civilians and civilian and military objects.
- The international community must take steps to ensure that those responsible for violations of international law and international human rights law are held to account, including through asking for the establishment of the United Nations Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) on grave violations committed against children in Ukraine
- Donors should invest in voices of children in all their diversity, in both ongoing humanitarian response, early recovery processes and future development. Ensure that accountability to children, including most vulnerable, remains at the heart of future development financing for Ukraine and prioritise children's rights and the restoration of family ties in third-country diplomacy.
- Humanitarian leadership should prioritise inclusive approaches to response and recovery that ensure that the rights and needs of all community members in all areas are respected, regardless of populations' background, without creating parallel systems.

# A year in my life

By Sophia\*, 16

**For our village in eastern Ukraine, the beginning was on February 17, 2022.**

I was having physics classes online when we first heard explosions ten kilometres away. They then began to land on nearby streets. Our teacher instructed us to rush to the shelter. When I got to the corridor, I heard a loud explosion. I only managed to sit next to the wall, close my ears, and open my mouth to avoid being shocked by the blast wave. We then dashed to the basement, closing the door only to have fragments fly across the basement, the roof, and the asphalt. I sobbed. It was a typical morning, and here we are.

The shelling continued in the days that followed.

On February 21, I awoke to the most powerful explosion. Just a big bang. The birds flew, and then there was silence. It felt like the end of the world. We didn't have time to go to the basement, so my grandmother and I hid behind two walls.

Later that day, we had a session with a psychologist at the village club when we heard a loud explosion. I realized it was somewhere around my house. I remember everything in



Sophia\*, 16, looking at the camera near the house she shares with her grandmother in western Ukraine. Photo taken on January 16, 2023 by Olena Dudchenko / Save the Children

bits and pieces: how I got to my yard, how there were no windows in the summer kitchen, how a window in the house completely fell out with all the panes, how I entered my room and saw a small shrapnel piece that had pierced the window and was hanging on curtains.

We then went to hide in the basement of an apartment building. Beds, a stove, and a table had been arranged there since 2014 when hostilities first started in our region. I was in the 2nd grade then. I remember how it was in our village, with tanks firing from our streets. I recall how happy we were as children sitting in the same basement when a lady brought us cooked corn. It was like a game where tanks appeared to be cool. We became accustomed to something flying over us. There was nothing we could do.

But this time I got stronger. I contacted volunteers, and we agreed that they would take me and eight other children out with the parents' permission. On February 23, we walked around Kharkiv like the happiest children, and we even went to the zoo. However, we heard explosions late at night. "C'mon, it's Kharkiv, there can't be any explosions," I reasoned at first. But then we realized there was shelling going on.

From Kharkiv, we drove for nearly five days to western Ukraine to settle in a hostel. I thought I was leaving home for two weeks. I expected everything to be over in a month.

When we arrived here in March, I started to help at a humanitarian aid point by registering people. Shampoo, shower gel, and other necessities were requested. One woman in summer flip-flops was relieved to receive shoes. I realized that people had nothing. I realized I had left on time.

I begged my grandmother, who was staying at home, to leave because I was alone and worried that I wouldn't be able to handle everything mentally. She has been my main caregiver since I was five. Grandma arrived to me in western Ukraine on April 4. In mid-May, we discovered that only two walls of our house remained. And by now, there is nothing but stones. I spent my

entire 16-year life there, and it was all destroyed in a matter of months.

At the end of May, we were told that my father was gone. We didn't sleep for two days because we were crying. Then, on June 2, my father called to tell that he was fine, although injured and getting treatment in the hospital.

The region where I live now is rather safe. I was able to spend the entire summer hanging out with my new friends. I moved with my grandmother from the hostel to a house in July where we now live for free. In the autumn, I began my senior year of high school and will be taking exams to study journalism at a university. I want to get a good education.

However, I am still affected by the war. I haven't heard anything from my mom in eight months. It would be a huge relief to learn that she is alive and well.

There are also power outages, making communication difficult. One morning I saw some sad news reports from the city where my father now lives. I wanted to check on him, but there was no signal and no power. Situations like this make me sick.

There is also a sense of nostalgia. What if I didn't sit here right now and instead went for a walk in the park back home? Or else I'd be sitting in my room? We completed its renovation just before the war.

Now I live by the rule "be yourself and do what you like." If you enjoy drawing, do so. And it appears to me that it will be very useful even during this war.

Children who enjoy drawing might become architects who will rebuild everything destroyed by the war.

\*Not her real name. Name has been changed to protect her identity.