



Population Displacements in the Ukraine War: The challenge of first humanitarian assistance

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Summary

- Since February 2022, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has triggered the largest war-related displacement of population in Europe since the aftermath of World War Two.
- Setting up an effective humanitarian response to support internally displaced persons in Ukraine is a task of major political importance.
- Since the beginning of the war, local volunteers have played a key role in providing assistance to internally displaced persons in Ukraine.
- They are often unable to comply with the standards set by international humanitarian institutions, which refuse to fund them, despite their being in urgent need of support.
- There would seem to be a need to relax the common standards that apply to humanitarian assistance in order to allow local actors, including volunteers, to collaborate with international humanitarian organisations.
- Helping informal groups of volunteers to organise themselves into non-profit organisations or NGOs could encourage international humanitarian organisations to support them.

Introduction

In early November 2022, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimated at 7.8 million the number of refugees from Ukraine recorded across Europe - in addition to 6.2 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) within the country's borders.

War is more than military confrontation and the current conflict in Ukraine is no exception. The migration flows that the Russian [invasion](#) of Ukraine has triggered since February 2022 represent the [largest war-related displacement of population](#) in Europe since the aftermath of the Second World War. In early November 2022, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimated at 7.8 million the number of refugees from Ukraine [recorded](#) across Europe – in addition to 6.2 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) within the country's borders. This amounts to [14 million](#) people having fled their homes – nearly one third of the country's population of [44 million](#) in 2021.

The [International Crisis Group](#), [Humanitarian Outcomes](#), the [Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action](#), the [Institut français des Relations internationales](#) (IFRI), and [Refugees International](#) have all emphasised the crucial role of local organisations and volunteers in providing first humanitarian assistance to internally displaced persons. Refugees International excepted, these institutions have suggested relaxing common standards in humanitarian assistance to allow local actors, including volunteers, to collaborate with international humanitarian organisations. The current challenge is to find a middle way between total compliance with international standards – which is often impossible here – and the so-called '[no-regrets](#)' approach, which assumes the risk of misappropriation or sub-optimal use of humanitarian resources. The intermediate solution which I develop here consists in helping informal groups of volunteers organise into non-profit organisations or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) specialised in delivering first humanitarian assistance.

I was in Ukraine for five weeks in April-May 2022, working with the [European Civic Forum](#), a network of NGOs and associations based in Basel, Switzerland and focused on migration and agricultural challenges. Their headquarters in Ukraine are in Transcarpathia, in western Ukraine. From there, I travelled with a Ukrainian colleague to Khmelnytsky, Zaporizhzhya, Kyiv, and Lviv. During my stay, Zaporizhzhya was 20 km from the [frontline](#).

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The political importance of refugees

In Zaporizhzhya, the Ukrainian authorities had to manage the inflow of people fleeing Russian-held territories or the advance of the Russian army. A few NGOs were involved in these operations, including the French organisation [Road to Relief](#), whose members were operating in Syeverodonetsk under shelling from Russian forces.

The refugees had to cross the no-man's-land separating the Russian and Ukrainian forces. In the absence of humanitarian corridors between the two armies, the crossing deprived them of any state protection, and they could suffer attacks with few witnesses around. Social media chats were the main source of information available to them. A Russian-speaking volunteer translated some messages in such chats for me. One message said Russian soldiers had opened fire on the cars of a refugee column to prevent them from leaving Russian-held zones. Whether this was true, or a Russian disinformation attempt to discourage refugees from fleeing, was not clear. In some cases, unfortunately, it is true. Since February 2022, Russian forces have been repeatedly accused of [violence](#) towards Ukrainian civilians by *inter alia* the [United Nations](#).

Whether Russia is trying to prevent Ukrainians from [leaving](#) or encouraging them to do so is not entirely clear and may depend on the emigrants' profile. On the one hand, since February, Moscow has been suspected of favouring large migration movements from Ukraine to Western Europe, with a view to destabilising its European adversaries, by targeting residential quarters and civilian infrastructures. In [September and October](#) 2022, Russian shelling increasingly focused on [energy infrastructures](#). The [Atlantic Council](#) has interpreted this turn as an attempt to trigger a new mass exodus towards Western Europe in the winter.

Moscow's strategy could be to prevent civilians leaving occupied Ukraine until the winter, and then suddenly increasing the number of IDPs and international refugees by destroying energy infrastructures, thereby exerting further pressure on the Ukrainian and Western European governments.

On the other hand, large-scale emigration from occupied regions in Ukraine towards the rest of the country or the European Union (EU) has a negative impact on the Kremlin's war [propaganda](#). Russian officials are still [claiming](#) that the war is intended to free Ukraine and protect its Russian-speaking population from genocide. Mr Putin even welcomes Russian-speaking Ukrainian refugees in Russia. Consequently, the more refugees flee towards Western Ukraine and Western countries, the more the Kremlin's claims lose credibility. As a matter of fact, Russia has received the [highest number](#) of refugees from Ukraine; if one takes the total number of Ukrainian refugees, however, the majority have been taken in by EU countries, the United Kingdom and Switzerland. Beside propaganda objectives, Russia may want to keep a sizeable pro-Russian population in Ukraine – especially in Crimea, whether they be Russian-speaking Ukrainians or newcomers from Russia.

In the same vein, the Ukrainian authorities may wish to keep close by Ukrainians who fled west to repopulate liberated territories – especially Crimea – for a later date.

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Refugees in Zaporizhzhya: the crucial role of inhabitants

For the European Civic Forum, the challenge consisted in bridging the gap between the resources shipped from the EU or Ukraine and the needs of refugees in the city.

In April-May 2022, many refugees from Eastern Ukraine had arrived in Zaporizhzhya. The Ukrainian authorities set up a registration point in the city to provide displaced persons with first assistance and to avoid infiltration from Russian agents. Some refugees were continuing towards Western Ukraine or the EU, but tens of thousands had remained in Zaporizhzhya, leading to a drastic rise in food, beverage and housing needs both in the city and elsewhere along the route followed by refugees travelling west.

Zaporizhzhya was so close to the frontline when I was there that only a few NGOs or international organisations could operate in the city. I heard [Caritas](#) were there and saw a [United Nation International Children's Emergency Fund](#) reception point. For the European Civic Forum, the challenge consisted in bridging the gap between the resources shipped from the EU or Ukraine and the needs of refugees in the city. The mission I participated in sought to deliver some basic necessities, but mainly to find a solution to this challenge.

The solution consisted in identifying trustworthy locals to organise food and beverage supply points. The medium-term objective was then to replicate the supply system set up in Zaporizhzhya in other cities, such as Dnipro or Mykolayiv.

From the beginning of the conflict, local volunteers – often organised in informal groups of friends, neighbours, students, or colleagues – have played a central role in providing first humanitarian assistance, both to the benefit of inhabitants of embattled areas and to IDPs.

Thanks to support from volunteers in Zaporizhzhya, food and beverage supplies became operational in the weeks after my trip. However, even though this system was probably the best answer to the emergency, I was not sure that it could last long, given that it was based on trustworthy individuals my travel companion and I had met for just a few days or even hours beforehand. This informal way of functioning has the advantages of being more flexible and reactive than the more conventional, structured but slower systems employed by large NGOs and international organisations. However, it also has several drawbacks.

First, it was almost impossible to control the identity of volunteers and efficiently monitor their activities on site from the headquarters of the European Civic forum in Transcarpathia. The funds allocated were held directly and managed by private volunteers in cash and/or through their private bank accounts. The arrangement was carrying the risk of [humanitarian resources being misappropriated](#). Even worse, from the beginning of the Russian invasion, IDPs flows in Ukraine have consisted of women and children in the main, which is to say a population [vulnerable](#) to trafficking, gender-based violence, and/or sexual exploitation. In that regard, not being able to effectively control the identity of volunteers is problematic; in the case of an incident, how could they be prosecuted?

This predicament also involves a degree of reputational risk, which could threaten further support from the European Civic Forum's partners. The [International Crisis group](#), the [IFRI](#), [Humanitarian Outcomes](#), and the [Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action](#) recognise that problems of this kind are typical of the way in which informal groups of volunteers operate in Ukraine. As a result, many such institutions refuse to fund informal groups of volunteers, which prevents them from expanding their action *in situ*, indispensable as it is.

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What can be done next?

To improve the situation, volunteers in Zaporizhzhya as well as others working under the same conditions - i.e. as endpoint providers of humanitarian aid provided by foreign institutions - could create non-profit organisations or NGOs specialised in the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

To improve the situation, I suggest that volunteers in Zaporizhzhya as well as others working under the same conditions – *i.e.* as endpoint providers of humanitarian aid provided by foreign institutions – create non-profit organisations or NGOs specialised in the delivery of humanitarian assistance. These organisations would be registered in Ukraine or a Western country. To save time, international partner organisations such as the European Civic Forum could cover the cost of creating these structures and provide technical and legal assistance. Volunteers would then be registered, at which point their identity could be verified as well as their criminal record extract. In addition, volunteer organisations would open a bank account, which would make it easier to monitor the use of funds allocated by partner institutions. This would improve transparency in a country where [corruption](#) is widespread. Moreover, this solution would enable the hiring of managers *in situ*, which would improve efficiency by partially compensating for a high turnover of volunteers. The more reliable volunteers could be hired, the more efficient the system will become. In addition, the solution I propose would help to rationalise humanitarian assistance through a separation of duties: international actors could act as providers of funds and necessities, while local volunteers or humanitarian workers could focus on delivering assistance to IDPs.

Another solution could lie in hiring or registering volunteers as members of the foreign organisations they work with; [Swiss Church Aid \(HEKS\)](#) already does this. While this solution would probably be the most efficient, it would also be more expensive.

Helping volunteers create non-profit organisations or NGOs may not be sufficient in itself to bring them into compliance with the standards of international humanitarian institutions. However, organisations such as the [International Crisis Group](#), [Humanitarian Outcomes](#), and the [IFRI](#) have been advocating a relaxation of the rules on collaborating with local Ukrainian actors for months now. Given that some international organisations already take a more flexible approach, the solution I propose could encourage others to do the same, as the ability of all the parties involved in this war to manage IDPs and refugees flows could be a decisive factor in the outcome of the conflict.