

Nunn, Foley: Orphanage children unprotected from abuse, neglect

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The violation of human rights in Ukraine is one of the pressing issues of our day. The suppression of freedom of speech, the control of the right of assembly, the oppressive use of the tax police and the blatant banditry of the road police however all pale into insignificance when compared to the wanton starvation of disabled children by those whom the state has empowered to protect them.

The care of children is one of the defining cornerstones of Ukrainian culture. Families will go without just about everything to ensure that their children have enough and have a future.

Yet not all well in this basic responsibility. Last Sunday, a highly respected British newspaper, *The Sunday Times*, published an investigative story on the deliberate abuse and starvation of disabled children at a state children's home at Torez, just outside Donetsk. The accusations were denied by the home's director.

The story, uncovered by Teresa Fillimon, executive director of the children's charity *His Kids Too!* is one of neglect and suffering on an inhuman scale.

Under the charter of the United Nations, of which Ukraine is a founding member, all people have rights

irrespective of sickness or disability. But this does not seem to apply at the Torez children's orphanage. The pervading understanding appears to be: "These children are no use to anyone so we may as well let them die." This was the same excuse given by the Nazis for leading thousands of mentally ill patients to the gas chambers. It is not an attitude that can be tolerated in 21st century Europe.

The head doctor at Torez, Alexander Vasyakin, claims that he does not have enough food or money to feed the children properly. But according to eyewitness accounts, he resists international assistance. And when the inspectors or dignitaries visit, there is deliberate and wanton deception. The children are dressed in better clothing, soiled beds are replaced, new sheets laid out, toys and televisions appear, the incontinent are placed in nappies and those most ill are moved out of sight and placed under lock and key.

Over the last year, 20 children have died not of their disability but of diseases bought on by malnutrition. Rather than appeal for national or even international help, the home serves its children a thick gruel, spoon feed to each child for little more than a minute at a time. Such inhumane practices

barely allow time for the children to swallow. Most eat little and are left to suffer for hours in their own urine and vomit.

Serious questions need to be asked as to why the coroner has issued death certificates on children that have more than likely died of malnutrition, why the state apparatus or staff has not raised alarm and how children have simply been allowed to fade away. There needs to be an inquiry and those who have either deliberately or through neglect let children suffer in this way should face the full force of the law.

Sadly this may not be the only case as Maxim Meleckiy, a 20-year-old law student who grew up in children's homes and suffers from cerebral palsy discovered to his cost. Meleckiy now hitchhikes around the country, taking statements from other children who just like him have suffered both inhumanity and indignity. According to these testaments, children are regularly beaten, starved, tied to radiators, raped and even loaned to pedophiles. Yet, when they try to complain, they are arrested by the police and handcuffed for being "mentally unstable" and threatened by officials.

On the opposite side there are children's homes in Ukraine that are brilliantly run by dedicated staff who treat the children as if they were their own.

Kyiv Lions Club has found many that not only do the best they can on state finances, but also raise funding from local benefactors, not to line their own pockets, but to build a real life for those less fortunate.



Orphanage children in Torez orphanage house seen in this May, 2010 file photo. (Courtesy)

The international non-governmental organization networks have introduced home-style foster care where children grow up with "brothers and sisters" in small family units. But they have met serious resistance from both the state apparatus and vested interests.

One champion of these needy children is billionaire Rinat Akhmetov. He has set aside millions to close down every state children's home in Ukraine by 2017 and replace it with international-standard foster homes. He is right for doing so. After all, a sizable proportion of people in Ukrainian prisons spent their childhood in state care.

This story will reverberate right around the world and so it should.

Ukraine will be judged not by the actions of this cruel few but on how the case is now handled by the authorities. However, we must also look to ourselves for it is no longer acceptable to look the other way.

The Ukrainian maxim: "I saw nothing, my home is on the other side of the village" has no place in the modern world. If by our deliberate blindness, children are allowed to suffer such depravities then, by our inaction, we are all guilty.

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