

Raised Among Arms: Child Soldiers in Europe

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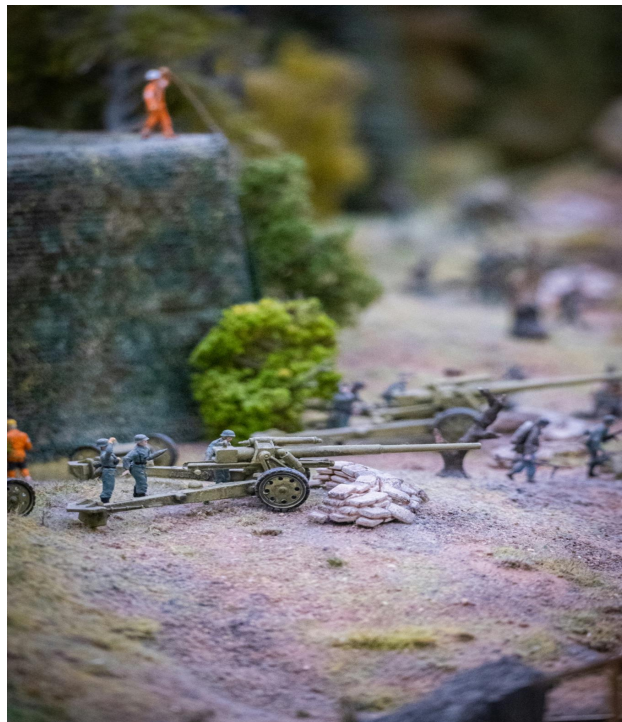


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Abbreviations	Full terms
CAES Centres	Centres for reception and situation examination
CESCR	Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CRS Officers	Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité (Republican Security Corps)
ECHR	European Convention on Human Rights
EU	European Union
EUAA	European Union Agency for Asylum
EUROJUST	European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation
EUROPOL	European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICRMW	International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families
ID	Identification
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
IRC	International Rescue Committee
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NGO HRO	NGO Human Rights Observers
NGO MSF	NGO Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders)

OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
PICUM	Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants
RIBs	Rigid Inflatable Boats
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WHO	World Health Organisation

INTRODUCTION

Tens of thousands of children are recruited and used as soldiers in international and non-international armed conflicts around the world. According to the Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups, a child soldier “refers to any person below 18 years of age who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies, or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities”. The number of child soldiers is increasing year by year, despite all the conventions and protocols stating that children should not be recruited and used in armed conflicts.

Armed conflicts affect every aspect of children’s lives. Children who are recruited and used in armed conflicts may experience trauma that can have lifelong effects; they can be injured or killed, uprooted from their families, subjected to sexual abuse and exploitation, and deprived of education. The recruitment and use of children in the armed forces or armed groups has been widely condemned by the international community, but children are forcibly involved in armed conflicts. Moreover, the release and reintegration of these children is another huge issue, because they may face an uncertain future, and their families and communities may not accept them anymore. Girls are most likely to be stigmatised and even rejected by communities. Advocating against child soldiers is important because the international community has the ability to raise awareness and remind the whole world that children should be protected and kept away from armed conflicts.

This report is divided into several parts. The first part delves into the international and European legal framework, more specifically, the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Optional Protocol, and it also discusses the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the most important ICC judgments on child soldiers. The second part explores the forms of militarisation of minors, such as indirect militarisation, direct recruitment, and direct involvement in armed conflicts, so that readers can better understand how children are used in armed conflicts. Then the report talks about the human rights implications: how the involvement in armed conflicts violates children’s rights, including the right to education, development, and protection; what kind of long-term effects can it have on a child’s life? One of the most significant chapters is about the responses and protection mechanisms, and how the prevention and reintegration policies work at the regional and international levels. What kind of role does civil society have in protecting and helping children to reintegrate into society? After discussing all these important topics, the last part of the report will contain, not only the conclusion, but also some recommendations for the European states and the European Union (EU) to strengthen prevention measures.

1. INTERNATIONAL AND EUROPEAN LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Amid the numerous ongoing international and non-international armed conflicts, the number of children who are recruited and used as soldiers in armed conflicts is also increasing.

According to the Secretary-General of the European Union External Action, over 437 million children live in conflict zones, from Myanmar to the occupied Palestinian territories, Haiti to Sudan, Ukraine to the Sahel region (EEAS, 2025). Reportedly, in 2023, 8,655 children were recruited and used by parties to the conflict (EEAS, 2025). These boys and girls suffer extensive forms of exploitation and abuse, and parties to the conflict use children not only as fighters, but also as scouts, cooks, messengers, and more. Girls are very often subjected to gender-based violence. According to the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), children become part of armed forces or groups for various reasons; some of them are abducted, threatened, or manipulated by armed forces, while others are driven by poverty (UNICEF).

No matter the reason behind their involvement, the recruitment and use of children by armed forces is a grave violation of children's rights and international humanitarian law (IHL). This chapter aims to delve deeper into the international and European legal framework and how it deals with the problem.

1.1 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Optional Protocol

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was adopted in 1989, and is the world's most widely endorsed human rights instrument. Article 38 of the CRC is directly related to children in armed conflicts. According to the article, State Parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure that persons who have not attained the age of 15 years do not take a direct part in hostilities (CRC, Art 38(2)). Moreover, the third part of the same article states that parties should not recruit any person who has not attained the age of 15 years into their armed forces (CRC, Art 38(3)). The state parties are obligated to respect and ensure the rules of IHL apply to children in armed conflicts.

There are strongly divided opinions on the proposed minimum age of recruitment into the armed forces, because Article 38 requires State Parties to protect children under the age of 15 from direct participation in hostilities, refrain from recruiting children under 15 into armed forces, and take measures to protect civilian children affected by armed conflict (Lansdown, 2022).

The Optional Protocol to the CRC on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict was adopted in 2000. The Protocol strengthens these provisions, raising the minimum age of compulsory recruitment to 18 (OPAC, Art.2). Article 3 of OPAC states that State Parties should also raise the minimum age for the voluntary recruitment of persons into their armed forces (OPAC, Art.3(1)). In cases that State Parties permit voluntary recruitment into their national armed forces under the age of 18 years, they shall maintain safeguards, to make sure that the recruitment is voluntary; it is carried out with the informed consent of parent and

legal guardians; such persons are fully informed of their duties in the military service (OPAC, Art.3(3)). OPAC also contains provisions regarding armed groups, specifically stating that armed groups should not recruit or use persons under the age of 18 in hostilities (OPAC, Art 4).

It should also be noted that IHL and customary international law also prohibit recruiting or using children under the age of 15 as soldiers. Article 77(2) of the Additional Protocol I (AP I) states that,

the parties to the conflict shall take all feasible measures in order that children who have not attained the age of fifteen years do not take a direct part in hostilities and, in particular, they shall refrain from recruiting them into their armed forces.

Moreover, Rule 136 of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) Study on customary international law, which applies to both international and non-international armed conflicts, states that children must not be recruited into armed forces or armed groups.

All these instruments require States to “take all feasible measures” to prevent children’s involvement in conflict. It allows some states to recruit individuals under the age of 18, under specific circumstances.

1.2 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court

Article 8(2)(b)(xxvi) and Article 8(2)(e)(vii) of the Rome Statute specifically prohibit the conscription, enlistment, or use of children under the age of 15 years to participate actively in hostilities, in international and non-international armed conflicts. Therefore, the treaty classifies the recruitment and use of child soldiers as a war crime.

The first and one of the most important cases in the ICC was *Prosecutor v. Thomas Lubanga Dyilo*. Thomas Lubanga was the former president of the Union des Patriotes Congolais (UPC)/the Force Patriotique pour la Liberation du Congo (FPLC) (Case Information Sheet, The Prosecutor v. Thomas Lubanga Dyilo). Lubanga was found guilty on March 14th, 2012 of the war crimes of enlisting and conscripting children under the age of 15 years and using them to participate in hostilities (The Prosecutor v. Thomas Lubanga Dyilo). He served 14 years of imprisonment. The Court concluded that between September 1st, 2002 and August 13th, 2003 the armed wing of the UPC/FPLC was responsible for the widespread recruitment of young people, including children under the age of 15, and they were deployed as soldiers to Bunia, Tchomia, Kasenyia, Bogoro, and elsewhere, and took part in hostilities (The Prosecutor v. Thomas Lubanga Dyilo).

According to the ICC, Thomas Lubanga was the president of the UPC/FPLC, and he was simultaneously the Commander-in-Chief of the army and its political leader. He was exercising an overall control over the activities of the UPC/FPLC, informed and involved in the planning of military operations, and he was also closely involved in making decisions on recruitment policy. In one of his speeches, he encouraged children under the age of 15 to join the army (The Prosecutor v. Thomas Lubanga Dyilo). Moreover, he personally used children under the age of 15 as his bodyguards (The Prosecutor v. Thomas Lubanga Dyilo).

Therefore, the Chamber concluded that these contributions by him were essential to a common plan that resulted in the conscription and enlistment of girls and boys under the age of 15 into the UPC/FPLC.

The case of *Lubanga* was followed by the cases of *Ntaganda* and *Katanga*, which also addressed the issue of child soldiers, but the Lubanga case remains the landmark because it was the first one on this matter.

1.3 Regional Instruments

The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) does not mention child soldiers directly, but some policy instruments in the EU deal with this issue.

In 2003, the EU adopted its first guidelines on Children and Armed Conflict, which stated that at that time, at least 300,000 child soldiers were participating in conflicts (UNCHR, 2003). This guideline was updated in 2008 and most recently in 2024. According to the guidelines, one of the huge challenges nowadays is the forced recruitment of children under the age of 18 and their use in hostilities by both armed forces and armed groups. Furthermore, the recruitment of children under 15 constitutes a war crime, and it causes long-term detrimental consequences on these children (EU Guidelines on Children and Armed Conflict 2024). This guideline commits the EU to integrate child protection into its external relations, humanitarian aid, and crisis management operations.

Most European states have incorporated the CRC and OPAC into their domestic law. In 2019, World Vision published the Global Recruitment Index of Child Soldiers. According to this document, the United Kingdom (UK) allows enlistment from 16. In Austria, the minimum voluntary enlistment age is 17, and the conscription age at 18. In Georgia, 17-year-olds are eligible to become cadets and, as such, are classified as military personnel. In Germany and the Netherlands, the minimum age is also 17, but with parental consent. In Russia, 16-year-olds can enrol in military schools. This study shows that the recruitment of children into armed forces is still a huge issue across Europe.

2. FORMS OF MILITARISATION OF MINORS: MAPPING EUROPE

2.1 Indirect militarisation: military defence programs in schools

Based on the ongoing transformations in the political, economic, and social spheres, with wars starting in several parts of the world, governments being toppled or adopting dictatorial aspects, and fear being the rule of thumb for several states, the defence education of young people has been a systemic solution adopted by countries, which has crystallised in several EU countries.

The common ideological thread running through all these programs is to mould the new European citizen into someone disciplined, nationalistic, and accepting of violence as a legitimate means of resolving conflicts. This habituates young people to militarism, encouraging them to see the army as an institution of security and stability, accepting war as a normal reality.

This is part of the EU's broader strategy, as outlined in the ReArm Europe initiative (ReArm Europe Plan/Readiness 2030), with its central goal being to increase weapons and ammunition production to strengthen Europe's deterrent power amid global competition and in the event of wars, such as the one in Ukraine.

At a time when military spending is surging across Europe, under the pretext of defence, governments need new generations willing to accept military logic as both necessary and normal, as it demands consensus and national cohesion.

Secular regimes and countries under authoritarian governments or in crises, have historically embedded ideology into children's daily routines, emotional attachments, and moral framework. Often framed as patriotic instruction or civic education, such practices are normalised within those societies despite their psychologically coercive effects on child development (Almazroui, 2025).

Crises are not merely destabilising backdrops, they are politically instrumentalised. Authoritarian regimes do not simply respond to crises, they harness them. War, economic collapse, or post-colonial volatility becomes a pretext to suspend protections and impose ideological realignment.

Additionally, studies of authoritarianism tend to cast children as passive victims rather than as targets of intentional ideological construction (Adorno et al., 1950; Fox, 2016). However, the child needs to be seen as both a subject and a site of authoritarian control, such as through military programs in schools or affiliated organisations, an indirect way of instrumentalising children through propaganda in defence education (Lankov, 2013).

By defence education, the process often includes all activities of teachers and learners, going from commanders to attendees and employees, leading to pupils mastering a specific area of defence knowledge and acquiring practical skills and habits in it. Those programs also shape their skills, interests, attitudes, beliefs, and opinions related to a wide range of social aspects of their lives. Although initiated by the need of the State to prepare a large number of its citizens for potential action in situations of armed conflict, it became a tool of social integration and behaviour shaping (Urych and Matyasik, 2022).

a) Germany

In Germany, military service was mandatory until 2011, as was defence education for schoolchildren. This education was limited to the principles of first aid and how to behave in the event of a fire alarm. Although not mandatory anymore, military service is now implemented through mass media, in the form of specially prepared short broadcasts. After 2012, short training camps were also built in different parts of Germany for children aged 15

and older during summer vacation, where they learn the advantages and hardships of working for the state army (Soler, 2017).

b) Latvia

In Latvia, members of the Latvian Parliament voted in 2018 to include defence education in the nationwide secondary education curriculum, making it a compulsory subject from 2024 (Matyasik and Urych, 2022).

This programme includes two years of defence education in the 10th and 11th grades of elementary school and is the same in all schools. It is planned to take place once a month, and children will be able to choose which summer term they wish to attend. It is divided into four blocks: civic education, survival school, physical training, and military preparation, and after the first level of infantry school, the student can become a reserve soldier.

In addition to the educational programme, there is also the Youth Guard (*Jaunsardze*), an institution subordinate to the Latvian Ministry of Defence, with the primary purpose of training young people in national defence, promoting patriotism, civic awareness, and fellowship (Matyasik and Urych, 2022). The conditions for joining the *Jaunsardze* are that the applicant must be between 10 and 21 years of age and be able to speak the official language of the Republic of Latvia.

c) France

In France, defence education has three levels: education as part of the school curriculum; participation in an educational programme that includes global defence and security classes; and education in military classes within the Defence Cadets programme (Ministère des Armées, 2008).

Programmes involving specific defence education conducted throughout the school term, especially in middle and high school, make up the first level. The second level is based on cooperation between schools and the armed forces under partnership agreements between sponsoring military units and schools.

d) Poland

In Poland, defence education for young people was implemented after the country gained its independence, and it has gained popularity ever since. The growing interest among Polish young people in defence education provided an impetus for developing a new formula for the operation of uniformed classes, known as Certified Military Uniformed Classes (Materac, 2023).

It is worth noting that students enrolled in the military preparation units are eligible for the following benefits: the possibility of completing a shortened preparatory service, which may lead to becoming a soldier in the personal reserves of the Polish Armed Forces or entering active military service, as well as applying to military universities.

e) Hungary

In Hungary, two military high schools are currently operational, and the government has set a target to establish ten by 2030. In these schools, the teenagers are introduced to field orientation, age-appropriate combat, survival techniques, and basic health and self-defence skills (Hungary Today, 2023).

The number of military high schools is on the rise, while the army runs informational programmes in other schools, including middle and even elementary schools, with the support of the government (Fragos, 2025).

Finally, in occupied territories, the reality is particularly severe, as the children are heavily subjected to militarisation and propaganda conducted by the government that occupies the territory and aims to annihilate the local culture and control the next generations of the occupied territory.

f) Ukraine

In the occupied Ukrainian territories, Russia has engaged in extensive “soft” militarisation of children, introduced required military training, and targeted Ukrainian teenagers for conscription (OHCHR, 2024, p.21). Children are forced to learn about Russian history, take pictures with the Russian flag and visit Russian army points.

Russia has imposed the Russian state curriculum on Ukrainian children, introducing a new subject – “Fundamentals of Security and Defence of the Homeland” (OHCHR, 2024, p.19). This includes military training about types of grenades, small weapons, hand-held anti-tank grenade launchers, and sniper rifles (OHCHR, 2024, p. 19).

Additionally, Russia has introduced youth groups, such as *Yunarmiya* (“Youth Army”) – founded to strengthen Russian patriotism, prepare the youth for Russian military service, and with a goal of ultimately enlisting 10 percent of its members into the armed forces. 29,000 children in Russian-occupied Crimea and 7,500 in Donetsk and Luhansk regions had already been recruited to *Yunarmiya* by 2021. Following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, children in Zaporizhzhia and Kherson have been forcibly recruited into *Yunarmiya* (Havrylov, 2025).

The militarisation of the school curriculum also affects teachers who are forced to teach under guidelines stipulated by the government. As part of a broader effort to tighten its control, the Russian authorities have been working to reopen schools in the occupied territories of Ukraine, seeking to secure full cooperation from those Ukrainian teachers who remained.

Those who refused to work for not wanting to collaborate with the Russian army were threatened and beaten, many hiding their former profession for fear of being killed. It is a grave violation of human rights, particularly for children, but also for teachers, mentors, parents, and everyone involved in their education.

Whilst there are no reports of Ukrainian minors in occupied territories being conscripted directly into the Russian army, many are encouraged to sign military contracts prior to

turning 18 years old. Although these individuals do not appear to be joining the army until they turn 18, this raises concerns that children are being encouraged to commit themselves to military service before they have reached the age of adulthood. There is evidence to suggest that vulnerable children are often targets of these recruitment campaigns. Upon turning 18, Ukrainian boys are subjected to conscription for a period of 12 months (OHCHR, 2024, p.21).

g) The Netherlands

The Netherlands has no official child soldiers in its Armed Forces. However, underage persons can undergo military training to be prepared for a future in the military (De Jong, et al., 2014). The three main military trainings are the General Military Course (*Algemene Militaire Opleiding*), which is accessible from the age of 16 years and nine months, the General Military Airmobile Course (*Algemene Militaire Opleiding Luchtmobiel*), which can be started from the age of 16 years and six months; and the Security and Craftsmanship vocational course (*Veiligheid en Vakmanschap, VeVa*), which can be entered into as early as 15 years and six months (De Jong, et al., 2014). Other courses, such as the Military Education for Submarine Sailors, accessible from the age of 16 years and six months, the *Brugjaar Koninklijke Marechaussee*, accessible from the age of 16 years, and the First Maritime Military Education, accessible from the age of 16 years and six months are also available (De Jong, et al., 2014).

The *VeVa* course has been under scrutiny by the CRC, which expressed concerns over children as young as 15 receiving military training (Hopman, 2015). In particular, the CRC stressed the importance of adapting the training to the status of children of the recruits, emphasising how harsh physical and mental training modules can negatively affect the child's health and development (Hopman, 2015). The online platform Children's Rights Research published a report in 2015 recommending that the government undertake close monitoring of the *VeVa* programmes, and to raise the minimum age for recruitment (Hopman, 2015).

2.2 Direct Recruitment

a) United Kingdom

The United Kingdom (UK) stands as one of the countries in the world that continues to recruit underage people in its armed forces. Children can apply to join the British Army starting at 15 years and seven months, but can only undergo assessment until they reach 15 years and nine months of age (British Army, n.d. -a). The age of enlistment is 16, after which one can join the army as a soldier (British Army, n.d. -a). Children under the age of 17 years and 6 months must attend the Army Foundation College (AFC) in Harrogate as Junior Soldiers (British Army, n.d. -a). All applicants under 18 require parental consent to be recruited (British Army, n.d. -a). The AFC is the institution for training of minors, which

offers both long and short courses, and has two intake sessions per year (British Army, n.d.-b).

While the AFC is presented as an opportunity to learn discipline, create a career in the army, study, and earn, numerous sources report extensive and systemic abuses within the college. AFC faced many scandals, hosting a culture of physical, verbal, and psychological abuse of minors. In 2021 alone, there were 22 minor victims of sexual offences at AFC (Child Rights International Network, 2024). Between July 2022 and August 2023, nine reports of rape were filed at the college (Sabbagh, 2023). Moreover, in 2023, an instructor was convicted for the sexual exploitation of six underage recruits (Perrie, 2023).

Sexual violence has taken various forms at AFC. For example, male instructors engaged in voyeurism, instructors initiating relationships with recruits, a male instructor who would routinely force female recruits to kneel in front of him, and regular offensive sexual comments toward the recruits' partners (Child Rights International Network, 2024). Sexual abuses are widespread at AFC.

Physical abuses take place at AFC, such as instructors punching and kicking recruits, dragging them on the ground; in one instance, smearing cattle excrement on a recruit's face, waterboarding of recruits, exposing recruits to CS gas, and, in another instance, forcing a recruit to eat dog food (Child Rights International Network, 2024). Many recruits disclosed instances of instructors laughing at and deriving pleasure from recruits in pain (Child Rights International Network, 2024). Alongside such violence, instructors abuse recruits verbally, ridiculing their bodies, calling them racial slurs, making up demeaning nicknames, and threatening to kill them (Child Rights International Network, 2024). Additionally, instructors incite violence and bullying among recruits (Child Rights International Network, 2024).

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) has awarded AFC with an "outstanding" grade for welfare; however, testimonies claim it is because of the entrenched culture of fear at AFC, where nobody dares to speak up (Child Rights International Network, 2024). People in power at the AFC can retaliate by detaining recruits or denying their leave requests (Child Rights International Network, 2024). This keeps a barrier of impunity around AFC and its systemic abuses of minors.

CRIN has published further research that delves into the consequences of the experiences of military training at an early age for British recruits. Mental health conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression occur at double the rate of civilian peers among young recruits (Child Rights International Network, 2023). In the past few decades, more than half of suicides in the army were of soldiers who had enlisted as minors (Child Rights International Network, 2023). Additionally, CRIN reports that male soldiers aged 16 to 19 are at a one-third higher suicide risk than their civilian counterparts, and three times higher than the army's average (Child Rights International Network, 2023). This is particularly concerning when compared to the average suicide risk in the army, which is lower than in the civilian population (Child Rights International Network, 2023). It shows the detrimental effect of recruiting child soldiers. The disproportionate number of children from deprived communities who join the army is also concerning. A quarter of new British

recruits are minors, many from underprivileged communities who are subjected to further harm (Child Rights International Network, 2023).

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child prompted the United Kingdom to investigate further into the violations occurring at AFC, and revise their system so that minors are protected (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2023). Nevertheless, the AFC remains shielded from accountability.

b) Germany

In Germany, each year, boys and girls are recruited into the *Bundeswehr*, the German Armed Forces. In 2024, the number of underage recruits reached the record high of 2,203, of which 321 were female recruits (Terre des Hommes, n.d.). Children can join the army at age 17, although only for the purpose of military training and with parental consent (Krennerich, 2019). At 17, minors can either join the voluntary military service programme (*Freiwilliger Wehrdienst*) for a period of between seven and 23 months or the regular soldiers (*ZeistSoldaten*), signing contracts up to 25 years of duration (Krennerich, 2019). Thanks to comprehensive advertising in schools and on youth media by the *Bundeswehr*, at the end of the 2010s, the number of underage recruits sat narrowly below 10 percent, making it the second European country for recruitment of child soldiers behind the UK (Krennerich, 2019; Terre des Hommes, n.d.).

Although underage soldiers are not allowed to serve with weapons, they undergo the same military training as adults, which includes handling weapons with live munitions, learning fighting and killing techniques, and taking part in military drills (Krennerich, 2019). However, in 2017, it was found that a child soldier had been put on sentry duty with a weapon (Krennerich, 2019). Furthermore, during the same year, the media reported violations of safety guidelines and the degrading treatment of recruits during shooting training at the *Bundeswehr* base located in Sondershausen (Krennerich, 2019). Military training, especially when carried out with weapons, violates Article 32 of the CRC, which states that minors cannot be made to carry out hazardous tasks (United Nations, 1989).

Cases of sexual violence against minors have occurred in the *Bundeswehr* (Terre des Hommes, n.d.). For example, an instance of sexual abuse on an underage recruit has been recorded at the Staufer Barracks in Pfullendorf, where a child soldier had to undergo degrading initiation ceremonies (Krennerich, 2019). Other cases of sexual violence have been taking place in Bad Reichenhall, at the Todendorf Barracks, and at the Hain Barracks near Gera (Krennerich, 2019).

Despite various points of concern, the Federal Government has consistently opposed raising the minimum age requirements (Krennerich, 2019). The *Bundestag* always claimed that the *Bundeswehr*'s recruitment tactics did not violate Germany's obligation to respect the rights of children, reaffirming this in their report for the CRC (Krennerich, 2019).

c) Cyprus

In Cyprus, the National Guard enlists people from the age of 17 years and six months, but allows 17-year-olds to serve as volunteers, provided they have parental consent (United Nations Human Rights Office, 2017; Child Soldiers International, 2004). While the numbers have been steadily decreasing, in 2016, 35 percent of Cyprus conscripted soldiers were underage (United Nations Human Rights Office, 2017). Cyprus justifies its training of underage soldiers, linking it to a need to keep a constantly prepared armed force for national defence, due to the 51-year-long occupation occurring in the country (United Nations Human Rights Office, 2017).

According to the UN, underage soldiers have not taken part in armed conflict in Cyprus since its occupation (United Nations Human Rights Office, 2017). Nonetheless, conscription of minors continues, and 17-year-old volunteers can join with parental consent.

d) Austria

Austria requires registration for military service at the age of 17, which also stands as the minimum age for voluntary enlistment with parental consent (Central Intelligence Agency, 2021; Child Soldiers International, 2008). Compulsory military service starts at 18 years of age (Central Intelligence Agency, 2021). However, underage soldiers can only join the military to undergo training and cannot be deployed overseas (Child Soldiers International, 2008).

e) France

In France, volunteers must be at least 17 years and 6 months old to join the army, provided they have a parent or legal guardian present to sign a consent form (Foreign Legion Info, n.d. -a). After a recruitment and selection process of around three weeks, recruits can start their military training at a *centre de formation initiale des militaires du rang* (CFIM) (Foreign Legion Info, n.d. -b; Ministère des Armées, n.d.).

2.3 Children's military participation

There is clear evidence of the engagement of children in warfare in Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus. Russia has enacted targeted militarisation campaigns for children in both Russia and the occupied Ukrainian territories. This has occurred alongside the recruitment of children to engage in both acts of sabotage as a part of wartime operations, and to work in factories manufacturing weapons intended for use in Ukraine. Given the wider culture of militarisation across Russia, occupied Ukraine, and Belarus, there are heightened risks of further direct involvement of children in military activity.

2.3.1 Involvement of Russian children in sabotage and surveillance

Russia's security agency – the Federal Security Service (FSB) – has recruited Ukrainian teenagers to engage in acts of sabotage against Ukrainian military targets (Dotysak, 2025). In 2024, in the Kharkiv region, 24 children were suspected of committing acts of terror or sabotage (Dotsyak, 2025). These children are often recruited through social media apps like TikTok and Telegram, and are promised payment in exchange for completing these acts of sabotage. There are also reports that children have been asked to complete surveillance tasks and share information about the Ukrainian military (OHCHR, 2025, p.21).

This involvement of minors in Russia's military activities in Ukraine has taken multiple forms. In Kropyvnytskyi, central Ukraine, teenagers aged between fifteen and eighteen were accused of setting military SUV vehicles on fire (Zubova, 2025). Other children have been asked to deliver packages, take photographs of buildings such as power stations, or spray graffiti (Barker, 2025). In the most extreme cases, Ukrainian children have been asked to build bombs for the Russian war effort. In March 2025, two students – one 15-year-old and a 17-year-old – built two bombs out of thermos flasks and metal nuts. Russian agents later detonated the bomb remotely when the students tried to deliver it; the 17-year-old died, and the 15-year-old lost his legs in the blast (Barker, 2025).

Whilst some children are motivated by payment for these acts, others are blackmailed following their initial act performed for the FSB or for compromising photos hacked from their phones. These children often agree to more complicated missions as a result. It is also clear that once a Ukrainian teenager has performed an initial task, it is hard for these individuals to lessen the grip of the Russians. In order to disguise their identity, Russian agents who recruit minors often use youth slang to imply that they are also teenagers (Walker, 2025 June). The recruiters also use various methods of psychological manipulation, ranging from sympathising with challenging family situations, to threatening the Ukrainians they target (Walker, 2025 June).

Insofar as these activities relate to military objectives for Russia's war in Ukraine, this violates the prohibition under international law on the recruitment or use of children in hostilities. Although these children are victims of war crimes, they are also deemed to have criminal responsibility for their actions under Ukrainian law because criminal liability begins at age 14. By the end of 2024, 11 children had been detained by Ukrainian authorities in relation to these acts of sabotage (OHCHR, 2024, p.14). The detainees face charges of treason, sabotage, terrorism, obstruction of the armed forces, or property damage (OHCHR, 2024, p.14). It is not clear whether Ukrainian authorities will consider these children as victims of war crimes when prosecuting.

2.3.2 Involvement of Russian children in the production of weapons

Russian children are involved in the war in Ukraine through employment in the production of military equipment and weapons. Russia has systematically engaged children in the design and testing of drones for use in its war in Ukraine (Ashurkevich *et al.*, 2025). Children have been recruited via nationwide video game competitions, from which the strongest performers

are selected to work for defence companies. The game, Berloga, launched in 2022 and involves “intelligent bears” defending themselves against swarms of bees using weapons such as drones.

High school students who play the game receive extra credits for the Russian state exam. Other incentives include presidential scholarships and internships at partner companies. The Leader Youth Club, launched by the Wagner mercenary group in 2023, also encourages youth aged 16 to 25 to build drones for the Russian military (Havrylov, 2025).

After being selected for this work, the children participate in the production of various weaponry, including first-person view drones and long-range drones. One child, aged 13, explained that he had trained soldiers in drone operations inside a state facility in 2022 (Walker, 2025 July). Other interviewees suggested that they understood the military purpose of their work, although they were discouraged from revealing this:

[w]e were forbidden to say that it was needed for the war, and we invented civilian applications. It's a children's program... A project must always have a dual purpose, especially when you're a school student. It's an unwritten rule I've observed at every competition (Walker, 2025 July).

Not only are these children participating in military production, but they are also often forced to work in poor conditions when doing so. Children working at drone factories often have to work shifts lasting up to 15 hours and are forbidden from telling their parents about the drone assembly work (Radio Free Europe, 2023).

Russia's use of child labour for military purposes violates multiple principles of international law, including Article 3 of the International Labor Organisation's Convention 182. International lawyer Ekaterina Deikalo also noted that military weapons factory centres are legitimate military targets for Ukraine; this means that the Russian state is intentionally putting schoolchildren at risk of being victims of a military attack by Ukraine (Ashurkevich *et al.*, 2025).

2.3.3 Abducted Ukrainian children

Since the beginning of the Russian war in Ukraine, Russia has forcibly deported more than 19,000 Ukrainian children to Russian territory (Yale School of Medicine, 2025). Russia, along with its ally Belarus, has subjected these children to forced adoption, re-education programmes, and military training.

Children from Russian-occupied Ukrainian territories have often left Ukraine under the auspices of attending summer camps and end up in Russian territory undergoing training for military service. One Ukrainian teenager – who was 16 when she left Ukraine – said that instructors at the military camp told her they were preparing for war (Davies, 2025). Training includes handling firearms, wearing body armour, viewing military parades, lectures, and combat demonstrations (Yale School of Public Health, 2023, p.25).

At least 2,442 of these Ukrainian children between the ages of six and seventeen have been transported to thirteen facilities in Belarus (Yale School of Public Health, 2023, p.4). The

Belarusian internal security services – the “Internal Troops of Belarus” – have provided military training to at least six groups of these Ukrainian children (Yale School of Public Health, 2023, p.6).

As well as forced military training, there are reports that Russia forcibly conscripts abducted Ukrainians into the Russian military once they turn 18 (OHCHR, 2025, p.21). According to the UK government:

The Russian senior leadership almost certainly views, at least in part, abducted Ukrainian children as a potential source of both current, and future personnel for the Russian military. The Russian senior leadership highly likely perceives that their potential deaths in the Russian military will entail minimal if any objection or protest from the Russian public [...] (Ministry of Defence, 2025).

One teenager explained that he was forced to sign draft summons papers whilst a Russian soldier with a gun stood behind him (United Media, 2025). As well as serving military objectives, this also benefits the policy of Russification, which seeks to destroy Ukrainian culture, identity and statehood. The involvement of children in military activities is a war crime, and requiring Ukrainians to fight for Russia violates the prohibition on forcing citizens to fight against their own country (Havrylov, 2025).

2.3.4 Direct involvement in armed conflicts: Russian and Ukrainian use of child soldiers

Although there is no evidence to suggest that Ukraine has used minors in its army since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, child soldiers participated in the war in eastern Ukraine in 2014 (Schevchenko, 2014). Reports suggest this occurred on both sides of the conflict, with child soldiers supporting both Russian and Ukrainian troops, respectively.

On the Ukrainian side, a 17-year-old was wounded in battle after spending two months in the conflict zone alongside military troops. According to reports, the child was a sapper and performed military engineering duties. The child claimed to have lied about his age in order to enlist, but evidence suggests that his commander was aware of his age. Pro-Russian separatists also fought alongside children as young as 15. One pro-Russian commander said regarding the children in his battalion, “[w]e need more guys like them and we won't be afraid of enemies. They are the future generation.”.

Claims that Ukraine has used child soldiers since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine are uncorroborated and have been debunked by Western media (France24, 2023).

3. HUMAN RIGHTS IMPLICATIONS

The human rights implications of the militarisation, deportation and indoctrination of youth in Europe have recently been felt most acutely in the context of the Russia-Ukraine War. The abuses felt by children in the region reach far beyond the strict prohibition of child

recruitment under IHL and strike the very foundations of international and European human rights protections. The right to education, to development, to protection from exploitation and violence and to family life and identity are all interconnected and systematically violated. The violence and abuse endured by these children leave them vulnerable to deep-rooted psychological trauma and long-lasting harm, shaping not only their lives individually, but also the future trajectory of Ukrainian society for decades to come. This section analyses these implications.

3.1 The Right to Development and Education

The CRC guarantees the right to education in Articles 28 and 29. It requires that education must be directed towards the “development of the child’s personality, talents, and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential”. Similarly, protections for the right to education are enshrined in Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and Article 2 of Protocol 1 to the ECHR. It is also protected by Article 53 of the Ukrainian Constitution. In the Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine, these obligations have been blatantly contravened, where education has been deliberately and systematically reoriented from development towards ideological indoctrination and militarisation.

A 2025 survey conducted by a non-government organisation (NGO), War Child, found that out of 200 children interviewed, 55 percent had been subjected to indoctrination (War Child, 2025). There were numerous reported strategies employed by Russian authorities to achieve this end, including: mandatory propaganda lessons, prohibition of the Ukrainian language and history, compulsory participation in “patriotic” events and repeated exposure to pro-Russian narratives. One 18-year-old boy from occupied Luhansk described mandatory weekly sessions imposed by the Russian authorities entitled “Conversations about Important Things”. During these sessions, teachers insisted that Ukraine had started the war and depicted Russia as heroes and freedom fighters (War Child, 2025). Schools have become a site of militarisation, with a 15 year old girl in Mariupol testifying that Russian soldiers who had come to their school “gave [them] weapons to assemble and disassemble, and also cartridges - [they] handled and disassembled those too. They let [them] shoot; the rifle was heavy, but the bullets weren’t real” (War Child, 2025).

The pattern of cultural erasure and forced “re-education” has been acknowledged in recent jurisprudence. In the European Court of Human Rights judgement in *Ukraine v the Russian Federation*, the Court found evidence of a drastic reduction in access to education in the Ukrainian language on the Crimean Peninsula since 2014. The judgment underscored that children in the occupied territories, as well as children deported to Russia, are absorbed completely into the Russian educational environment (Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights, 2025). The Ukrainian Parliament Commission for Human Rights, in its 2025 Special Report, stated the following:

The system of formal and informal education, including extracurricular activities, is actively used as a tool for indoctrination and militarisation of children and youth in the TOT. The

extracurricular education system further integrates young people into the socio-political processes of the aggressor state through patriotic paramilitary clubs and youth branches of political parties and associations, actively involving them in the TOT and Russia's affairs (Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights, 2025).

The environment is rife with pro-Russian propaganda, and reported mandatory school activities such as preparing “voluntary-compulsory” aid packages for Russian soldiers blur the line between education and military service (War Child, 2025).

3.2 Exploitation, Militarisation and Abuse

The same survey of 200 children revealed that 41 percent were subjected to militarisation, including weapons training, sapper work, and combat instruction (War Child, 2025). Children described being compelled to wear military uniforms, march in drills and learn how weapons function. A 17-year-old girl from Kherson testified that she had been instructed in demining, grenade throwing, and even trained with real explosives during sessions in camps (War Child, 2025). Other sources have provided testimonies from Ukrainian children which demonstrate the extent of Russian indoctrination. In one case involving a young boy rescued from the Russian occupied territories, the boy's sister recalled that upon his return, “He started repeating all of the propaganda that he had been fed. He was scared that there are Nazis, that they were going to kill him, that he would be very miserable, and that they would hate him” (Giannangeli, 2025). Another rescued girl, merely 16 years of age, told NGO Save Ukraine, “Every day felt like we were being shaped into something we weren't. They didn't treat us like kids. They wanted us to behave like their soldiers” (Giannangeli, 2025).

These practices have been confirmed by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Their March 2025 report revealed findings of children as young as eight being trained to handle automatic rifles, grenades, sniper, and anti-tank weapons, even being required to wear military-style uniforms to school (OHCHR, 2025). In Russia itself, the “Berloga” project utilises gamification to involve children in the creation, development, and testing of drones used in combat, with these competitions and clubs serving as a path to military service (Ashurkevich et al, 2025). President Putin has publicly endorsed the programme, believing it to be central to state policy (Ashurkevich et al, 2025).

Yet, it appears that child soldiers play a part on both sides of the conflict, with evidence of Ukraine utilising children in a military capacity emerging as early as 2014 (BBC News, 2014). One boy was verified by the UN in 2024 as having been instructed to assist a local recruitment centre in Ukraine (UN General Assembly, 2024). While credible information as to the usage of child soldiers by the Ukrainian government remains limited, a Twitter statement in 2022 saw the Ukrainian Defence Ministry assert that there “are no age restrictions” for individuals seeking to enlist in the Ukrainian army (The Independent, 2022).

3.3 Psychological Trauma and Long-Term Consequences.

The cumulative result of indoctrination, militarisation, and exposure to violence is extensive psychological harm. Psychological assessments of returned children show that all ten interviewed by an affiliate of NGO War Child had been exposed to traumatic events such as armed attacks, explosions, or acts of torture (War Child, 2025). Six exhibited moderate to high levels of PTSD, characterised by flashbacks, emotional dysregulation, and hyper-arousal. Further evidence from the European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry Journal (2022), the World Psychiatric Association (2018), and the International Review of the Red Cross (2019) demonstrates that war-related trauma in childhood is linked to long-term disorders including depression, anxiety, dissociation and substance abuse. The long-term activation of stress hormones can also affect the brain in ways that create permanent deficits in educational and social outcomes.

The European Court of Human Rights has repeatedly recognised that psychological suffering that has been inflicted by the state can amount to inhumane or degrading treatment under Article 3 of the Convention, heightened where children are concerned. The systematic exposure of children to violence and coercion way surpasses this threshold. Save the Children estimated that, by 2022, 7.5 million children were at risk of physical harm, displacement, and emotional distress, while UNICEF reported that refugee children in Europe often lacked access to education, healthcare, and protection services (UNICEF, 2023; Cowley et al, 2019). In the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, violence has been normalised, and the cultural identity of Ukrainians has been systematically eroded. This threatens to increase the radicalisation, perpetual trauma, and stunted development of the children affected.

4. RESPONSES AND PROTECTION MECHANISMS

4.1 Prevention Policies

At the European level, the EU claims that protection of children in armed conflict is a priority under the EU's Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy (2020-2024). This commitment goes beyond European borders, and supports humanitarian and development projects in several war-torn countries, aiming at immediate protection as well as the prevention of future recruitment, and the reintegration of former child soldiers. A strong reintegration programme is considered crucial for the prevention of the re-recruitment of child soldiers, since it is hard to recruit children who have assimilated back into the society (European External Action Service, n.d.). The Section 2.4 of the EU's Action Plan, emphasises that long-term rehabilitation and reintegration are necessary for the prevention of grave violations against children, and can be achieved if the EU coordinates with available UN mechanisms (Serra Calvo, 2022).

Regional institutions also play a crucial role in protecting the affected children. The Council of Europe's Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2022–2027) highlights the protection of children during armed crises and conflicts, and urges Member States to prevent the militarisation and exploitation of children (Council of Europe [CoE], 2022). Complementing this instrument is the Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups (2007), which is endorsed by several European states. The instrument provides in-depth recommendations for children linked to armed conflicts, and highlights that the children who have been affected should be considered as victims and not perpetrators. It emphasises the importance of a holistic and individualised approach in reintegration for prevention (War Child UK, 2022).

In addition, the UN Special Representative partnered with UNICEF in 2018 to establish the Global Coalition for Reintegration of Child Soldiers, which aimed at understanding the part the international community can effectively play to support affected children and strengthen integration support (European External Action Service, n.d.). All these initiatives have created a multilayered prevention framework through European, regional and international initiatives. And the EU, emphasising the importance of UN initiatives, reinforces the importance of a collaborative approach to the prevention and protection of children involved in armed groups and forces.

4.2 Reintegration and Rehabilitation Policies

Reintegration is the peaceful and sustainable reintroduction of children into society formerly involved in armed groups or forces into society. Their involvement in conflicts usually leads to them losing their childhood, or suffering long-term trauma (Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict [OSRSG-CAAC], 2018). Reintegration programmes help children transition into society and into meaningful roles within their families and communities, as a recovery process and as a national or local reconciliation measure (United Nations, 2007). Supporting affected children's reintegration is therefore essential for building long-term peace and stability (War Child UK, n.d.). Scholars emphasise that these programmes have to be multi-year and must have adequate funds, as short-term intervention risks failure (European External Action Service, n.d.).

The successful long-term reintegration usually starts with family reunification and community acceptance, including forgiveness by the community for children who have committed violence during the conflict (Boothby & at al., 2006). Many scholars recommend traditional methods of healing and cleansing, for instance, restorative justice mechanisms, like truth telling, tradition ceremonies, which can also help the community accept the returning children (OSRSG-CAAC, 2017). Alongside reconciliation, educational and other vocational training are important, as they equip children to productively contribute to their community (Elkhaili & Sempijja, 2025). Monetary and institutional support is key to ensure long-term survival and resilience (Boothby & at al., 2006).

Psychological interventions are also effective and are another key pillar. Studies show that children receiving psychological support are more likely to become responsible, productive and caring adults. A more well-known longitudinal study was done in Mozambique, where 39 child soldiers were brought to a rehabilitative centre, and 16 years after the two-year reintegration programme, these children reintegrated successfully into society as responsible adults (Boothby & al., 2006). While the research might come from a global context, its findings are useful to many post-militarisation contexts, even Europe. Most successful reintegration stories come from the African region, which puts great importance on restorative justice within society.

Civil society organisations are key actors that are responsible for the reintegration process. They are intermediaries between communities, international organisations, and governments (OSRSG-CAAC, n.d.). Many well-known organisations, like War Child and Save the Children advocate for better protection of children during armed conflicts, raise social awareness on the militarisation of children, highlight legal and policy gaps in international and regional legal systems, to be better equipped to help the affected children. Save the Children (n.d.) works in Brussels and ensures that the EU funds are used truly to improve children's lives and have a lasting and positive impact.

Besides being a form of healing for children involved as well as the society, reintegration is also a strategy for the prevention of future recurrence. Without reconciliation, children become more vulnerable to re-recruitment, which undermines protection mechanisms.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis of this report makes evident how the progressive militarisation of minors, both directly and indirectly, has numerous implications on both human rights and the long-term psychological faculties of children (UNICEF, 2021). Despite the presence of a European and international legislative framework that places at the centre of its regulations the firm awareness that the recruitment and use of children is a very serious violation of children's rights and IHL, such practices continue to persist, embedded in the paradoxical term child soldiers (Drumbl, 2012; Elkhaili, 2025; EEAS, 2024).

Firstly, the CRC, which despite being ratified almost globally is not, however, equally applied particularly in places of armed conflict, holds states responsible for taking all necessary measures for the fully and effective implementation of the convention, setting the minimum age at 15 years (Council of the European Union, 2003; Vaghri et al., 2021). Reinforcing its obligations, the OPAC, shifts the minimum age for recruitment to 18 years (United Nations, 2000). Finally, the Rome Statute of the ICC, specifically defines the inclusion of children under the age of 15 to actively participate in hostilities, a war crime (ICC, 2021). From a European perspective, however, the ECHR does not contain direct references, but some articles can be applied in these circumstances. Moreover, the EU has developed some policy instruments, such as guidelines on Children and Armed Conflict, identifying forced recruitment under the age of 18 as the main challenge of current times (EEAS, 2024).

The presence of regulations is essential, but there are certainly serious gaps and ambiguities that require greater attention. Among these, first and foremost, is the lack of agreement and cohesion regarding the minimum recruitment age, which makes it possible for some countries to use loopholes and not subsequently be held accountable for the inclusion of children in the military context. The dual threshold identified as 15 or 18 years does not allow uniformity, permitting early recruitment practices disguised as voluntary enlistment, school programs that normalise the military logic, and brutal methods of forced recruitment, deportation, and indoctrination, which Europe, after a long time, has been able to witness on its own territory following the Russian aggression against Ukraine (Dotysak, 2025; Yale School of Medicine, 2025; OHCHR, 2024; Havrylov, 2025). Moreover, the wording taken up by multiple instruments, "all feasible measures", is deliberately vague, leaving much freedom to the signatory states to decide what such measures should be, allowing them to relax when, for reasons of security and defence, they decide to implement more permissive policies toward the recruitment of minors.

With regard to the European context, the lack of provisions in the ECHR leaves a regulatory gap characterised by an indirect and fragmented discipline. The EEAS proposed guidelines are essential but not binding and highlight the internal political contradictions of some

member states, such as those analysed, creating a gap between principles and concrete practice that does not allow effective prevention, but above all, weakening the credibility of the efforts undertaken. In all the instruments analysed, there is very little attention to all indirect involvements that constitute a violation of the rights to education aimed at the “development of the child’s personality, talents, and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential” and guaranteed by CRC, ICESCR, Protocol 1 to the ECHR (United Nations, 1989; ICESCR, 1966; Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, 1950; ICRC, 1989). The report serves as a catalyst for understanding the risk associated with this indirect type of recruitment, which is often overlooked by normative instruments. The widespread methods of indirect militarisation were analysed, such as the use of school defense programs and the militarisation of school curricula which in any case tend toward indoctrination into the military logic through “patriotic” paramilitary clubs and youth branches of political parties and associations that insert children into a logic instrumental to future direct involvement (Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights, 2025). The methods of recruitment range from psychological manipulation to promised payment through social media, which can lead children to be directly involved in clashes and prosecuted for war crimes. The implications on human rights, recently brought to light in Europe following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, are the clear and devastating illustration of this, decidedly undermining the prohibitions related to the involvement of children in war, IHL, and the foundations of human rights protection (Dotysak, 2025; Yale School of Medicine, 2025; OHCHR, 2024; Havrylov, 2025). These practices of exploitation, indoctrination, militarisation result in direct abuse of children who are destined to have long-term consequences such as high levels of PTSD, depression, anxiety, dissociation, and substance abuse (War Child UK, 2025).

For this reason, it is necessary that the EU and its Member States take the necessary decisions for the implementation and resolution of these challenges, especially through strategies of prevention and reintegration mechanisms (Serra Calvo, 2022; War Child UK, 2022). The European claims included in the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy (2020–2024), together with the commitment to go beyond European borders to support development and humanitarian projects for the protection, prevention, and reintegration of child soldiers, are useful if and only if Europe itself with its Member States will take care to resolve the problems of militarisation and exploitation within its own territory. A double standard—advocating child protection abroad while tolerating recruitment, militarisation, or indirect exploitation at home—cannot be justified.

From this report, therefore, numerous recommendations can be extracted, useful both for the EU and for the Member States. First of all, the first recommendation coincides with the ultimate goal of this report, namely, the cross-cutting priority to raise public awareness on the problem of child soldiers. Awareness campaigns are therefore necessary to inform European societies, which too often believe that the issue of child soldiers is an external problem far from them (EEAS, 2024).

The second recommendation concerns the need to standardise the minimum recruitment age at 18 whether on a compulsory or voluntary basis. Only through alignment with the highest international standard will it be possible to effectively protect minors from premature

exposure to military environments. European institutions need to produce binding legislation for the harmonisation of these standards, removing the existing inconsistencies.

Strictly connected is the prevention of indirect militarisation. It is of fundamental importance to remove school curricula and extracurricular programs that carry forward a military logic in the school system, normalising hierarchy, discipline, and the use of violence. To make this effective, it is essential to place at the centre the issue of voluntariness and emphasise how certain elements such as economic deprivation, social instability, and political pressure play an essential role in coercing children (Elkhaili, 2025).

Thirdly, this report focuses on the strong responsibility to extend support to international reintegration and rehabilitation projects and mechanisms capable of breaking down social barriers (EEAS, 2021; War Child UK, 2022). Child soldiers, victims of a system of militarisation and indoctrination, must have the possibility to deconstruct the teachings of the military logic and return to being children, without being considered perpetrators, through a comprehensive strategy of education programs able to meet different needs, including formal education and non-formal schooling that go beyond traditional models (Elkhaili, 2025; EEAS, 2021). The necessary approach is called holistic, formed on the one hand by reconciliation, education and vocational programs and on the other side, psychological intervention for families and children with the ultimate goal of reintegrating children into society (Boothby et al., 2006; EEAS, 2021; War Child UK, 2022). In order to make this strategy truly effective, European institutions should, in fact, aim to strengthen cooperation among different actors through targeted funding, technical assistance and partnerships with UN agencies and specialised NGOs able to provide essential data and research to design more targeted and effective interventions (Elkhaili, 2025; EEAS, 2021; Serra Calvo, 2022).

Finally, the international landscape needs to improve and implement mechanisms of regular monitoring and accountability through independent bodies on military training and recruitment practices with the implementation of sanctions both for state and non-state actors (Council of the European Union, 2003; International Criminal Court, 2021).

In conclusion, without the support of an international cultural shift it is not possible to sustain legislative or institutional reform, for this reason the public awareness campaign results as a fundamental element to inform European societies about the risks posed by the militarisation and recruitment of children and the devastating long-term consequences not only on the victims but also on the processes of reconciliation and peace (Drumbl, 2012). The role of fundamental importance is played by civil society organisations, the school system and the media in fostering a shift in the public narrative that rejects the normalisation of the military logic and is based on the promotion of human rights, peace and the dignity of every child.

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