

## **A Family For Every Orphan Partner: Nikolai Kuleba, former Child Ombudsman of Ukraine (Minister of Children’s Rights)**

March 7, 2022

Nikolai has dedicated his life to orphan care, most recently serving as Ukraine’s Minister of Children’s Rights for 7 years. He continues to work with organizations in Ukraine to advocate for programs and policies that are in the best interest of orphans and vulnerable children.

**Emergency Relief Efforts:** Nikolai is coordinating a large-scale national effort, *Save Ukraine*, to evacuate tens of thousands of children and families to safety. They face shelling from Russian forces and an impending lack of food and medicine. When asked “Nikolai are you safe?” He replied, “I am not safe if Ukraine’s children are not safe.” Below is a video of Nikolai describing the evacuation efforts in Ukraine.

<https://afamilyforeveryorphan.org/ukraine-update-from-afeo-ukrainian-partner/>

Nikolai has a public Facebook profile where he provides updates, critical information to evacuees, and advocates for assistance.



Микола Кулеба   
Page · 105,256 followers

 @KulebaMykola

### **Q: What is Nikolai’s role in evacuation efforts?**

A: Nikolai is the main coordinator of *Save Ukraine* – a national evacuation effort to assist vulnerable children and families in Ukraine. He established the strategy and coordinates with government officials and churches in Ukraine and neighboring countries to the west.

### **Q: Who is Nikolai’s team evacuating?**

A: Around the clock, Nikolai’s team is evacuating orphans/vulnerable children, children with disabilities, and low-income families with children. Their focus is on combat hotspots where there is the most danger for children and families.

### **Q: How many has his team evacuated to safety?**

A: Tens of thousands, thousands every day

### **Q: How is evacuation of children and families being accomplished?**

A: Drawing on experience from the 2014 invasion, when Russia grabbed Crimea and occupied Donetsk and Lugansk regions, Nikolai and his team quickly kicked off an **awareness campaign**. Their team shares information on how to evacuate and logistics through social media. They also **established a hotline / help center** for evacuation assistance called *Save Ukraine*. Ukrainians in danger can apply to the help center for evacuation assistance. More than 30 specialists provide consultation to determine needs and assess risks (safety, health status, special needs). As soon as families decide to evacuate, they arrange transportation in various ways or even pay for the transportation that families have found. (In some situations when evacuating an orphanage, they have had to be very creative to avoid calling attention to a large bus full of children. Numerous cars have been arranged to bring children to safety in very small groups. A painstaking but critical process to mitigate them from becoming a target.) Nikolai’s team helps

evacuees get to one of their **strategically positioned 11 bases / evacuation hubs\***. They involve churches and governmental structures to support these bases effectively. Over 100 people are providing their assistance to help evacuees in Kyiv and other bases. Once families with children are at a base there are many ways for families to be further evacuated – by train or bus. Once evacuated to safety, volunteers and partners organize provision of basic needs.

\*Nikolai and team have identified strategic bases / evacuation hubs to move children and families more efficiently and safely across the country, as it is too dangerous and inefficient to evacuate each family in a single trip. Evacuation is a multi-day process for children and families. Once at the line to cross into some neighboring countries, there have been additional waits of more than 60 hours.

**Q: What networks in Ukraine does Nikolai leverage for assistance in evacuation?**

A: Nikolai is in daily contact with Ukraine’s Minister of Health, Minister of Education, and Minister of Social Services working to evacuate orphans and organize response. With 80% of refugees going to Poland, he works with government officials in Poland to ensure proper accommodations and care are provided to evacuees. He also leverages churches across the country as they step up to care for children and families. Nikolai is connected to the Ukraine Without Orphans network that includes over 400 churches and 110 NGOs. He also works closely with transportation entities, arranging for 10-15 train cars to be reserved on trains for the evacuation of orphans/vulnerable children, children with disabilities, and low-income families with children.

**Q: What are the current challenges?**

A: Lack of resources, people, finances, and time. Combat regions are becoming increasingly impossible to evacuate from due to active shelling. Routes used for evacuation change every day as Russian troops infiltrate and roads can quickly become dangerous. There is great urgency to get children and families evacuated, as we see the tragic realities unfolding in Mariupol when decisions to evacuate are not made quickly enough – hundreds of thousands are trapped in unimaginable situations. There is disregard for green corridors by Russia. The psychological state of the family is another significant challenge as they become afraid to evacuate once any shelling starts. They must be very careful as well concerning the timing of evacuation.

**Q: Where are children and families being evacuated to and how is safety ensured?**

A: Children and families are evacuated to the west and across the border. They are very careful to make sure the children are not becoming victims of child trafficking. Through the Ministry in Ukraine, they work with EU countries to ensure children and families are safe and cared for when in their country.

**Q: How are the children being tracked?**

A: Every child evacuated has a legal guardian, either a parent or a government appointed legal guardian; for orphans/vulnerable children in government care it is their Orphanage Director. There are no children sent across the border unaccompanied. The orphanage Director continues to be responsible to account for (and track) all the children under his/her care. (Many orphanage directors have been afraid to make decisions to evacuate or cross the border. Some were only arranging for children with passports, or children without parental rights to evacuate. However, the Director can take *all* children under their care to safety with proper approval, whether it be in Ukraine or in an EU country. More and more are deciding to do so over the past several days.)

**Q: How much is needed to cover ongoing evacuation efforts?**

A: “Millions upon millions (of dollars)”

**Q: How is the money used for evacuations?**

A: For gas, buses, drivers, shelter, food, hygiene kits, blankets, medicine, etc.. Ukraine has made all trains free during the war.

**Q: Example of recent efforts, at the time of our call:**

A: On Sunday, March 7<sup>th</sup>, 700 children – orphans and children with disabilities – and their families were evacuated with 10 train cars. Trains are packed with sometimes standing room only for 15 hours. It was a very special and difficult operation to evacuate all children with disabilities from the National Children’s Hospital. They will now travel by car to Italy. Another large group of orphans with disabilities from a baby orphanage in Kharkov is currently at the train station waiting to board and evacuate west. Nikolai continues to have multiple conversations with orphanages, who are become increasingly in danger each day, to evacuate. Many directors are getting caught up in bureaucracy and are afraid to take responsibility for the children and move them to safety. Nikolai stresses the pain of watching Mariupol now occupied by Russian, as orphanage directors did not decide quickly enough to evacuate the children. Timing is everything. Many orphans remain in Mariupol and Nikolai and team are doing everything they can to continue to try and find ways to evacuate them. Tomorrow, Nikolai is meeting with the Mayor of Lviv and a bishop to help open more *Save Ukraine* bases for refugees.