



# EUROPEAN HUMANITARIAN FORUM 2023

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## Looking back: One year into the Ukraine conflict

DG ECHO & Egmont Royal Institute for International Affairs  
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This outcome paper delves into key areas of discussion and recommendations highlighted in the warm-up session “Looking back: One year into the Ukraine conflict.” The event was held virtually on February 28, 2023, with more than 130 participants attending both in person and online. It was co-organised by the Egmont Royal Institute for International Affairs and DG ECHO in the lead up to the 2023 European Humanitarian Forum in March.

The warm-up session investigated the lessons that can be drawn from the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine as a result of Russia’s invasion through analyses and interventions from an expert panel represented by SIDA, ECHO, the United Nations, the International Crisis Group, Médecins Sans Frontières, and Caritas Ukraine.

Panellists spoke about the challenges of maintaining a strict principled humanitarian approach in an ongoing conflict; securing humanitarian access throughout Ukraine; and supporting and strengthening partnerships with Ukrainian actors. Discussions covered the issue of applying the humanitarian principle of neutrality alongside the European provision of both humanitarian and non-humanitarian assistance, as well as providing cross-line assistance to those most in need. Panellists also examined the current barriers to humanitarian access, while addressing the funding, coordination, and leadership challenges that national and local Ukrainian relief groups have reported.

The following conclusions highlight the need for transparent dialogue between policymakers, international and local humanitarian organisations operating in Ukraine and donors, in order to provide assistance in a more effective, transparent, and sustainable manner.

### Humanitarian principles

- The provision of different forms of assistance in Ukraine has proven complex throughout the response. The EU has provided humanitarian, political, financial and military assistance in clear support for Ukraine, which has raised questions – and still stirs debates - over the necessity of neutrality as an absolute principle. As the perception of international organizations’ neutrality across all parties to the conflict increasingly impacts the delivery of assistance, there is a growing ethical call for donors to acknowledge geopolitical motives and better differentiate their discourse between humanitarian and political assistance to Ukraine.
- Further, there is a need to clarify requirements and standards in terms of neutrality and humanitarianism on a local level. Networks of local volunteers and Ukrainian civil society organisations have been requested to adhere to humanitarian standards regarding the differentiation between assistance to civilians and armed forces. The international community should adhere to these same requirements. A transparent dialogue on both the international and local stage is needed to reconcile possible double standards, particularly with an emphasis

on local organisations that prioritise the solidarity approach in the provision of various forms of assistance.

### **Humanitarian access**

- International organisations - both UN agencies and INGOs- face different degrees of risks in expanding humanitarian access along and on both sides of the frontlines. While access to territories controlled by the Government of Ukraine is generally unhindered, many international organisations report security risks on the frontlines. INGOs remain committed to providing assistance on both sides of the frontlines on the basis of need; however, access remains the main barrier. While international organisations have pursued greater partnerships with local organisations working on the frontlines, there remain questions of motives as to whether these partnerships are intended to advance effective localisation or rather a pathway for international actors to mitigate risks and duty of care constraints.
- Many local organisations are indeed equipped to enter hard-to-reach areas across Ukraine, particularly within 20 kilometres around the frontlines. INGOs and UN agencies should strengthen their collaboration and operations with local groups in order to provide effective, immediate, and locally-led assistance. However, there remains a need for a platform to better address and ultimately mitigate the ethical risks related to operations co-conducted by actors with a very different mindset towards humanitarian principles.
- While delivering assistance across all territories remains a key priority, humanitarian organisations describe a reluctance from donors to support cross-line humanitarian activities, which has meant that communities in Russian-controlled areas have not received sufficient humanitarian assistance. The lack of access in these areas first and foremost originates from the absence of meaningful engagement among parties to the conflict to address the humanitarian imperative, leading sometimes to donors and other stakeholders' wait-and-see approach. Attempts by humanitarian agencies to negotiate crossline assistance will nevertheless remain hindered until real and humanitarian-centred diplomatic efforts are committed by the parties.

### **Strengthening local partnerships**

- Local Ukrainian organisations face constraints in accessing funding opportunities from international donors. Complex criteria for vetting, compliance, and due diligence have presented challenges for local groups to access funding.
  - The Ukraine Humanitarian Fund (UHF) is a key pathway for directly funding local organisations that face capacity and resource challenges in receiving international funds. The UHF could serve to improve sustainability of the response as local organisations remain in great need of continued funding one year into the conflict. The UHF could serve as a platform to identify, vet, and strengthen and align capacities with local relief groups and support donors' capacity to identify and engage with Ukrainian organisations.
- There is a need for greater support and empowerment of local organisations within the humanitarian coordination structure and for strengthening a local partnership rather than simply talking about localisation. UN agencies and INGOs should invest in learning and capacity building with local organisations to prioritise their attendance, representation, and decision-making within these structures, such as within the cluster system and the Humanitarian Country Team.

*This paper may not necessarily reflect the views of the European Commission, the Swedish Presidency of the Council, and the organisations which took part in the events.*