



Dispatch from Eastern Ukraine

A rapid assessment to support institutional resilience
and emergency response to Russia's war in Ukraine

Recommendations

While Ukrainian institutions are proving remarkably resilient, and the municipalities are providing rapid aid delivery, logistical problems and insufficient coordination between networks of civil society organizations present significant obstacles. We share the following recommendations to enable the provision of aid to the most affected populations and to coordinate essential, consistent crisis communications:

1

So far, Ukrainian institutions have generally withstood the shock of the war. In particular, the central government, the army, and the municipalities are the three critical points of the institutional system with (overall) solid legitimacy and variable, though real, capacities to serve the population (raions and oblasts are less decisive and serve more as relays between the local and the national governments). Due to decisions taken after 2014, the army is still a relatively decentralized structure, and the Territorial Defense (Teritorialna Oborona) has a certain autonomy, but its means are limited in both equipment and armaments. In this context, **priority must be given to the existing institutional system**, which must be strengthened, rather than creating new institutions or introducing international NGOs (with some exceptions for highly targeted skills).

2

Civil society initiatives are politically essential but insufficient to deliver the necessary aid, and the newly created associations have great difficulty structuring themselves effectively and ensuring the sustainability of their actions. Coordination between local NGOs should be strengthened to obtain more international funding in areas such as assistance to displaced people. How can these local NGOs be helped to become more professional in gaining access to major donors? An expert intermediary could assist by acting as a service hub through which requests to such donors would be developed.

3

Municipalities are the only institutions that can provide rapid aid delivery to the front line and exposed civilian populations. The militarization of municipalities, enacted by the martial law, largely solves administrative and logistical difficulties. However, the town halls have already largely evacuated their staff from the front line, particularly from the Donbas, and (despite the central government's financial support) they can no longer guarantee their budget because of a lack of local income. Aid should be redeployed from relatively stable cities to ensure the continuity of their services.

4

The **logistical problems in delivering aid (mainly private)** from Poland to Ukraine are complex, both in regulatory and organizational terms. Civil society organizations (CSOs) struggle to make purchases from inside Ukraine and must go through intermediaries; transport is difficult as the CSOs lack the resources to pay drivers. Moreover, the packages are often badly labeled (too little information on the contents, necessary descriptions of medical supplies inaccurately translated – for example, via Google Translate Camera) and poorly organized, which forces

them to be repackaged. However, the lack of funding, suitable equipment, and personnel specialists makes the professionalization of logistics networks difficult. Thus, donations are often out of step with local needs and the most vulnerable populations are difficult to reach in a complex environment with many overlapping intermediaries and interpersonal networks. Training (e.g. on monitoring and planning) and professionalization (e.g. contracts and salaries for core full-time members) of these networks is necessary from both sustainability and effectiveness perspectives.

5

There is an **urgent need to advocate for civilians to leave dangerous areas**. Share information by handing out leaflets, posting to social networks, and setting up phonelines to inform callers on the risks of non-evacuation. Strengthen ties with municipalities and intermediate reception centers to inform displaced people in advance of their journeys and where/how they will be resettled. The lack of information about how people will be able to meet their immediate needs (food, shelter, etc.) and longer-term means of subsistence is anxiety-provoking, particularly for those who foresee facing stigmas linked to their geographical origin and their use of the Russian language.

6

There is an **urgent need for specific medications and adapted reception centers for sick, disabled, and elderly populations** who are still on the front line of Donbas.

7

The **provision of smartphones to affected populations** is essential, to allow them to connect among themselves (avoid the loss of social capital) and with the Ukrainian institutions (via the Diia app).

Introduction

This report aims to provide the donor community with actionable findings to inform interventions that aim to strengthen the resilience of the Ukrainian government and civil society organizations, while providing leads to improve emergency response – particularly as it relates to evacuations, displacement, and aid delivery in Eastern Ukraine. This analysis is based on interviews and direct observations conducted in Lviv, Dnipro, Pavlohrad, Pokrovsk, Kramatorsk, Sloviansk, Lysychansk, and Sieverodonetsk between April 4-10, 2022. Fieldwork is ongoing and is planned to continue until April 16; as such, our conclusions should not be considered definitive.

A large proportion of Ukrainians live far from the combat zones: Western Ukraine is relatively safe and stable, and the withdrawal of Russian troops from the north of the country will probably allow the start of reconstruction, the return of regular citizens (even though the authorities are trying to halt returns at present), and, eventually, the reinstallation of the central government in the capital.

However, Russia is building up its military forces in Donetsk and Luhansk, and the war is expected to intensify in the eastern regions of the country.

This report focuses on three main issues:

First, the war situation poses a specific strain on Ukrainian political institutions, both at the central and sub-national level. Unlike most contemporary conflicts, our initial data show **a growing solidity of Ukrainian institutions**. Indeed, the central government maintains a solid and direct relationship with the citizens. However, sub-national institutions require further resources as they depend on the already-strained central government for funding and security.

Second, civil society associations are surprisingly fragmented and work informally (without registrations and proper structures in place), confirming the findings of available sociological studies of Ukrainian society. These particularities were adapted to the initial phase of the conflict, where the speed of mobilization was essential. There has recently been a **decline in the ability of these organizations** (which are often informal) to mobilize resources and a low level of professionalism, which makes it challenging to attract aid from major donors.

Third, it is essential to distinguish between:

- the regions that are outside military operations, where the government benefit from macro-economic stabilization support (IMF, World Bank, EU, etc.) and arms shipments, and
- the emergency situations on the southern and eastern fronts.

In the Donbas, a possible Russian offensive in the coming weeks (mid to late April) – or, perhaps more likely, an intensification of the bombardments – **requires a rapid response**. This would rely on the municipalities, most of which are still functional, to provide necessary shipments of materials (medications, food) and personnel (medical), as well as closer communication between the front and the rear.



Institutional resilience during wartime

The whole bet of the Russian invasion was a disintegration of state structures that would have enabled establishing a pro-Russian government in Kyiv. However, even in the towns close to the front line, there has been no collapse of the most important institutions, notably the army and the central government. Whereas the military institution in Ukraine was weaker prior to 2014, allowing the annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Donbas, its prestige is now recognized in the current war. Likewise, the police and municipalities are functioning, even in areas close to the front. Since February, the administrations of the occupied cities have been withdrawing from their territories and continuing to work remotely from other localities. We have not observed – and have not been told about – cases of looting or riots (which might have been expected) or, with a few exceptions, collaboration with the Russian army. This institutional solidity, of which the military is only one facet, is an essential explanation of Ukrainian resilience. The war has led to a strengthening of national institutions, which have seen their legitimacy and their cohesion strengthened.

The resilience of national institutions



The mood is unanimously patriotic, and all public servants and citizens interviewed align with the central government. In this sense, the banning of pro-Russian parties (mostly heirs to the Party of Regions) probably does not reflect the perception of an immediate threat by the current government. However, some weak points are emerging. On one hand, there is anecdotal resistance to conscription, including from displaced populations in the west who are reluctant to return to a conflict they have just escaped. On the other hand, as we will discuss further in the next section, there are tensions surrounding the reception of displaced persons. Finally, a significant part of the population (estimated at between 20%-30%) caught up in the fighting in Donbas prefers to take refuge on the Russian side (or perhaps stay put, hoping for a Russian victory).

Regardless, the central government maintains a strong connection with its citizens. Similarly, pensions and salaries of civil servants are still being paid because the banking system remains functional outside heavily bombed areas. E-administration is also an asset. Compared to 2014, the government's capacity in terms of IT management is stronger. E-government was a core promise of Zelenskyy's 2019 presidential program and was reinforced by the measures taken during COVID-19 and by the EU-supported anti-corruption reforms. Those reforms enabled the establishment of more advanced e-administration than in many other European countries, including:

- The payment of pensions and salaries are facilitated via apps for banks without counters.
- The government app (Diia) allows people to register as displaced, and traders/SME owners are able to request compensation of approximately 6500 UAH. The government directly pays the aid to users of the app and Diia offers several services, including the ability to make money donations to the government, vaccination certificates, payment of taxes, etc. This allows a direct connection of the government with the population.
- Aid to IDPs goes through the Ministry of Communities and Territories Development, with direct payments made to each applicant. In the raions (districts), the registration offices are physical, but the Diia app allows the municipalities to view the reception capacities of each raion via a website, which makes it possible to spread IDPs geographically.

In general, social networks are effectively used by the administration, which strengthens links with users.

The crucial role of the municipalities



The evidence collected suggests that municipalities are the institutions to be supported directly or through the central government. The coordination of municipalities at the national level – of which, the mayor of Kyiv is the elected president – is a coordination instrument with great potential and should be strengthened.

- 1) The highly centralized Soviet system gave way to a relatively decentralized system, partly under pressure from the EU. The administrative system has been oriented towards strengthening municipalities to the detriment of oblasts and raions (although, within the oblasts, administrations – which are subordinate to the President of Ukraine – enjoy a wider

mandate and greater prerogatives than the oblasts' elected councils). In the current situation, in addition to the strengthening of the central state noted above, there is an important role for mayors as the symbolic expression of communities, organizer of emergencies, and conduit of aid.

- 2) Despite this decentralization, there does not seem to be local autonomization/fragmentation or major tensions with the central government. Indeed, two factors reinforce the cohesion of the institutions:
 - As planned in the reforms following Euromaidan, decentralization in Ukraine has worked to the benefit of the municipalities and less so to the benefit of the raions and oblasts. Consequently, there is no construction of a political authority that could compete with the central power. For example, except for Vitalii Kim – governor of Mykolayiv oblast since 2020 – no governor (appointed by the central government) appears to have a level of popularity and visibility that could compete with central authority figures.
 - Moreover, at the level of the municipalities, we see that there are no new resources available (at least, not enough) to empower the mayors and allow for more autonomy at the local level. In fact, the opposite is true: the mayors depend on the central state to compensate for the loss of tax revenue due to the war.
- 3) Territorial Defense (Teritorialna Oborona) is an important part of the Ukrainian defense system. These units depend, in part, on the municipality for their equipment/supply, which explains a very uneven level of equipment. However, they are autonomous from the town hall in terms of their actions (in principle, they are under the authority of the Military Operations Chamber, Ministry of Defence) and are paid directly by the Ministry. For example, in Sloviansk, the Teritorialna Oborona do not have significant support from the municipality and the commanders have to equip and feed themselves.

The few examples of internal political frictions at the local level are linked to personalities (mayors or others) who are criticized due to their lack of patriotism or for previous political disputes (e.g. the deputy of Volnovakha, Dimitri Lubiniest, criticizing the mayor of Kramatorsk). Moreover, the “pro-Russians” in Odesa, Sloviansk, Kharkiv, Bakhmut, etc. have, for the moment, rallied to a patriotic line unlike in 2014.

Civil society: fragmentation and informality



As far as civil society is concerned, here are a few preliminary observations based on the data:

- 1) Information associations of volunteers and registered civil society organizations lack coordination – both amongst themselves and with local authorities, such as the municipalities (for example, in Dnipro and Lviv). There are contacts between individuals and occasional collaborations (e.g. to rent a depot and unload trucks in Lviv), but no established system for cooperation or coordination.
- 2) Relations with the municipalities are cordial but often distant, since there is long-standing suspicion regarding the effectiveness of state structures. Municipalities, perhaps because they lack resources and personnel, give little support to private associations, and the latter seem to

want to remain independent. However, in Novomoskovsk (a town of 70,000 inhabitants located 15 kms north of Dnipro), collaboration seems good with a clear division between military aid (for the Teritorialna Oborona) and civilian aid. A city councilor has overseen humanitarian aid since the invasion.

- 3) Many associations of volunteers are not registered, which closes the door to certain forms of aid or receipt of aid from abroad or between oblasts. In general, there is a certain amateurism and ignorance of international financing circuits. Since early 2014, Ukrainian civil society has mobilized because of Euromaidan and the conflict in the Donbas, but this mobilization did not lead to sufficient professionalization. It may be possible to push for the coordination of formal or informal associations through websites (for example), so they can apply for funding, but external monitoring should be thorough and the sums should reflect the CSO's capacities.
- 4) While private donations were very strong in the first weeks of the conflict, they are now rarer due to economic exhaustion, particularly in Dnipro (a city of over 968,000 inhabitants) where associations are treating approximately 8,000 displaced persons per day. **All the organizations and volunteers that we met in the field mentioned the exhaustion of their financial capacities**, while there is no difficulty in obtaining supplies to meet the immediate needs. Major foundations such as Come Back Alive¹ are working to equip the Ukrainian army from private donations, working directly with the Ministry of Defense.
- 5) In terms of effectiveness of volunteers, any assessment must be qualified, acknowledging that the data are still very fragmentary. If we take the Teritorialna Oborona (and civilian support for the organization of armed volunteers), these units are useful, particularly for static guarding, and can be associated with the national army in the event of a siege. The evacuation of civilians from the Donbas is also an area where these volunteer associations seem to have done very significant work. Likewise, reception of displaced persons is an area where private initiatives have been central.

Finally, the comparison with 2014 makes sense, but the Ukrainian state is now much stronger (especially the army) and more legitimate. In addition, the intensity of the conflict and the number of displaced people quickly exhausted the resources of volunteer associations. The volunteers are remobilized but are terribly lacking in resources in an interstate war of incomparable magnitude.



The Donbas: evacuation and protection of populations

After only a month, the Russian war in Ukraine experienced a major turning point. Russia has scaled back its ambitions due to the disastrous performance of its army. From now on, the development of the war depends on Russia's attachment to the regions it conquered since February 2022 and possible military progression in the oblasts of Donetsk and Luhansk. At the beginning of April, however, it was not certain that the Russian army would manage to quickly organize an offensive in the Donbas, due to its losses and its state of disorganization. However, this blockage on the ground is likely to result in an intensification of bombardments and violence against civilian populations in a logic similar to the Russian interventions observed in other countries, particularly in Syria. Russia's relatively weak

¹ <https://www.comebackalive.in.ua/>

position presupposes an intensive use of force to block counter-attacks by the Ukrainian army, paralyze civilian institutions (hospitals, social services, schools), and terrorize the population.

In this context, the situation in Donbas is specific for several reasons and aid must be adapted accordingly. On one hand, the level of destruction and movements of the population are likely to increase dramatically. On the other hand, the region is landlocked and does not have the structures to meet the needs of the population. Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts depend on help from the rest of Ukraine, which has fragile logistics networks. The war was only belatedly prepared for and the situation could deteriorate rapidly in the event of a Russian attack on the government-controlled areas of the Donbas.

Russia forces or blocks evacuations



The concentration of the war in the Donbas leads to a different strategy of the Russians in relation to the civilian populations. We know that the Russian army sought to “produce refugees” by bombing residential areas with some success: these attacks and the threat of further incursions by Russia created more than 4 million refugees and more than 7 million displaced persons.² To accelerate the departures, the Russian forces did not bombard the railways, nor the roads (with some exceptions), which were favored by those fleeing.

In the Donbas, the situation is reversed. To prepare its offensives, disorganize the Ukrainian forces, and break the morale of the population, the Russian forces bombard the railway stations by explicitly targeting civilian populations. On April 8th, the firing of a fragmentation missile towards 4,000 displaced people waiting for the 10:30 am train at Kramatorsk station left more than 50 dead and 100 seriously injured. The attack brought the train evacuation network to a halt, and the terror caused by the brutality of the attack has had a demobilizing effect on the networks of volunteers.

Numbers of displaced people



Evacuations from regions close to the front line are carried out to allow military operations in the event of a Russian offensive and to protect civilians. As a result, Ukrainian authorities issued an order to evacuate Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts in the first week of April 2022 under martial law. We do not have an overall figure for population displacements in the Donbas for the past few weeks (March-April); the mayors interviewed have only approximate indications, and the figures are changing rapidly. Figure 1 (below) shows the estimated population changes in Kramatorsk and Sloviansk, based on estimates from local authorities.

² European Council of Refugees and Exiles: <https://ecre.org/ukraine-displacement-as-the-number-of-refugees-and-idps-pass-11-million-concerns-grow-over-vulnerable-groups-eu-allocates-17-billion-euro-in-support-civil-society-struggle-to-keep-up-with-ukrainian/> (published April 8, 2022)

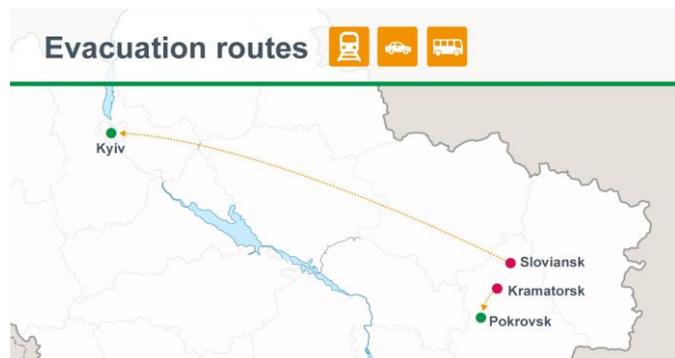
Figure 1: Estimates of internally displaced persons



Evacuation methods and routes

- 1) Evacuations are primarily made by train, private car, or bus. There are two main evacuation routes: Sloviansk-Kyiv and Kramatorsk-Pokrovsk. The railway has had a major role in the evacuation so far; in particular, the Sloviansk-Barvinkove (Kharkiv oblast) train is still running, even though Barvinkove was attacked. The bombardment of the Kramatorsk station on April 8th is far from an

Figure 2: Evacuation routes in Ukraine



isolated case and, on the contrary, marks a clear strategy of Russia delaying evacuations to hinder the military operations of the Ukrainian forces. This strategy has been amplified since the operational pause of the Russian army over the past two weeks, taking into account the precision and number of these attacks against railway stations, including at Barvinkove, Kramatorsk, Lozova, Pavlohrad (not counting intercepted missiles). The 57 deaths in the Kramatorsk train station attack have affected the evacuation efforts, both for the people willing to evacuate and the volunteers facilitating these efforts. In Kramatorsk, there were between 6 and 8 trains per day over the fortnight prior to the attack. Without the trains, the evacuation must now be done solely by road, with a maximum volume of 2,000 people per day. For evacuation of the displaced, there is a lack of drivers and vehicles but also of more centralized coordination platforms between various private initiatives and state institutions.

- 2) Buses are municipal or owned by volunteers. Networks of volunteers (individuals, micro-structures, churches, etc.) have cars or minibuses which they use for the evacuation of displaced people. For example, the Protestant Church in Sloviansk serves as a transit area for IDPs. The priests have been providing this service since 2014 with 2 or 3 minibuses (a minibus can hold 20 to 30 people) and they drive to the front in small units to evacuate people from the front towns. Resources are limited, mostly financed by individual donations. At any one time, 150 people can be accommodated in the church before being evacuated to the West. However, the increasing scarcity of available volunteers led to the closure of this particular reception center this week. The leaders of the church recognize that their initiative is not tenable if the front approaches Sloviansk.
- 3) Displaced persons are quite systematically sent to the West of Ukraine and abroad, with volunteers taking care of the displaced. In Dnipro, around twenty centers receive between 7,000 and 8,000 displaced persons per day, who generally stay for one or two nights before their departure for the West or abroad. There is no, even minimal, planning of arrivals and resettlements.



Support for remaining populations

- 1) Tens of thousands of people in the main towns across Eastern Ukraine are unwilling or unable to be evacuated. These populations are often elderly, have either no prior experience of evacuation or negative memories of it from 2014, are disabled, and/or have a lower socio-economic level. Some families return to their homes because the reception in Dnipro is not satisfactory. In Donetsk oblast, people are not used to moving around; in fact, many have never traveled and have no contacts elsewhere in Ukraine. There are also people with disabilities and chronic illnesses or who have limited mobility and have no money in reserve. A lack of awareness of aid networks and exposure to Russian misinformation may also play a role in some people choosing not to leave their homes.
- 2) In the municipalities visited, the level of preparation of the teams and their sustainability is variable. Some municipalities have already evacuated. Some cities are largely evacuated, and public servants have also left – thus, aid will be difficult to deliver there (Bakhmut, Sloviansk, Sieverodonetsk, Lysychansk, Rubizhne). However, some towns – for example Kramatorsk, Pavlohrad, and Dnipro – are largely intact with functional town halls and can serve as a base for logistical support intended for the population of these towns and for the populations closer to the front. The Ukrainian municipalities in Donbas have not collapsed and attempt to take charge of the population. The visited municipalities show different degrees of preparedness:
 - **In Sloviansk**, for example, municipal staff highlighted that not enough was done prior to the invasion. With martial law now in place, the military replaces civil servants with military personnel. 70% of the municipal administration has moved West and works remotely (such as the departments dealing with culture, sport, and pensions). In order to replace civilians, the mayor is able to recruit military personnel. Many volunteers have also left, which weakens services. Many pharmacies have closed and most doctors, nurses, and other medical personnel have left. There is no preparation of bomb shelters by municipalities and people have to fend for themselves.

- **In Kramatorsk**, the mayor only started to prepare the city on February 24th – the day Russia invaded. A colleague from Mariupol managed to travel to Kramatorsk and explained what had happened, prompting the administration to begin preparations. Now, the municipality asks the Association of Ukrainian Cities³ to send stocks of food and medicine. The municipality developed lists of people who are staying, with these lists divided by levels of vulnerability to adapt the provision of aid. The city is divided into 6 residential areas (starostas), with one representative per area who is responsible for updating the list by going door-to-door. The municipality makes one delivery per month to the homes of vulnerable people (February and March deliveries were completed, and distribution for April is in progress). There are 11 hubs to store supplies for soldiers and civilians. Across the municipality, 54 volunteers are used to unload trucks and 60 work on distribution of supplies. Part of the municipal staff remained on site: approximately 70% of the services are functioning and 70% of the administration is still there, and at least 50% will remain (they shouldn't be required to mobilized). The municipality centralizes the aid of associations and NGOs and distribute it with the help of between 200 and 300 volunteers. ATMs are generally functioning and about half of the banks are open. No new bomb shelters have been built since they were last used in 2014.
- 3) There are existing shortages of medical, food, and transport resources – with more feared. For example, before the 2022 invasion, there were 3,000 medical personnel in Kramatorsk, but only 20% of those remain. Officials claim that blood supplies are sufficient and can be resupplied from Pavlohrad, hence the importance of the Dnipro-Pavlohrad logistics axis (by road and rail). However, doctors and activists recognize that, in the event of a Russian offensive, current human and material resources will not suffice. The attack on Kramatorsk station on April 8th also showed the limits of evacuation capacities and the hospital service was overwhelmed. The municipality also dug holes for refuse to dispose of and then cover waste that cannot be picked up. Some of these holes were dug to bury the dead quickly (hopefully to be re-buried properly later), but the population was told that they were designed only for household waste.



Methodology

This report is based on a series of individual (15) and group (6) interviews conducted between 4-10 April 2022 in Lviv, Dnipro, Pavlohrad, Pokrovsk, Kramatorsk, Sloviansk, Lysychansk, and Severodonetsk. Our team interviewed on-site and displaced public servants and elected representatives working for central institutions (e.g. MPs, governor offices) and local administrative sub-divisions (e.g. mayors, municipal staff), as well as members of civil society organizations (some engaged since 2014 and others newly mobilized). Interviews are supplemented by direct observations, including of the evacuation in Severodonetsk, visits to various shelters for IDPs in Dnipro, and visits to aid distribution hubs and civil society organization centers. This is a draft report – our team is continuing fieldwork until 16 April and will launch further fieldwork in early May.

³ Association of Ukrainian Cities: <https://auc.org.ua/en>

About us

SAYARA INTERNATIONAL is a social enterprise combining rigorous research and communication to create positive change in fragile and conflict-affected societies. Sayara has evolved across unstable contexts. Our decentralized structure – with a global leadership network and investment in local talent – enables agility and rapid start-up, while equipping us with unique values and competencies.

Sayara provides complex monitoring, evaluation, research, and learning (MERL) and data-driven communication in the most challenging environments. Our work focuses on countering disinformation, fostering inclusive governance and social cohesion, and improving service delivery in emergencies.

Since 2015, Sayara has managed complex, rapid response, and multi-year projects in Eastern Europe. Sayara's regional team comprises 16 experienced full-time staff – country-level leadership and program staff and a network of over 50 trusted technical experts who work remotely or from our offices in Kyiv and Warsaw.

Figure 3: Sayara's geographic coverage in Eastern Europe (April 2022)



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