



ICC's Putin arrest warrant based on State Dept-funded report that debunked itself

## Description

- **The International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for Russian President Vladimir Putin, accusing him of the “unlawful deportation” of Ukrainian children to a network of camps inside Russia. The warrant was based on a report by the Yale HRL center, which is funded by the US State Department.**
- **US journalist Jeremy Loffredo visited one of Russian government-sponsored camps in question. At The Donbas Express, located just outside of Moscow, Loffredo met youth from war-torn regions who were flourishing thanks to free music instruction, and grateful to be in a secure environment. This article features his exclusive video report.**
- **A Grayzone review of the Yale HRL report found the paper’s content contradicted many claims contained in the ICC warrant. It also undercut incendiary statements its director, Nathaniel Raymond, issued during media appearances.**
- **In an interview with Loffredo, Yale HRL’s Raymond further contradicted allegations he made in a CNN interview about a massive “hostage situation” underway in Russia, acknowledging that most of the camps he researched were “teddy bear”-like cultural programs. He also disclosed his collaboration with US intelligence.**

On March 17, the Prosecutor General of the International Criminal Court, Karim Khan, introduced an arrest warrant for Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Commissioner for Children’s Rights, Maria Llova-Belova. The warrant, which accused Putin and Lolva-Belova of conducting the “unlawful deportation” of Ukrainian children to a “network of camps” across the Russian Federation, inspired a wave of incendiary commentary in the West.

US Sen. Lindsey Graham, perhaps the most aggressive cheerleader in Congress for war with Russia, proclaimed: “The ICC has an arrest warrant for Putin because he has organized the kidnapping of at least 16,000 Ukrainian children from their families and sent them to Russia. It is exactly what Hitler did in World War II.”

CNN’s [Fareed Zakaria](#) echoed Graham, declaring the ICC warrant revealed that Putin “is in fact following parts of Hitler’s playbook.”

The ICC prosecutor appeared to have based his arrest warrant on research produced by [Yale University's Humanitarian Research Lab](#) (HRL). Yale HRL's work was funded and guided by the State Department's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations, an entity the Biden administration established in May 2022 to advance the prosecution of Russian officials.

During an interview with CNN's Anderson Cooper, Yale HRL's executive director, Nathaniel Raymond, claimed his report provided proof that "thousands of children are in a hostage situation." Invoking the Holocaust, Raymond asserted, "We are dealing with the largest network of children camps seen in the 21st century."

Yet in an interview with Jeremy Loffredo, the co-author of this report, and in his own paper for Yale HRL, Raymond contradicted many of the bombastic claims he made to the media about child hostages. During a phone conversation with Loffredo, Raymond acknowledged that "a large amount" of the camps his team investigated were "primarily cultural education – like, I would say, teddy bear."

Yale HRL's report similarly acknowledges that most of the camps it profiled provided free recreational programs for disadvantaged youth whose parents sought "to protect their children from ongoing fighting" and "ensure they had nutritious food of the sort unavailable where they live." Nearly all of the campers returned home in a timely manner after attending with the consent of their parents, according to the paper. The State Department-funded report further concedes that it found "no documentation of child mistreatment."

Yale HRL based its research entirely on Maxar satellite data, Telegram postings, and Russian media reports, relying on Google translate to interpret them and at times misrepresented the articles in its citations. The State Department-funded unit conceded that it performed no field research for its paper, stating that it "does not conduct ground-level investigations and therefore did not request access to the camps."

Unlike the Yale investigators who inspired the ICC's arrest warrant, Loffredo gained unfettered access to a Russian government camp in Moscow that houses youth from the war-torn Donbas region. Though it is precisely the kind of center that Yale HRL – and by extension, the ICC – have portrayed as a "re-education camp" for Ukrainian child hostages, he found a hotel full of happy campers receiving free classical music lessons in their native Russian language from first-class instructors – a "teddy bear," as Raymond called it.

At The Donbas Express music camp located just outside of Moscow, youth told Loffredo they were grateful to have found refuge from the Ukrainian army's years-long campaign of shelling and besiegement of their homeland. By fleeing the war in Donbas, these children had escaped a nightmarish military conflict for which Yale HRL and the ICC have demonstrated little to no concern.

## **Free music lessons, "spiritual enrichment," safety from war, and US condemnation: a visit to the Donbas Express**

When I, Jeremy Loffredo, visited a youth music camp in Russia in November 2022, I was unaware that the US government would soon exploit altruistic programs such as the one I witnessed to advance political warfare.

At the time, I was in Moscow on assignment for Rebel News, my former employer, to conduct man-on-the-street interviews with average people around the city.

After meeting someone whose wife was influential in the Russian music scene, I was invited 45 miles southwest of Moscow to visit the kind of program that was described by State Department-funded researchers as a “re-education camp.” It was there, at a Soviet-era hotel in the town of Pokrovskoye, that I entered one of the so-called facilities now at the center of the ICC’s arrest warrant for Putin.

By the time of my visit, the Russian government had transformed the hotel into a makeshift sleep-away camp for children native to the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Lugansk. The center I visited, dubbed “The Donbas Express,” was focused on providing classical training to children interested in musical arts. Parents who wished to keep their families protected from the conflict back home had enrolled their children in the program.



Peter Lundstrem, a professional violinist and teacher at the Donbas Express, explained to me, “Thanks to the support of the State Presidential Fund, we were able to bring 80 children from Donetsk and Lugansk regions. They are talented young musicians and they’re here for 12 days. They live here and take lessons from outstanding music teachers. They put together concerts. They receive education.”

Despite its glaring flaws and failure to seek on-the-ground corroboration, the State Department-funded Yale HRL report got one thing right about the experience of children enrolled in the Donbas Express: they are likely to keep their involvement in the program secret. In the eyes of Ukrainian authorities, the simple act traveling to Russia — even for free music lessons — is tantamount to collaborating with the enemy.

As the report says, “Many families in Ukraine do not want to publicly share their [camp or school] experiences because they fear they will be seen [by Ukraine] as collaborators with Russia.”

Of the students involved in Donbas Express, Lundstrem said, “So that you understand what is done to children like these in Ukraine... children who receive any kind of help from Russian people or the Russian state... they would be simply killed.”



A concert at the Donbas Express

For much of their lives, these youths lived with the threat of death on a daily basis. For the eight years leading up to Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the ethnically Russian population of Donbas endured regular shelling at the hands of the US-backed, nationalist government in Kiev. Even before February 2022, that civil conflict had left thousands of civilians, including children like the ones I met at the Donbas Express, dead.

"Of course many of [the young people enrolled in Donbas Express] were greatly affected by this conflict," Lundstrem said. "Many of them lost houses. Some of them lost their relatives and friends. In the conflict zone, they in fact cannot continue their professional music studies. In Donetsk, philharmonic and general education institutions are not functioning."

Although the State Department-funded Yale report would have Americans believe that Russia's move to open camps such as the Donbas Express amounted to war crimes, the students I met there did not want to leave.

"Of course they all want this program to continue. They want to stay and for it to go on and on. But we can do these small things only. We will do this again in the future maybe," Lundstrem told me.



I spoke with two Donbas Express students on camera. Each expressed effusive gratitude for the program.

“I am here on invitation, on generous invitation,” said one from Donetsk. “I never thought I would get to come to Moscow. I’ve been helping to perform in concerts, which is helpful for spiritual enrichment and soul purification. And I’m here to develop my musical performing skills.”

“Here, we continue our musical studies despite what has been going on around us because it gives us relief,” another kid from the Donbas told me.

Like all other students in the program, these aspiring musicians grew up in a region in open rebellion against a Ukrainian government that has banned their Russian Orthodox religious denomination, sought to outlaw the Russian language, and violently attacked the ethnic Russian population of the country.

Most, if not all, of the students enrolled in the Donbas Express identify with the Russian nation, according to their instructor. “They have this [patriotic] song, ‘My Homeland Is Coming Back,’” Lundstrem commented. “All of these 80 kids were screaming it. Simply screaming this song.”



But the teacher emphasized, “We are not organizing [the Donbas Express] for political reasons. We’re not here to say, ‘Russia forever!’ for example. We’re here to help these children. But of course, we’re Russians.”

The political sympathies and Russian ethnic background of the children who traveled from eastern

Ukraine to programs like the Donbas Express is referenced only in passing by Yale HRL's State Department-funded report.



### Content of Yale HRL report contradicts ICC arrest warrant

Nathaniel Raymond, the executive director of the State Department-sponsored Yale HRL, [appeared on CNN's Anderson Cooper 360 on February 16, 2023](#) to announce what he called “an Amber Alert for Ukraine’s children.”

Alluding to the Holocaust, Raymond claimed he and his team had uncovered “the largest number of camps seen in the 21st century,” a finding that constituted possible “evidence of genocide.”

“They’re trying to make them into Russians,” Raymond said, asserting that Russian authorities had forcibly removed the Ukrainian children from their families and subjected to coercive military training.

“Thousands of children are in a hostage situation,” the State Department-backed Yale researcher proclaimed.

With an indignant scowl on his face, CNN’s Cooper muttered, ‘This is truly sickening. This is sick.’”

However, the actual content of the February 14 2023 investigation Raymond directed on behalf of the State Department conflicts with his claims of a “hostage situation.”

Raymond’s apparent cluelessness about the situation inside many of the youth camps may stem from the fact that neither he nor any of his colleagues sought to visit them. Nor did they attempt to contact any children who attended the camps, their parents, or staff members.

As his report states, “Yale HRL does not conduct interviews with witnesses or victims; only the specific information available in open source is collected. When analysts are unable to identify public information about whether a child has returned home, it can be difficult to ascertain the current status of the child. Similarly, Yale HRL does not conduct ground-level investigations and therefore did not request access to the camps.”

In other words, the researchers that informed the ICC’s arrest warrant for Putin conducted no field research, and admit they failed to obtain concrete information regarding the children’s status.

The paper acknowledges that, in fact, “Many of the children who have attended these camps appear to return to their families when scheduled.”

Also buried in the report is the following disclosure: “Many children taken to camps are sent with the consent of their parents for an agreed duration of days or weeks and returned to their parents as originally scheduled.”

“Many of these parents are low-income and wanted to take advantage of a free trip for their child,” the Yale HRL/State Department paper continues. “Some hoped to protect their children from ongoing fighting, to send them somewhere with intact sanitation, or to ensure they had nutritious food of the sort unavailable where they live. Other parents simply wanted their child to be able to have a vacation.”

So if the children voluntarily attended the camps and were mostly returned on time, while most parents provided “meaningful” consent” and were grateful that their children could be in a safe place with healthy food, where was the “evidence of genocide” that Raymond alleged during his CNN appearance?

According to the Yale HRL/State Department’s paper, “There is no documentation of child mistreatment, including sexual or physical violence, among the camps referenced in this report.”

The report’s citations contain a link to a [RIA Novosti article](#) about a two-week summer camp in the Russian town of Magadan. Polina Tsvetkova, a child quoted in the article, provided an unequivocally positive review that mirrored those offered by enrollees of the Donbas Express:

“While we were driving from the airport, we were very impressed with the local landscapes. I like to walk in the fields, pick flowers. It is very interesting to see nature. All kinds of beautiful views. When we were driving, I saw small rivers flowing from the mountains. Very beautiful, the views are simply gorgeous.”

The Yale HRL/State Department paper omits the testimony of joyful summer camp attendees featured in the RIA Novosti article it cited. Instead, it deploys the article in order to claim: “Children have been transported [to camps] by bus, train, commercial aircraft, and, in at least one case, by Russia’s Aerospace Forces.”

As he did during his CNN appearance, Raymond’s State Department-sponsored report glossed over a single fact that exploded his entire assertion that “thousands of [Ukrainian] children are in a hostage situation.” That is: nearly all of the children referenced in the Yale HRL/State Department report are ethnic Russians from families and communities that have sided with Russia in its conflict with the nationalist government in Kiev.

The youth who attended the camp referenced in the RIA Novosti article were from Zhdanovka, a town in the Donetsk Republic that separated from Ukraine in 2014, and formally declared its independence in 2022. Yet the ICC and all other official Western sources referred to these youth simply as “Ukrainian,” as though they were forcibly extracted from pro-Kiev communities occupied by Russian forces and subjected to brainwashing inside Russian internment camps.

The Yale HRL/State Department refers to the political and ethnic background of the youth campers only in passing, noting at one point, “Many families in Ukraine do not want to publicly share their experiences [at camp] because they fear they will be seen as collaborators with Russia.”

Not only have the Yale HRL/State Department paper’s authors demonstrated zero concern for the safety of these families, they have inspired calls for their immediate return to a conflict zone where they could be tortured or killed by the Ukrainian government.

Referring to the evacuation of 500 orphans from Donetsk in February 2022 just as Ukrainian forces escalated their attacks on the separatist republics, the authors write, “The reason given publicly by Russia’s government at the time was the supposed threat of an offensive by the Ukrainian armed forces against the so-called Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People’s Republic (LPR).”

The citation provided to support this claim is a [report by Donbas Insider](#) detailing how the Ukrainian army had intensified its shelling of civilian areas in Donetsk on February 19, 2022, destroying a house, a poultry farm, and an electricity substation, leaving 800 residents without electricity. It was the 43rd Ukrainian violation of a ceasefire in the Donetsk People’s Republic. Five days later, Russian forces invaded Ukraine, announcing a mission to “demilitarize” the country.

So does extricating orphans from the Donetsk war zone to safer ground inside the Russian Federation constitute the crime of “kidnapping,” as Raymond alleged?

The Yale HRL/State Department researcher apparently upholds an extremely loose definition of the term. Back in 2020, Raymond approvingly tweeted a Washington Post editorial denouncing the Trump administration’s policy (continued by the Biden administration) of separating minors from migrant

parents: '



## “Teddy bear” camps: in interview, Yale HRL director contradicts “hostage situation” claims, discloses US intel ties

Nathaniel Raymond is a technologist who has worked at various international NGOs and universities, from Oxfam to Harvard’s Signal Project, and claims he served on the ICC’s tech advisory team. Before securing his post as a lecturer at the Yale School of Public Health, he worked for George Clooney, the Hollywood celebrity who helped make the plight of the Darfur region of Sudan a cause celebre. Clooney, for his part, campaigned alongside the pro-Israel groups and President George W. Bush, who threatened to send US troops to Darfur.

“I count tanks from space for George Clooney,” Raymond quipped to the Guardian in 2012, referring to his pioneering use of Maxar satellite technology to document alleged human rights abuses.

When I, Jeremy Loffredo, learned that Raymond’s Yale HRL had issued a report on Russia government youth programs like the Donbas Express, I emailed him to inform him that I had been to one of these camps back in November 2022. I told him I was open to sharing my experience with him. He agreed to speak to me by phone.

Raymond explained to me that when he arrived at Yale HRL in 2021, he was directing a State Department-sponsored project documenting the Afghan government’s alleged abuses against the country’s Hazara minority. But as US intelligence began warning of an imminent Russian invasion of Ukraine, the mission quickly shifted.

“Our initial concept of operations was actually on Afghanistan,” Raymond said. “And we got rerouted to Ukraine. We were going to be watching the Hazara. And, and then we got, we got pulled in on this. And two weeks before the invasion happened, we were told to standby and form a squad, and then by Spring, we knew the good stuff was happening.”

Raymond added that the US National Intelligence Council applied “a lot of pressure” on his team at Yale HRL to document the Russian government’s operations to move citizens from eastern Ukraine to the Russian Federation.

“We were like, ‘Okay, how are we going to do this?’” he recalled. “And so we spent the Summer into the early Fall, trying to figure out our operational concept. And it wasn’t until October [2022], that we really realize how to do it. And the trick was, when we broke it open, it was getting inside Russian VPN

networks looking like Russian citizens looking at local mayoral VK [Russian social media] accounts.”

Raymond said his team relied on the Pentagon’s US Indo-Pacific Command to “expand our satellite access in the Pacific Command to get the Siberian and eastern camps.”

When asked why his research team did not attempt to visit any programs inside Russia like the Donbas Express, Raymond said, “We’re persona non grata. We’re considered extensions of US intelligence by the Russians.”

Though he acknowledged working closely with US intelligence and the State Department, Raymond denied that Yale HRL’s focus on alleged Russian atrocities at the exclusion of those committed by Ukraine was driven by US government funding. “The Ukrainian alleged Ukrainian abuses, we probably can’t see through our means,” he insisted. “Because they’re small unit stuff with POW’s mostly. Like, they shot a bunch of guys in the knees allegedly.”

Raymond pointed to his unit’s documentation of a Russian strike on a Ukrainian grain silo as a typical example of “Ukrainian bullshit.” “What we think [the Ukrainians] were doing,” he said, “is they were running an ammonium phosphate lab, underneath that silo, to build munitions.”

Though he said that “the only thing that could have made that [blast] hole is basically a bomb factory,” Raymond claimed it was impossible to confirm his suspicion.

He used a metaphor about traffic violations to explain why Yale HRL was focused exclusively on nailing the Russian government: “We got a parking violation in terms of the laws of armed conflict, like the Ukrainians are double parked in a moving zone, right? At a bus stop. And the Russians, meanwhile, are doing the DUI in the 16-wheeler through a shopping mall.”

While minimizing the Ukrainian military’s documented shooting of defenseless prisoners and use of civilian infrastructure to conceal military installations, Raymond homed in on Russia’s policy of bringing ethnically Russian children to cultural programs, accusing Moscow of a criminal process of “Russification.”

When asked about the fact that most of the children involved in the programs Yale HRL investigated already consider themselves Russian, and come from separatist, ethnic Russian regions that have been targeted with violence by Ukraine’s US-backed government, and that some have no home to return to because they were destroyed in the conflict, Raymond was dismissive.

“Even if that was true, it’s a war crime,” Raymond insisted. “Under the Geneva Convention, one state party to an armed conflict cannot adopt or transfer children from the other state party under any circumstances.”

While Raymond would not consider the ethnic and political backgrounds of the children while determining whether their rights had been violated, he freely acknowledged that the vast majority of camps his team at Yale HRL investigated were, like the Donbas Express, “primarily cultural education, like I would say, teddy bear.”

by JEREMY LOFFREDO AND MAX BLUMENTHAL

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**Date Created**

04/06/2023