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Donations worth millions fail to reach Ukraine - sparking calls for change

Monday 3 October 2022, by [COSTA-KOSTRITSKY Valeria](#) (Date first published: 20 September 2022).

Aid delays have exposed a deep power imbalance between Ukrainians and the international actors claiming to help them.

Millions of pounds raised for Ukrainians following Russia's invasion have not yet been given to those in need, charities have warned.

In a [recent open letter](#), Ukrainian community organisations cited excessive bureaucracy within international organisations as one of the main obstacles preventing the donations from reaching communities and volunteers in the country.

Georgian activist [Nino Ugrekhelidze](#), who has been supporting Ukrainian organisations since the war began, told openDemocracy how the letter came about.

"This network of communities and organisations got together to reflect on how [international] philanthropy and humanitarian organisations have been responding to this war," she said.

"And they concluded [the response] has been horrible, or, to use another adjective, insensitive."

According to Ugrekhelidze, aid is still not reaching Ukraine. "International humanitarian help has really struggled to access Ukraine and particularly eastern Ukraine," she said.

Bureaucracy stops aid

Darya Rybalchenko heads the board of Ukraine's [National Network of Local Philanthropy Development](#), which has been raising funds for its emergency response to the crisis.

She told openDemocracy that any discussion with a Western donor or an international NGO requires her organisation to produce an enormous amount of paperwork before funding for a specific project can even be discussed.

Rybalchenko points to work in Voznesensk, a city in Ukraine's southern Mykolaiv region, not far from the frontline. On 20 August, Russian [strikes](#) caused some damage in the city. On the same day, Rybalchenko's organisation wrote to the [International Organization for Migration](#) (IOM), a UN agency, to say that 22 apartments and 36 houses had been damaged and to ask if they could provide temporary repairs to the damaged houses.

On its website, the IOM says: "The International Organization for Migration (IOM) is mobilising teams and boosting capacity in Ukraine and neighbouring countries to respond to the growing humanitarian needs of Ukrainians forced to flee the country, those internally displaced, and stranded third-country nationals."

At the time of writing, Rybalchenko had received one phone call from IOM but no reply to her request.

“I still don’t know whether [IOM] can support us... It has [since] started raining in our country. Houses will be further damaged because of this long reaction time,” Rybalchenko said. “[International organisations] could provide local organisations with funding without this long process and we would avoid delays.”

Voznesensk endured another strike on 9 September, this time targeting agricultural facilities.

IOM didn’t respond to openDemocracy’s request for comment.

In June, Varvara Pakhomenko, an expert on international aid, [told openDemocracy](#) that there is an increasing understanding within the development community that in times of crisis, international actors should acknowledge that the most important thing is to deliver funding to those in need, even if some of the money is not used for its intended purpose.

This recent letter suggests little progress has been made in this direction.

For Ugrekhelidze, the demands that international NGOs and UN institutions have placed on local Ukrainian organisations in recent months have been completely unrealistic. She claimed many have requested to see reports on Ukrainian organisations’ activities for the past five years – despite some organisations being unable to access their offices.

A white saviour complex?

According to the open letter, a significant amount of funding secured by international NGOs is currently being used to “[build capacity](#)” within Ukrainian organisations – to improve skills and systems within the organisations, often via training. The letter argues that this is counter-productive.

We asked signatories what ‘capacity-building’ actually entailed. Rybalchenko said: “It means that an [international] organisation allocates a lot of resources to make sure that a local organisation will adopt its model.

“The Red Cross operates a centralised office in Kyiv, and it wants all local medical organisations [that it funds] to adopt and implement Red Cross medical standards. If they do this, the [Red Cross] office will give them money to run their projects. We don’t need money to be taught how to go through typical European procedures, or [use] typical European organisational models. We need money to run our own projects and to be heard.”

The Red Cross didn’t respond to openDemocracy’s request for comment.

The demands placed by Western donors and NGOs on Ukrainian organisations might also reveal a specific power dynamic.

“International humanitarian organisations don’t really support the localisation that they talk so much about. That never happens,” said Ugrekhelidze. “It seems they never trust local organisations that have been working there before a crisis.”

For Ugrekhelidze, a Georgian who worked with women and community organisations after the start of the 2008 Russian-Georgian war, the current dynamics around power and financial support in Ukraine, in which “international NGOs and UN agencies come in and sideline local organisers” feel

familiar.

“Regardless of what the war or the crisis is, you always get white people from the Global North coming and telling you that this is how you should respond. And you know how you should respond, because you’ve been doing it for decades,” Ugrekheldidze said.

“But [international organisations] have resources. And there’s always a clash between international organisations coming in with their own agendas and local organisers, who know their communities.”

Not neutral

Another sore point for many Ukrainian organisations is neutrality, a key principle for many international organisations.

This dictates that humanitarian aid must not favour any side in an armed conflict and must be provided solely on the basis of need.

Karolina Soliar, head of communications at Ukraine’s National Network for Philanthropy Development, said: “Many international organisations can’t supply weapons by law, but they also don’t want to supply anything that goes to the army.

“In my view, this means they are putting an equals sign between the Ukrainian army and the Russian army, which I don’t think is right.”

Local organisations worry that the wider context – and the fact that it was Russia that launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine last February – might be forgotten.

However, some see value in certain rules from international donor organisations.

Independent activist and consultant Almut Rochowanski, who has been working with grassroots activists across Ukraine since 2015, explained that in all humanitarian crises and armed conflicts there are hierarchies of need, which determine which groups get more of the resources. And in these hierarchies, Rochowanski says, “the military is always on top”.

“This has been internalised in Ukraine for a long time,” she said. “Grassroots activists told me years ago that raising money for the army was easy, but for everything else – women, the elderly, children, victims of gender-based violence and so on – it was much, much harder. But they also feel a moral pressure, both external and internal, to give what little money they can raise to the military.

“In fact, I know they feel this pressure right now; they have been telling me. So when there are clear rules from their donors that they must spend the donated funds on civilian needs, it’s quite a relief to them.”

Six months into the war, Ukrainians have had to shift from emergency response to envisioning the mid-term and long-term future. Those who are involved in the humanitarian response to the war are getting tired, and the inadequate response of the international community is a further hindrance.

“Our resources are limited, very limited. We can’t wait for responses to grant applications for three months, because everything changes in Ukraine in the space of three months. We don’t know what things will be like in three months’ time,” Rybalchenko said.

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