



POLICY BRIEF

**United Nations as a  
Humanitarian Organisation:  
to be or not to be?**



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*To be, or not to be, that is the question:  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles...*

W. Shakespeare

The news of the International Committee of the Red Cross opening an office in Rostov-on-Don (Russia) has caused a vigorous discussion within Ukrainian society on the role of international organisations in coping with the humanitarian challenges generated by the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Already, there are voices questioning the effectiveness and adequacy of such a response, particularly regarding the United Nations' humanitarian organisations<sup>1</sup>.

Within the UN as an umbrella institution, several humanitarian institutions such as OCHA, WHO, IOM, UNICEF, etc. are presumed to aid in humanitarian crises. Many of them launched their programs after Russia had occupied part of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts and Crimea in 2014. So, where are they now and what is their response?

According to the 25 March UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) report<sup>2</sup>, UN agencies and their partners reached approximately 890 000 people. At the same time, the organisation expects 12M people in need of humanitarian assistance. Thus, during the first month of the war, all UN institutions reached only 7,4% of those who need their help. Their latest report from 30 March<sup>3</sup> omits the information on the outreach of UN activities and states that 1230+ UN workers on the ground and 110+ partner organisations are “implementing or planning to implement activities across the country” which implies recognition of inadequacy of the UN response over the first month.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/olexandra.matviychuk/posts/10158542055707304>

<sup>2</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/ukraine-humanitarian-impact-situation-report-1200-pm-eet-25-march-2022> (p. 4)

<sup>3</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/ukraine-humanitarian-impact-situation-report-1200-pm-eet-30-march-2022> (p. 4)

Just one simple example from the 25 March UN report: “UNHCR delivered 3,000 blankets to the State Emergency Service of Ukraine in Zaporizhzhia to be distributed to people evacuated from Mariupol.” The problem is that about 40K people have already evacuated from Mariupol and other settlements situated along the “green corridor” route<sup>4</sup>. The UN contribution pales in comparison to the scale and volume of aid and goods provided by local civil society organizations and independent local and international volunteers, especially if one takes into account the resources available to the UN.

Why is the reach rate so unsatisfactory? Among the challenges the UN institutions in Ukraine face, there are limited access to some territories because of security concerns, “competition over logistics assets”<sup>5</sup>, and the concentration of most aid organisations in the western regions. These challenges seem reasonable, at first sight. However, Ukrainian volunteers also face all of them. They have become those who “take arms against a sea of troubles”. It seems that there is nothing impossible for these strangers united for the common goal: to fundraise, to find suppliers from abroad, to organise logistics even to temporally occupied territories. All these, while they don’t have such experience, infrastructure, and funds available for the UN.

What could be done? Apart from security issues, it seems that bureaucracy chains and heavy-regulated procedures are the factors that hinder a swift response. For example, one of the calls by UNDP<sup>6</sup> among other things outlines extensive reporting procedures for successful applicants which would put a drain on their already limited (wo)manpower and resources.

Thus, a possible answer lies in the UN and its structures:

- Enlarging the number of workers or affiliates on the ground, especially in the North, Centre, South, and East of Ukraine.
- Limiting the number of forms and documents that need to be filled for and after each action.
- Reach out to those NGOs and volunteers who already operate in the affected areas without asking them to apply for grants and to undergo typical grant application procedures.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://t.me/kurtievofficial/1729>

<sup>5</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/ukraine-humanitarian-impact-situation-report-1200-pm-eet-25-march-2022> (p. 6)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.ua.undp.org//content/ukraine/uk/home/recovery-and-peacebuilding/grant-opportunities-UN-RPP/supporting-vulnerable-groups-and-people-in-Ukraine.html>

- Opening and administering Call for Applications for Ukrainian civil society organizations and NGOs with a lighter requirement regarding application and reporting / review procedures for a swifter and more efficient aid.

Ukrainians are grateful for the support, but it is not enough – it is a drop in the ocean. We expect the UN to play a more active role across Ukraine including the temporarily occupied territories and areas near battlefields.