



Expert meeting on Ukraine

Three years after the full-scale invasion, how do national and international humanitarian responders work together?

Thursday 20 March | 15:00 – 17:00 CET | ZOOM

Summary report

This report was written based on the discussion taking place at the time of the meeting and has not been updated to include developments and events that have occurred since then.

February of this year marked the third-year anniversary of the full-scale Russian invasion in Ukraine. Numerous humanitarian actors have taken part in the large-scale humanitarian response that followed the invasion. According to [ReliefWeb](#), over 660 humanitarian organizations assisted 8.4 million people across Ukraine under the 2024 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan. Even after three years, the humanitarian situation in Ukraine needs continuous attention: [OCHA](#) estimates that in 2025, 2.7 million people – 36 % of the population – require humanitarian assistance.

On March 20, KUNO organized an expert meeting to discuss the situation in Ukraine three years after the full-scale invasion. The focus of the meeting was on the cooperation between international and national humanitarian actors. Recent developments, such as the USAID funding cuts, have created uncertainty around humanitarian response and cooperation, making this conversation even more important.

This expert meeting was moderated by **Corinne Lamain**, coordinator of KUNO. This report summarizes the interventions of the three speakers, and the discussion with the participants after.

The Alliance of Ukrainian Civil Society Organisations

Oleksandra Kirtoka, Program and Project Manager at the Alliance of Ukrainian Civil Society Organisations (further: the Alliance), began by sharing insights into the work of the Alliance. The Alliance is an initiative group, think tank, and coordination center for humanitarian response in Ukraine. Currently the Alliance has 16 members. A [locally led response strategy](#) has been set in place for the upcoming years, with contributions from over 200 actors, including the United Nations. Half of the Alliance members are

impacted by the USAID cut, which has so far resulted in a total loss of 84 million dollars. While the impact of the budget cuts is tremendous – including staff layoffs, salary reductions, sectoral impacts on multipurpose cash assistance, halted reconstruction efforts, and unlaunched projects - the Alliance is trying to remain a reactive force. Oleksandra concluded that, fortunately or unfortunately, challenges bring Ukrainians together and people will work together in this crisis towards their common goals. Ukrainians are seeking to understand how to protect themselves, being aware that support can vanish suddenly. People are trying to be resilient during these times.

Humanitarian Narratives

The second speaker, **Maryana Zaviyska**, Co-founder and Research Lead at Open Space Works, delved into the findings of the study '[Narratives and the Ukraine response](#)', published in November 2024, and newer studies on the [impact of the suspension of USAID funding on Ukrainian CSOs](#) and [the human cost of the USAID cuts](#). In the humanitarian narratives report, different narratives that have driven and shaped humanitarian action were identified: one framing solidarity with Ukraine as a key motivator for support. The narrative of solidarity with Ukraine has posed challenges for the humanitarian principle of neutrality, with concerns that these two inevitably conflict. Secondly, the war in Ukraine has been framed as an exceptional crisis, fueling high levels funding and responses. These elements of the response clash with humanitarian commitments to impartiality.

Maryana elaborated on two more narratives that play a role in Ukraine. First, there is the narrative of vulnerability or resilience. There is a strong narrative of vulnerability in Ukraine, which results in the feeling that Ukrainians are deserved of assistance. This is beneficial for fundraising efforts but can clash with the idea that people are also resilient. However, these two can be true at the same time. It can be hard to navigate these narratives as people do not want to be portrayed as strong all the time, or as weak all the time. Secondly, the response in Ukraine is portrayed as exceptional and as a success story for localization. However, the reality is different and much still needs to be done to achieve a truly locally led response.

Maryana explained that the recent funding cuts are very much linked to these narratives. USAID covered 30% of the available funds for humanitarian response in Ukraine in 2024, and supported civil society and development programs. Solidarity was a very powerful tool in pulling together funds in a short amount of time, as funders were supporting Ukraine politically as well. Now that the political environment is changing, it is revealed that this solidarity driven action carries a lot of risks. Solidarity is fragile - it can shift with political winds or media attention, leading to sudden funding cuts or changes in public sentiment. This makes support unpredictable and conditional, especially for those

deemed “less sympathetic” or who fall outside dominant narratives, such as marginalized groups or civil society actors with critical perspectives. Moreover, responses grounded in solidarity can overshadow humanitarian principles like neutrality, and may be used to advance selective forms of protection that do not serve all affected populations equally. In short, while solidarity can spark action, it is not always sustainable, inclusive, or safe - especially when not accompanied by structural commitments to rights-based and locally led responses.

In addition, the distinction between humanitarian aid and development is blurred in Ukraine, so the cuts on the one influence the other. Four areas were identified that were affected by the funding cuts: livelihood and business support, energy infrastructure, long-term recovery, and support for veterans and ex-combatants. In the end, currently 300.000 people in need have been cut off from aid.

Localization in Ukraine

Last of the speakers, **Nicholas Noe**, Senior Fellow at Refugees International, talked about the current developments in Ukraine and the [Annual Ukraine Localization Survey of 2024](#), which was coproduced with a member of the Alliance [EAST SOS](#).

In the end of 2024, the situation was looking hopeful. Although Ukraine is widely perceived as having a lot of corruption problems, different studies showed that there are no confirmed cases of corruption in the humanitarian aid response in Ukraine, and that innovative changes in localization were being made, such as through the Alliance. However, the events of the past two months have destroyed this positive momentum. The Trump Administration is causing localization to happen by brute force, which is an inefficient and chaotic way to do reforms. Some elements of the Trump administration even weaponized some of the research arguments of localisation.

The Alliance strongly showed how local and national organisations can and should take the lead and how international organisations can support them.¹ The formation of the Alliance is highly innovative: Bringing local NGOs together during wartime is challenging, but the Alliance has succeeded in doing so while also being able to plan ahead for post-war peace. Secondly, relating to funding, the Ukraine Humanitarian Fund and its scoring system, and the commitment of direct Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) of USAID funding to local organisations were important steps for localization in Ukraine.

¹ Report of lessons learned of the Alliance: <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports-briefs/looking-forward-the-alliance-of-ukrainian-csos/>

As a last note, Noe underscored that it is wrong to look at Ukraine as exceptional; there are factors of the Alliance and other good things that have happened are also applicable in many other contexts and a lot of lessons there need to be replicated there - those contexts are no less deserving from receiving trust.

Nexus

The triple Nexus (humanitarian aid, development, and peacebuilding) also plays an important role in Ukraine. Communities are affected in different ways by the war, resulting in a need for a variety of responses. It is important that the recovery and reconstruction talks do not overshadow the need for humanitarian aid, since frontlines are constantly moving. The Alliance is trying to find its footing regarding this triple Nexus. On the one hand, the Alliance wants to be part in the implementation of the Nexus. On the other hand, The Alliance recognizes that they cannot do everything at once and that it faces operational challenges stemming from the events of the past two months.

The role of INGOs and localization

The panel and participants discussed the role of INGOs. A lot of international actors are interested in localization in Ukraine. But this can backfire when they do not do their research properly. For example, there have been cases where an INGO plans an initiative while a local or national NGO is already implementing it. Instead of duplicating efforts, it would be more effective to connect these organizations. In addition, not every local actor is ready for this cooperation to happen. Some local and grassroots organisations are hesitant to collaborate with international actors, since they are not knowledgeable enough of the local context and are not flexible enough to adapt to the challenges that can occur. Instead, they prefer to maintain their independence. On an institutional level, national actors appreciate the expertise of INGOs more. It is important to have feedback and partnership review mechanisms in place for local and national NGOs in order to do localization well.

Ukraine is facing a challenging time ahead and its future is uncertain. This makes it important to have platforms and spaces available where actors can discuss and work together to help the Ukrainian people in their time of need.