

Managing humanitarian narratives in the Ukraine crisis response

Virtual roundtable, 26 May 2022

John Bryant, Patrick Saez and Sarah Redd

June 2022

Key messages

Resilience and solidarity are the dominant narratives among those affected in Ukraine, with the conflict's existential nature enabling a whole-of-society response.

The international humanitarian sector is playing a relatively marginal role in Ukraine. There is tension between the enormous levels of international funding for humanitarian aid and the limited operational need and/or space for many international organisations to actually deliver assistance.

Russian aggression and violations of International Humanitarian Law are a reality, and strident commitments to 'humanitarian neutrality' that do not acknowledge facts risk being interpreted as tacit complicity.

The war in Ukraine has had a direct impact on global food insecurity, so there was a missed opportunity to use money raised for Ukraine to help the conflict's 'secondary victims', including in the Horn of Africa. For many, the contrasting responses to occupation or refugee protection are emblematic of 'Western' hypocrisy.

Humanitarian organisations, donors and the media should better represent the Ukrainian-led response. International actors should be honest about the scope of their own role and funding requirements; nuance how they communicate about neutrality, while proactively rejecting harmful narratives; and build on progressive policies in response to this war to advocate for more equal responses to other pressing humanitarian crises.

Acknowledgements

About the authors

John Bryant is Senior Research Officer in the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG).

@John_Bryant

Patrick Saez is Senior Research Fellow and Policy Lead in HPG.

@PatrickSaez2

Sarah Redd is Policy and Communications Advisor in HPG.

@SarahRedd11

Readers are encouraged to reproduce material for their own publications, as long as they are not being sold commercially. ODI requests due acknowledgement and a copy of the publication. For online use, we ask readers to link to the original resource on the ODI website. The views presented in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of ODI or our partners.

This work is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.

How to cite: Bryant, J., Saez, P. and Redd, S. (2022) 'Managing humanitarian narratives in the Ukraine crisis response: virtual roundtable, 26 May 2022'. HPG roundtable note. London: ODI (<https://odi.org/en/publications/managing-humanitarian-narratives-in-the-ukraine-crisis-response-virtual-roundtable-26-may-2022>).

This PDF has been prepared in accordance with good practice on accessibility.

Purpose of the note

This note summarises the findings of a private online roundtable held by the Humanitarian Policy Group at ODI with support from the British Red Cross on 26 May 2022. Participants comprised senior staff from key donor governments, international humanitarian organisations operating in Ukraine, and independent journalists covering the conflict.

The discussion sought to understand the humanitarian narratives that are unfolding in the Russia-Ukraine crisis and how those narratives are impacting different approaches to the response and relationships between a variety of actors, and what influence the narratives have on the effectiveness of the response. Participants also shared ideas on what humanitarian organisations can do to influence narratives to maximise their positive effects.

Background

Russia's invasion of Ukraine began in 2014 in the eastern Donbas region and the Crimean Peninsula, but dramatically escalated in 2022 across the country. Yet the rapid Russian victory that was widely predicted has not come to pass, and the conflict instead looks set to become far more protracted. The government and population of Ukraine understands that the invasion presents an existential risk to the future of the country, and has mobilised a whole-of-society response. Civil society – including groups formerly critical of the Ukrainian government – have supported the war effort, rehoming the displaced and meeting the needs of those affected. The dominant narratives within Ukraine are of resilience in the face of Russian aggression, and solidarity with other countries providing diplomatic and military aid.

In contrast, the international humanitarian sector has notably had a relatively marginal role in the response; it does not usually appear in Ukrainian narratives. Attempts to evacuate those besieged in Mariupol aside, international actors have so far not taken a leading role in service provision and advocacy – at least from the perspective of many Ukrainians. A sense of 'solidarity' with humanitarian responders within Ukraine has been hindered by the early withdrawal out or to the west of the country of many large humanitarian organisations in the opening phases of the conflict. In addition, high-profile international fundraising appeals like the United Nations Flash Appeals contained almost nothing for local organisations. More importantly perhaps is the perceived irrelevance for many of notions of 'humanitarian neutrality' in the face of a war of aggression.

Neutrality in the Russia-Ukraine war

Humanitarian organisations advocating for neutral and impartial assistance have so far found Ukraine a challenging context. With Russian aggression and violations of International Humanitarian Law, many see a strident approach to neutrality as concerningly close to a tacit complicity with such actions. While this is far from a new accusation for organisations like the Red Cross movement, such debates have been made more prominent following reactions to the photos of a senior delegation of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) meeting the Russian government – including Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov – in Moscow to discuss humanitarian access (ICRC, 2022). While the Red Cross and others argue such engagement is essential for facilitating access to those in need, hostility to these actions have a real-world impact for humanitarian organisations across the country, in the form of direct threats to staff, access constraints and loss of reputation.

Although refraining from publicly denouncing individual parties to conflict is an established modus operandi for the ICRC, it seems to have pervaded the wider sector. For instance, international non-governmental organisations issued a letter in April calling on ‘all parties’ to refrain from targeting civilians and civilian infrastructure (DRC, 2022).

Funding for the international response

Constrained access, and limited operational space more broadly, is especially problematic in this response considering the enormous levels of funding provided. For example, ‘the United Kingdom’s public emergency appeal from the Disasters Emergency Committee ... has attracted more funding for Ukraine than all previous nine appeals combined’ (Saez, 2022). While this, along with examples such as the enthusiastic response to the ‘Homes for Ukraine’ scheme in the UK, demonstrates a strong sense of solidarity among donor publics, there is a risk of frustration if humanitarian organisations cannot deliver assistance on such a scale. (There are also concerning similarities to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the response for which received high levels of initial funding but which needed better sequencing to be spent effectively.) This highlights the continued inability or unwillingness of many international humanitarian organisations to fund the Ukrainian organisations best placed to deliver assistance rather than through their traditional model of direct assistance.

This tension is especially pronounced considering the global humanitarian response to concurrent food security crises, all of which have been exacerbated by the war’s impact on rising global prices. There are other direct and indirect impacts, such as the World Food Programme losing access to the 40% of its wheat that it had previously purchased from Ukraine (Hegarty, 2022). There was a missed opportunity by humanitarian organisations to frame a narrative of

needing to help those most affected globally by the secondary impacts of the conflict on food insecurity – including in the Horn of Africa where that impact is compounding the effect of repeated rain failures – with funding raised for this crisis. More widely, the discrepancy between Ukraine (where potentially more money can be spent) and contexts such as Yemen, the Horn of Africa and Afghanistan (where funding falls short of meeting needs) is a valid source of frustration for many across the world. The perceived hypocrisy of many Western countries in propagating narratives of Russian aggression, while failing to condemn other aggressions and occupations, has not gone unnoticed by other countries and populations in conflict.

Russian vs. Western narratives

Narratives of the conflict and its humanitarian response are increasingly polarised globally, no more so than in Russia, where state media has framed the conflict domestically as being part of a larger clash with the United States-led Western world. Yet a simple binary choice of a ‘Russian’ versus ‘Western’ narrative often neglects the Ukrainian voices at the centre of the war. With the bulk of frontline response capacity taken up with meeting urgent needs, there is a risk that local voices will be left out of any humanitarian ‘narratives’ established this early into the conflict.

Influencing and managing humanitarian narratives to maximise positive effects

As narrative-setters, humanitarian organisations, donors and the media should work collectively to better understand relevant narratives in Ukraine, Russia and the West and agree ways to manage them effectively.

Much needs to be done to better represent the extraordinary levels of mutual solidarity in Ukraine and the region, and to provide platforms for the voices of affected Ukrainians and local organisations to be heard. Direct engagement between the latter and decision-makers in Western capitals, including senior government officials and ministers, should be the norm. This should be facilitated, not hindered, by international humanitarian agencies, including by supporting rather than undercutting national systems and local responders.

International humanitarian organisations should reflect on how they define and communicate about neutrality. Partly in response to criticism, some humanitarian organisations are beginning to adopt more nuanced narratives, ones that acknowledge Russia’s responsibility while remaining committed to delivering assistance according to humanitarian principles.

6 HPG roundtable learning note

At the same time, humanitarian organisations that remain neutral to gain access to certain areas, and which successfully gain such access, should be collectively supported when faced with public attacks in the media or on social media. Harmful narratives should be monitored and responded to in real time. To help this, donors should refrain from conflating humanitarian aid to Ukraine with diplomatic and military support.

Humanitarian organisations, donors and the media should actively manage Ukraine-related narratives in the context of other humanitarian crises around the world. Fundraisers have a specific responsibility to avoid ‘maximalist’ narratives and to be honest about the relative funding requirements.

The extraordinary levels of solidarity with Ukrainians should be harnessed to fundraise for other crises. Additionally, the national, regional and international response to this crisis should be used to demonstrate that when political will exists, international commitments such as those made in the Global Refugee Compact are straightforward to implement for refugees fleeing other conflicts.

Bibliography

- DRC – Danish Refugee Council** (2022) ‘Ukraine: I/NGO statement on the targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure’. Webpage. DRC, 11 April (www.drc.ngo/about-us/for-the-media/press-releases/2022/4/ukraine-i-ngo-statement-on-the-targeting-of-civilians-and-civilian-infrastructure/).
- Hegarty, S.** (2022) ‘How can Ukraine export its harvest to the world?’ Webpage. BBC, 26 May (www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-61583492).
- Hyde, L.** (2022) ‘Evacuation challenges and bad optics: why Ukrainians are losing faith in the ICRC’. Webpage. The New Humanitarian, 3 May (www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2022/05/03/the-icrc-and-the-pitfalls-of-neutrality-in-ukraine).
- ICRC – International Committee of the Red Cross** (2022) ‘ICRC President completes visit to Russia to speak about humanitarian issues in armed conflict’. News release, 24 March (www.icrc.org/en/document/icrc-president-completes-visit-russia-speak-about-humanitarian-issues-armed-conflict).
- Saez, P.** (2022) ‘Navigating humanitarian dilemmas in the Ukraine crisis’. HPG emerging analysis. London: ODI (<https://odi.org/en/publications/navigating-humanitarian-dilemmas-in-the-ukraine-crisis/>).
- Saez, P. and Bryant, J.** (2022) ‘Two ways the humanitarian system should harness global solidarity with Ukraine’. ODI Insight, 3 March (<https://odi.org/en/insights/two-ways-the-humanitarian-system-should-harness-global-solidarity-with-ukraine/>).



The Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) is one of the world's leading teams of independent researchers and communications professionals working on humanitarian issues. It is dedicated to improving humanitarian policy and practice through a combination of high-quality analysis, dialogue and debate.

Humanitarian Policy Group

ODI
203 Blackfriars Road
London SE1 8NJ
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0) 20 7922 0300
Fax: +44 (0) 20 7922 0399
Email: hpgadmin@odi.org
Website: odi.org/hpg
