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THE DIASPORA RESPONSE TO WAR IN UKRAINE

by Diana Hincu

Since the escalation of war in Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Ukrainian diaspora members worldwide have responded with an outpouring of grief and solidarity to pragmatically assist fellow nationals in distress and advocate for an end to the conflict. This article focuses on the immediate response of Ukrainians abroad following Russia’s invasion in late February 2022, which triggered a fresh surge of diasporic activities that has been unique in scale and creativity, displaying new ways of engagement.

The role of the diaspora in supporting the development of countries of origin as well as citizens fleeing and migrating more broadly has been increasingly recognised at the policy level. Already in the [EU Integration Action Plan 2021-2027](#), the European Commission acknowledged the critical role of diaspora actors in facilitating the inclusion of new arrivals in destination countries. Indeed, the diaspora often forms the bridge between migrants and emergency actors and “speaks the language of aid and the language of need,” as highlighted in findings on diaspora emergency response from the ICMPD project [Migrants in Countries in Crisis](#). Furthermore, diasporas can contribute at all phases of the crisis cycle: mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery.

On 21 March 2022, the Commission adopted [new guidelines](#) to support the implementation of the Temporary Protection Directive in relation to the mass influx of displaced persons from Ukraine. These guidelines capitalise on diaspora involvement, namely in the provision of information, assistance in labour market orientation and acceleration of entrepreneurship and mentorship activities. These roles are detailed in an EU Global Diaspora Facility study on [diaspora engagement in times of crisis](#), which revealed the substantial response of the Ukrainian diaspora during the regional conflict that broke out in eastern Ukraine in 2014.

Learning from previous crises

The 2014 conflict was of significant proportions, especially given the European historical context, affecting some 3.5 million people. However, the latest expansion of the conflict has thus far affected four times more people than the 2014 crisis. At the end of May 2022, UNHCR estimated that approximately [7 million people](#) had crossed international borders in search of

safety abroad, while IOM reported earlier that month that more than 8 million have been internally displaced in Ukraine.

Since the first weeks of the Russo-Ukrainian War, migrant-led organisations and diaspora members have reacted speedily in a myriad of ways, providing communication support, financial and in-kind aid and volunteers. It is not the first time that the Ukrainian diaspora has rallied so fervently in response to events in their homeland.

For the past decade, the Government of Ukraine has focused its diaspora engagement efforts on the protection of migrants' rights and repatriation programmes. Following the Euromaidan revolution and the subsequent conflict in 2013-2014, the Ukrainian diaspora pursued humanitarian relief efforts and a range of different mobilisation strategies, such as organising community solidarity events. These have included transnational activities.

For the Ukrainian diaspora, both in groups and individually, the memories of the 2014 crisis provided lessons learned and a call to action. Moreover, the strong response they demonstrated during the COVID-19 crisis has empowered them with the experience of providing remote support and designing adaptive strategies. As a result, Ukrainian diaspora communities have not only grown in size over recent years – the recent exodus notwithstanding, the Ukrainian diaspora worldwide is put at around 6 million, with 20% residing in the EU – they have also become better organised.

A strong and timely response

Since the outbreak of the expanded conflict, the Government of Ukraine has shown itself increasingly aware of the dividends of Ukrainian diaspora engagement – and of its soft power in the international arena. In addition to leveraging financial resources and direct donations (collected with tremendous speed), members of Ukrainian communities abroad have been engaging in multiple non-financial forms of diaspora capital, contributing their social, political and intellectual capital. Some have also returned to the country to take up arms in support of the military effort (over 66,000 Ukrainian men returned in the first two weeks alone).

Indeed, recent months have seen the political engagement of Ukrainian diaspora communities grow at a record rate. Diaspora leaders and networks across the globe have become highly vocal, with far-reaching political protests against the Russian invasion, official letters and

petitions to Ukrainian and international politicians, awareness marches and picketing of diplomatic missions.

Advocacy efforts have also led to the creation of new platforms aimed at responding to the crisis in a more centralised and accountable manner. An apt example is the inauguration of a Ukrainian Hub at the Station Europe Building of the European Parliament in March 2022, initiated by Promote Ukraine, a Ukrainian professional network active in the EU.

Since the very first days of the war, diaspora actors have leveraged their social connections and capital to raise money for humanitarian relief and military support. They have also made extensive use of social media to counter Russian misinformation amid the ongoing informational war that is taking place beyond the physical battlespace. Social cohesion has notably manifested in areas such as health, food security, emergency shelter and education, as encapsulated in the Humanitarian Response Ukraine Map gathered by Diaspora Emergency Action and Coordination (DEMAC).

For their part, diaspora professionals have teamed up with international and private actors to generate employment for Ukrainians. A new form of technology-driven response are the platforms targeting in-demand skills in the freelance job market. Initiatives such as support for Ukraine-based freelancers on the Upwork platform, Ukrainian business incubator, and the Jobs for Ukraine campaign bringing Ukrainian talent into contact with Belgian companies underline the diaspora's pioneering role in finding jobs for their newly displaced compatriots.

The Ukrainian diaspora in Moldova

Throughout Europe, local Ukrainian communities are playing a fundamental role in the reception of those fleeing the war, including in neighbouring Poland, Romania, Hungary, Moldova and Slovakia. The unique position of the diaspora to contribute to crisis management is even more recognised in countries where there is the need for a more guided response. At the time of writing, the number of people crossing into Moldova is approaching the half million mark, despite being one of Europe's smallest and poorest countries. Moldova now has the largest proportion of Ukrainian refugees per capita, which is putting tremendous strain on the country's social services. Reinforced solidarity is needed, as highlighted in the European Council 10-Point Plan.

In the case of Moldova, diaspora-led collaboration – prior to the current conflict, the country boasted a Ukrainian diaspora over 325,000-strong – has been quite complex. Here are some of the notable aspects of the Ukrainian diaspora response in Moldova:

- **Early response** marked by immediacy, rapidity and reduced focus on formal engagement. For instance, just a few days after the invasion, a joint initiative of Ukrainian diaspora communities in Moldova created the Ukrainian Refugee Centre Moldova, which has helped 1,300 people to date. Dmitry Lekartsev, Executive Director of the National Congress, praised in an interview the social cohesion shown by all actors in coping with the crisis:
“We created the Centre in two days and built a mobile team able to coordinate the help and manage the humanitarian relief. We learned by doing. I have to say I never witnessed such cohesion in Moldova.”
- **Access to vulnerable groups**, facilitated by diaspora groups and local associations. The National Congress of Ukrainians joined forces with the Community of Ukrainian Women in Moldova and used their network to assist the evacuation of people with disabilities from Ukraine (and onward movement to Germany). This cooperation has helped over 350 people with special needs since the beginning of the latest era of hostilities in Ukraine.
- **Provision of first-hand crisis information and contextual knowledge**, as the diaspora is connected locally and has a command of the local language. Individuals from the Ukrainian diaspora partnered with the volunteer group ‘Moldova for Peace’ working under the auspices of the Moldovan Government. The collaboration has helped greatly to consolidate the state platform for support, which has already benefited 17,000 people. Here, the diaspora acts as liaison to pinpoint the specific needs prevailing and underpin the humanitarian aid effort through crowdfunding, translation services, charity concerts, etc.
- **Youth mobilisation for crisis management** has seen young leaders join diaspora members in Moldova to provide information and other support at the refugee centre, while amplifying the call for more synergy and solidarity. Youth diaspora and influencers can help to build rapid networks, especially on social media, vital assets in times of resource mobilisation.

- **Fostering of trust and credibility**, with the Association of Ukrainian Youth in Moldova among those organisations launching fundraising drives and leveraging its connections to rally support for the Ukrainian cause, collaborating with the Solidarity Fund of Poland to open the refugee centre in the Moldovan capital, Chisinau. The presence of pre-existing relationships with other stakeholders is highly useful in times of crisis, enabling diaspora members to work collaboratively in their response.

What next for the Ukrainian diaspora?

Despite all that has been done, many Ukrainian diaspora actors are still facing barriers and challenges – related to trust, accountability, responding to events through an ad hoc approach, informality and limited information sharing with humanitarian actors. As has been repeatedly recommended by multiple humanitarian actors, connecting diaspora groups to the Clusters System would aid efforts by UN agencies to respond effectively. The Cluster Approach is meant to strengthen system-wide preparedness and technical capacity to respond to humanitarian emergencies, and to provide clear leadership and accountability in the main areas of humanitarian response.

At the Global Diaspora Summit 2022, international actors provided preliminary recommendations on how to further leverage the important resource that is the diaspora. Some members of the confederation asked for more guidance, greater coordination and more capacity development on humanitarian principles and communication skills to address affected vulnerable groups. Others, on the contrary, do not self-identify as diaspora entities, preferring to remain as informal grassroots groupings that act in a temporary capacity, rallying around critical situations.

Despite facing many challenges, Ukrainian diaspora groups and individuals have shown immense capacity for community mobilisation, as well as commendable managerial courage and interpersonal skills in facilitating community responses. Such groups are also paving the way toward new and creative solutions to respond to the rapidly evolving situation – in a way that is sustainable.

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