

Ukraine Update

Speakers:

Hielke Zantema, ZOA Netherlands. Currently stationed in Uzghorod, a city in the South-West of Ukraine, near the border with Slovakia and Hungary. Setting up emergency aid for IDPs in West-Ukraine, where tens of thousands of Ukrainians have fled to.

Benoit de Gryse, Stichting Vluchteling. Visited Lublin and Warsaw (Poland) in the first couple of days after the Russian invasion, knowing that Poland would receive a large stream of refugees. Assessed the situation there to see where and what the needs are, what possibilities exist, and to get an idea of possible scenarios.

Samantha Melis, Stichting Vluchteling. Visited Lublin and Warsaw (Poland) in the first couple of days after the Russian invasion. Assessed the situation there to see where and what the needs are, what possibilities exist, and to get an idea of possible scenarios.

Dorien Boxhoorn, Stichting Vluchteling. Visited Moldova and Romania, especially the border regions with Ukraine, where many refugees are entering the countries. Assessed the situation there to see where and what the needs are, what possibilities exist, and to get an idea of possible scenarios.

Executive summary:

- Since the start of the Russian invasion, the humanitarian response in and around Ukraine is characterized by local and volunteer initiatives. The crisis is way too big for these small-scale initiatives to handle, and they are quickly getting overwhelmed. More international and professional assistance is urgently needed.
- Coordination of aid initiatives has proven difficult. The many volunteer initiatives are hard to keep track of, and international coordination by OCHA or UNHCR is slow to get started in the affected areas.
- Discrimination is happening with regards to aid and access to neighboring countries. Roma's and people of color are experiencing difficulties at the border, being denied access or only being allowed to leave after everyone else.

Main take-aways:

The situation in general:

- All the areas that were visited by the speakers of this event were chaotic. There were massive flows of people, both IDPs and refugees trying to cross the border. Among these large groups there are some heartbreaking situations. Some people do not want to leave the country because their husband or son is not allowed to come with them. They would rather stay than be separated from their family.
- There is a general feeling of shock and disbelief among the Ukrainians. Every conversation starts with expressions of shock and amazement. Everyone felt that something was going to happen, but nobody expected Russia's actions to be this quick and this extreme.

- There is also a tangible sense of unity. There really is commitment from the Ukrainians to help and support each other. Some have said: “Putin has united us more than ever.”

Local volunteers and initiatives:

- There is a huge amount of local initiatives in all the areas visited by the speakers. It has been great to see the immediate responses by local churches, volunteers and local organizations. There is an urge to help and people are really stepping up to do what they can. Hielke Zantema from ZOA stated: “The Ukrainians show great commitment not only to fight, but also to help and support each other.” These local organizations and systems are valuable for international organizations coming in, because they can build on existing systems and partnerships.
- However, these smaller local organizations, as well as the un-experienced volunteers and initiatives by local churches are quickly getting overwhelmed. The size of the crisis and the refugee flows is simply too massive to rely on a system of local volunteers. Currently, there is not enough international and professional support to relieve the local initiatives, which are camping with crowdedness and shortages.
- It is also very difficult to keep track of all the local initiatives and especially the individual volunteers. Most will probably have good intentions, but that is hard to know for sure. In Poland, for example, there are many people at the border holding up signs that they are willing to transport refugees to other locations. As many of the refugees are women and children, there are definitely protection risks for certain groups and there are already examples where groups of men were singling out young women to get into their vehicle.

Coordination

- The difficulty of keeping track of local initiatives in border regions also touches upon the larger issue of the coordination of aid in and around Ukraine. Before the arrival of international organizations, local initiatives were coordinated in WhatsApp and Telegram groups. Churches would for example post a request there and volunteers could react. These groups quickly became too big to function with too many requests and answers to actually keep track.
- International organizations that are setting up aid right now are also having a hard time to keep track of who is doing what and where. Therefore there is an urgent need for a cluster system and for organizations such as OCHA and UNHCR to arrive in all affected areas.
- Currently, the level of coordination varies very much per area. On paper, Poland was prepared, as they made whole scheme where the government would be in charge with support of the UNHCR. In reality this system is not functioning very well. In the south-west of Ukraine, where Hielke is situated, there is also no presence of OCHA yet. Moreover, UNHCR staff was forced to flee from their office in Kiev, which naturally complicates their coordinating duties. Dorien mentions that the border situation in Romania seemed well-coordinated.

Discrimination

- Although the crisis initiated many heartwarming responses, there are also painful situations of discrimination in aid distribution and access into neighboring countries.
- Roma’s trying to leave Ukraine are often denied access at the border because they do not have the right documents to cross the border into neighboring countries. Therefore, they are forced to stay behind. In Moldova the Roma people are one of the few groups who will probably stay in the country, because they do not have the means to travel any further. Whereas most of the refugees in Moldova are planning to pass through to Romania or even further into Europe, they do often not have this opportunity. Only the poorest thus go into the Moldovan reception centers, where there is already an alarming shortage of food, drinks and sanitary facilities.

- In Poland, discrimination is also a big issue. There is a strong narrative of “good refugees” versus “bad refugees”, which is also fueled by the Polish government. Polish civil society organizations have mixed feelings when it comes to their work at the Ukrainian border. They are pressured by the Polish government to fill in the gaps left by government coordination. However, they are being criminalized for doing the exact same work at the border with Belarus, where refugees are still being forced to cross the border from Belarus but denied entry by Poland.
- In Ukraine and in Poland there is also discrimination among the Ukrainian refugees. White Ukrainians are seen as good refugees, but non-white Ukrainians or for example African students in Ukraine are experiencing racism and discrimination. There are stories of black refugees only being allowed to get on transport to the border after everyone else has left, or being denied access into Poland.

In the discussion following the speakers’ introductions, the need for humanitarian corridors was stressed, as humanitarian access is tough. Humanitarian workers are able to enter Ukraine, but leaving is difficult because of the long lines at the border. The European Commission has provided [guidance](#) on how to speed up crossings from Ukraine, with the necessary security checks stating The European Commission indicated it will "[set up additional crossing points, waive customs duties and create special lanes to channel humanitarian aid.](#)" It seems these lanes are not operational (yet). This could be an issue to advocate for.

[KUNO](#) is the Platform for Humanitarian Knowledge Exchange in the Netherlands.