

# Implementing a DNA strategy to reunify Ukrainian children separated from their families

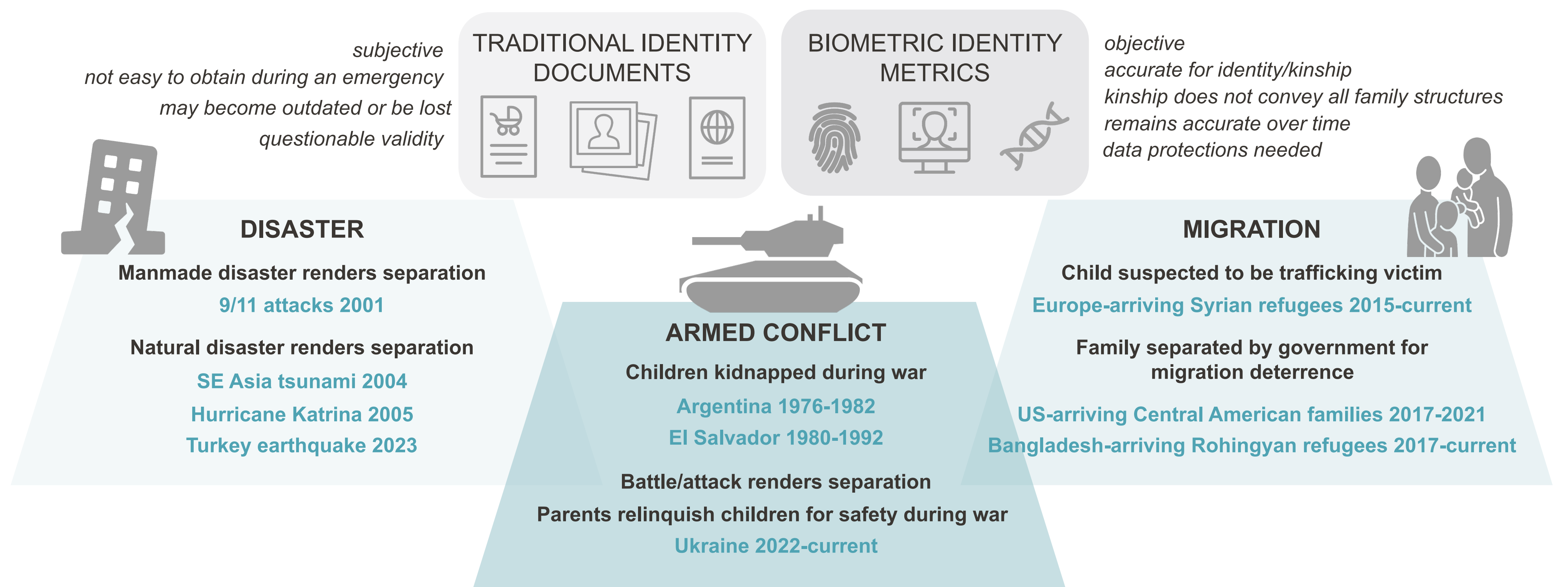
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## Contexts for which DNA was or could have been useful for family reunifications



- Globally we have processes for the **identification of human remains**, albeit imperfect and inefficient in many scenarios
- There is **no global systems for reunification** of live family members separated by such contexts
- Family separations in Ukraine parallel those of disappeared children 1970s-1990s from Argentina, El Salvador, and Chile—situations in which DNA was used to reconnect genetic family members, in most cases not until decades later
- Civil society groups and families are **seeking DNA testing** to reunify adults who were forcibly separated from their families and placed for intercountry adoption decades ago
- Common **short tandem repeats** can be used with high sensitivity to determine kinship with 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> degree relatives (like parent-child, siblings)
- Investigative genetic genealogy** also might have a role for determining the identities of long-missing separated children

**Forcible family separations harm children and the effects are lifelong**

Reunification is challenging and operates on a continuum

Separations can last for days or decades

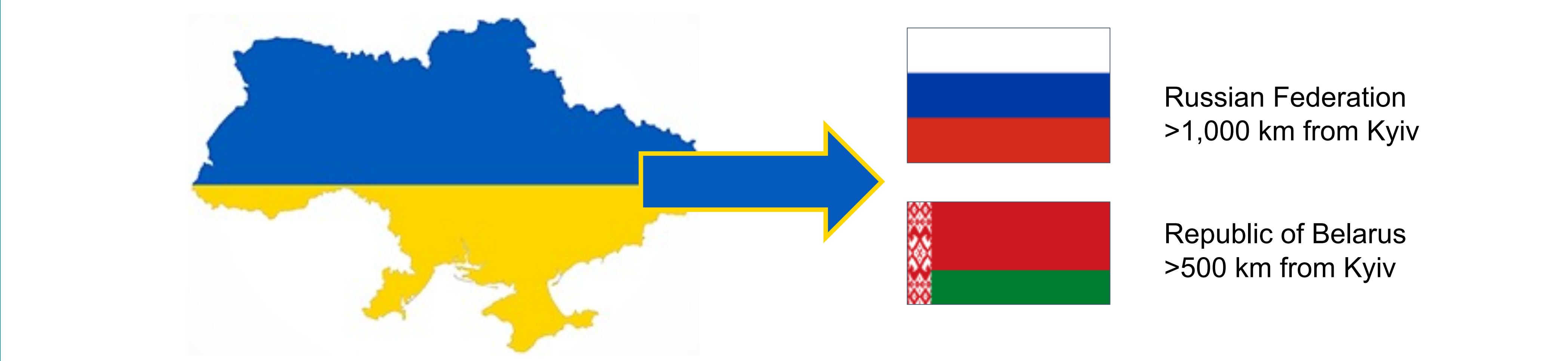
No child should ever remain separated from their family because they cannot be identified

**DNA technology can be a catalyst for healing when used with appropriate safeguards through community-centered collaborative efforts**

Not using DNA technology to expedite reunifications is unethical

**Despite the need, there is no global identification system to aid family reunification**

Since February 2022, thousands of Ukrainian children have disappeared into Russia ~90% of whom have living parents



The tragedy for Ukrainian families is the **first global opportunity** to proactively collect the DNA of living family members for urgent reunification, or for eventual reunification for the children who might be separated well into adulthood

- ### Children removed from Ukraine
- Children who were removed directly from their families
  - Children whose parents were killed
  - Children who were separated from their parents during “filtration” checkpoints for security of occupied areas
  - Whole institutions (e.g., orphanages) that were relocated
  - Children who were offered camps for rehabilitation or recreation during the conflict
  - Children who were removed under the pretense of medical care



Based on the stories of 387 returned Ukrainian children  
Source: Daria Herasymchuk, Commissioner of the President of Ukraine on Children's Rights and Child Rehabilitation, speaking at the conference "United for Justice," 20 Nov 2023, Massey College, Toronto, Canada

### Potential key organizations for DNA efforts (thus far)

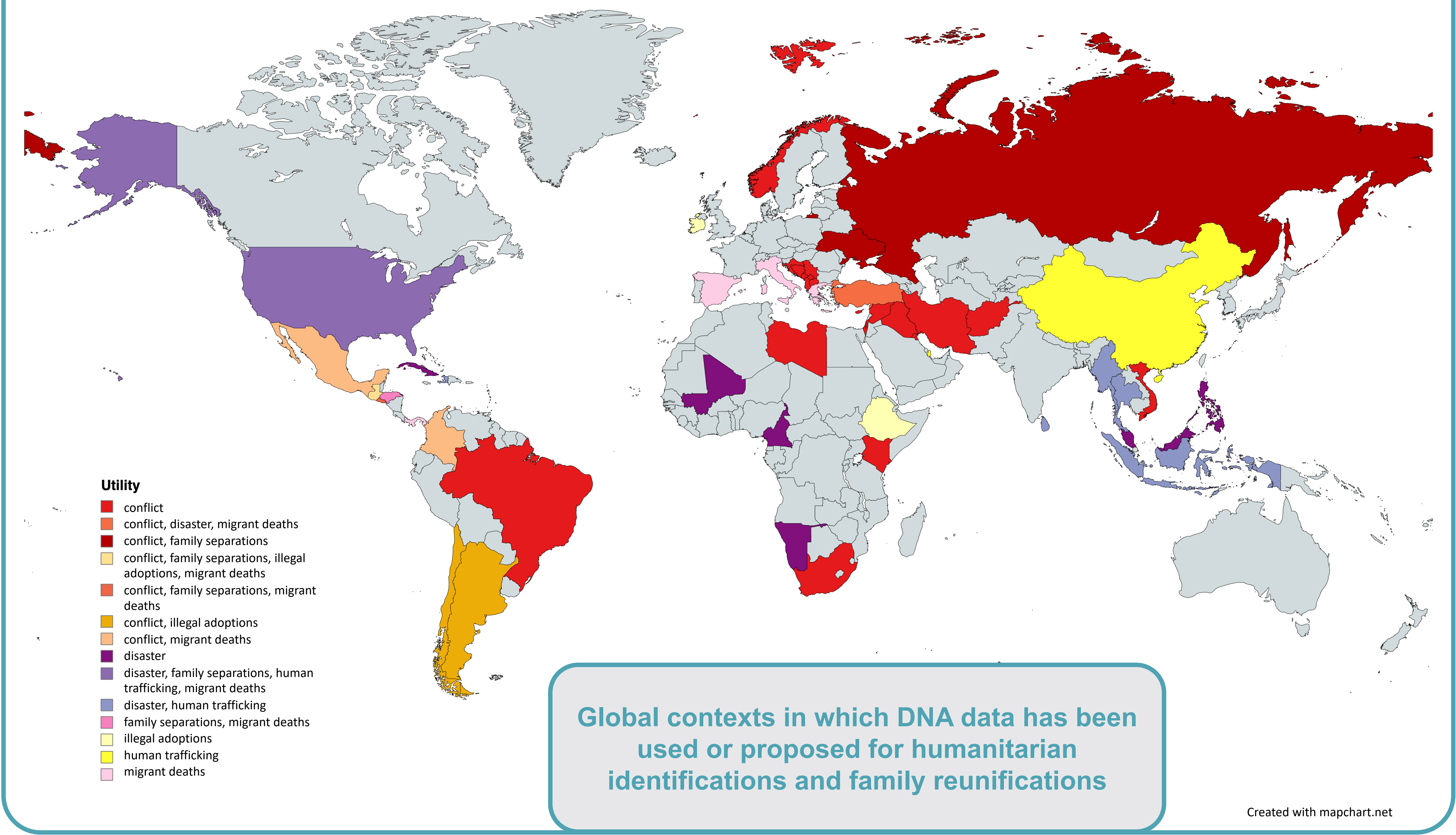
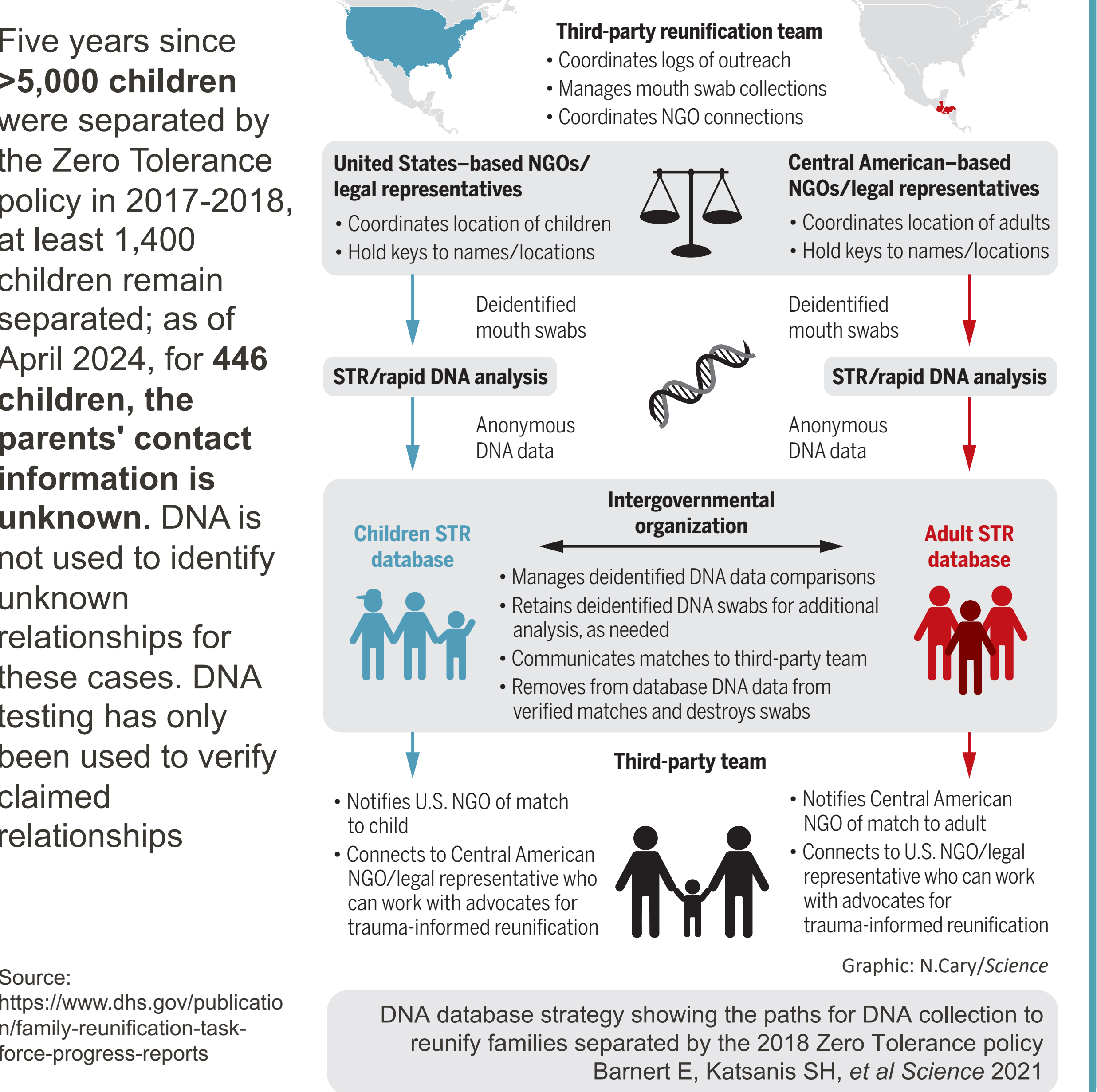
DNA database: **icmp**

Coordination: **ANDE**

Connection to families: **ICMP**

Rapid DNA: **ANDE**

## A DNA led database strategy for migrant family reunifications



## What is needed?

- Trauma-informed strategy for a DNA database in support of reunification of Ukrainian families for:
  - Children recovered and requiring verification (e.g., preverbal children)
  - Children for years/decades to come as they become adults and seek out their families
- Understanding of strengths and limitations of DNA
- Protections for families, safeguards for data
- Partnerships among civil and governmental organizations

## Challenges identified thus far

- Navigating a process during wartime
- Defining disaster response roles of various groups
- Coordinating and meeting capacity appropriate to the need
- Lack of trust in certain organizations
- Lack of awareness of DNA approaches and potential protections
- Distinguishing disinformation (wartime propaganda) and misinformation
- Diaspora of families

The political and wartime tragedies will take decades to resolve, but for families who can be reunified, barriers to using DNA should not contribute to delays

The window for implementing DNA strategies for some families can close quickly in unstable wartime circumstances due to migration, disappearance, illegal adoption, or death

Addressing barriers in Ukraine and learning from the process can feed into the creation of global strategies to facilitate family reunifications