

Protection of civilians

Ukraine briefings

Briefing 2/4



About this series

▲ Photo: Alina Smutko/PAX

Between May-September 2024, the PAX Protection of Civilians (PoC) program conducted desktop research on the main causes of civilian harm in the Ukraine war, as well as on efforts by a range of Ukrainian actors to seek to mitigate and address some of that harm. This research was complemented by Key Informant Interviews, our team's own field experience, and the work of PAX's Ukraine program more broadly. **The result is an analysis of protection-related challenges, best practices, and lessons identified from the war in Ukraine that can help inform the scaling of states' CHM – or broader PoC – roles, capabilities, and activities in the event of LSCO.** This is especially relevant as the complexity and intensity of military operations in Ukraine has resulted in specific protection needs and challenges that may not have been encountered or considered with sufficient depth before. This series introduces several shorter briefings that explore the research's key takeaways (briefing 1) as well as important insights regarding specific topics, such as evacuations, protection challenges related to civilian resistance efforts, and the organization of civilian harm response efforts (briefings 2, 3, and 4).

Protecting civilians through evacuations: Ukraine

5 February 2025

Since Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, the complexity and intensity of military operations in Ukraine have resulted in protection challenges rarely seen at such magnitude. The resulting devastation of civilian lives and livelihoods pose important questions about the existing conceptualizations of civilian harm mitigation (CHM) – sometimes also referred to as Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response (CHMR) – and Protection of Civilians (PoC) when applied to large-scale combat operations (LSCO). This briefing considers (preparedness for) large-scale civilian **evacuations** as an important means to protect civilians from harm. It reflects on **lessons, challenges, and good practices** as seen in Ukraine in order to explore how evacuations can contribute to PoC – particularly in the context of LSCO – and what role the military can fulfil therein.

Evacuations as a means to protect civilians

In times of armed conflict, evacuations can be an important means of protecting civilians from harm. Evacuations are here understood as “arrangements to remove people protected by [International Humanitarian Law] from locations where they are insecure, either because they face risks from military operations or because they cannot access adequate food, water and other basic goods and services” to other, safer locations, as per [Chatham House](#). If properly executed, evacuations can reduce the risk of civilian harm from own operations and help minimize the risk of civilian harm caused by others. In Ukraine, for instance, civilians in frontline areas who had not evacuated were at risk of considerable harm from the Russian Armed Forces (RAF), which [besieged](#) cities like Mariupol, leaving the local population there without access to basic needs and at risk of starvation. The RAF has further used civilians as [human shields](#), and has been linked to [enforced disappearances and targeted killings](#). It is therefore not unsurprising that many interviewees in our research brought up evacuations as possibly “the best way to protect civilians” during this war. Successful evacuations can further result in more

tactical options being available to the armed forces during conflict, which may indirectly benefit the protection of civilians.

However, evacuations are often **framed** as a 'last resort' option given the security, logistical, and ethical challenges that they expose. It is important to recognize that evacuations typically **introduce** new harm and protection risks, by uprooting people from their lives and communities, contributing to psychological trauma, and exposing people to increased risk of protracted displacement, human trafficking, or sexual exploitation. Other risks relate to the possibility of deliberate targeting of evacuees or evacuation gathering points. As such, evacuations should be seen as a strategic decision with potentially long-lasting reverberating effects, which should therefore be considered **as a last resort**. Additionally, it is crucial that preparedness for evacuations also encompass sufficient **post-evacuation support**.

Evacuations and the military

By removing civilians from at-risk areas and so decreasing the risk of 'collateral damage', evacuations can significantly enhance military freedom of movement, particularly in LSCO where mass movement of civilians can be expected, and can increase the tactical and materiel options available to the military. In the absence of planned evacuations, many civilians are further likely to seek to move themselves ('autonomous evacuations'), which may increase the risk of people ending up in harm's way as their movements become more unpredictable to those forces seeking to protect them. The military can also play an important role in facilitating evacuations, although this should be approached with caution, as using military assets for humanitarian purposes is typically approached as a last resort option due to **associated risks**: military accompaniment of evacuations can put civilians at increased risk of targeting and it can negatively affect the perceived neutrality of humanitarian actors, regardless of whether or not they are directly involved in the organization or execution of evacuations.

While the role of the military is thus often limited to **helping create a secure environment** to enable humanitarian action, for instance through redeploying air defense assets to protect evacuation routes, it may be that in certain circumstances military forces are the **only actor** able to undertake an evacuation. **UN OCHA**, in its *Civil-Military Guidelines for Complex Emergencies*, proposed that more active involvement of the military can be considered where it concerns an **urgent task**, which is **limited in time**, and where the military provides **unique capability**. Overall, it is important that militaries prepare for their potential role in evacuations through dedicated pre-crisis planning and exercises, including attention specifically for coordination and information-sharing practices.

Evacuations in Ukraine

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, evacuations have taken place across the country and throughout different phases of the war. Most large-scale evacuations occurred in the first weeks and months following the invasion and predominantly in Ukraine's border areas with Russia and Belarus, or in the direct vicinity of areas of active combat, such as large parts of Kyiv, Chernihiv, Sumy, Kharkiv, Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, Dnipro, Kherson, and Mykolaiv Oblasts. By May 2022, **IOM** had recorded a peak of 8 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) within Ukraine, as well as 5.7 million people who had fled to other countries. While these numbers do not distinguish between those who fled of their own accord and those who took part in officially organized evacuations, the numbers demonstrate that large-scale population movements occurred in the first few months of the full-scale

war. Ukrainian Railways alone **reported** evacuating 4 million people to safer areas by train during the first year of the full-scale war. As of late 2024, recent Russian advances on cities like Pokrovsk are leading to a **resurgence** in evacuation needs.

Types of evacuations in Ukraine

Two types of evacuations can be distinguished in Ukraine: government-led and civilian-led evacuations. In the case of the former, Ukrainian authorities – in the case of an emergency situation – organize for the large-scale removal of civilians. This always occurs on a voluntary basis, however, and people have the right to sign a waiver and refuse to evacuate. During such evacuations, the authorities often provide means of transport, although humanitarian actors may be engaged where there are insufficient means. Civilian-led evacuations may occur, for instance, when civilians independently request NGOs or volunteers to help them leave dangerous areas.

Evacuations in Ukraine are typically organized and conducted by (local) authorities, NGOs, and volunteers. The AFU fulfil a more supporting role and may be involved to the extent that it coordinates with other stakeholders to minimize the risk of civilian harm through ‘friendly fire’ or – in more exceptional cases – to carry out the evacuations itself when civilians are trapped in especially dangerous and hard-to-reach areas.

Several interviewees from among the AFU and Ukrainian civil society shared their perception that many direct civilian casualties at the beginning of the full-scale war may have been prevented had there been better preparedness for large-scale evacuations. At the start of Russia’s renewed invasion, some local authorities **underestimated** the speed of the RAF advance, for instance. Other interviewees from among local government and the AFU shared that some communities had prepared for different scenarios, or faltered in the execution of evacuations due to limited coordination among different stakeholders. The effectiveness of evacuations was also heavily undermined by RAF actions, which frequently **denied** safe passage to civilians or – apparently deliberately – targeted large groups of civilians as they sought to evacuate, such as in April 2022 when an RAF attack on **Kramatorsk train station** resulted in at least 58 civilian deaths.

After the full-scale war’s first months and especially following Ukraine’s liberation of the Kyiv, Sumy, and Chernihiv Oblasts, the planning and coordination of evacuations of frontline communities became more organized. An interviewee involved in such evacuations indicated that these became easier to prepare and execute as front lines became more static and predictable. Evacuations were also increasingly about removing just one or two at-risk frontline communities to safer areas, contributing positively to their timeliness and safety. The decreased scale further allowed for more targeted support for vulnerable civilians and for more attention to the needs and wishes of the population. Evacuations also improved through a number of concrete policy steps (see ‘good practices’ below), lauded by various interviewees from among local government.

Challenges faced by Ukraine

Varying levels of preparedness for evacuations

In Ukraine, the effectiveness and success of evacuations has varied across communities and administrative regions, particularly in the first months of the full-scale war. An important contributing factor was that, prior to February 2022, the development of evacuation plans was not centrally enforced. As a result, the existence and quality of local evacuation plans varied widely. Combined with surprise over the speed of the RAF’s advance, some communities were slow to evacuate or did so chaotically. Often, this came at the expense of more **vulnerable groups** in society.

In other cases, notably in Bucha and Mariupol, civilians trusted their local authorities who assured them that they would be protected and that there was no need to evacuate. Finally, evacuations are complex processes that can involve a variety of governmental, humanitarian, and military stakeholders. Especially during the beginning of the full-scale war, there were not always clear mechanisms in place for information sharing and coordination between these different actors, impeding overall efficiency.

RAF targeting and obstructionism

An immense complicating factor in the organization of safe evacuations in Ukraine has been apparently deliberate targeting by the RAF of evacuees and evacuation gathering points, and a lack of willingness to agree to green corridors. The latter has also meant that civilians seeking to escape dangerous areas were sometimes left with no other option but to travel through Russian-controlled territories, Belarus, or areas of active combat, all of which came with significant protection risks.

Remaining populations

In every armed conflict, there will be civilians who choose to remain amid dangerous circumstances rather than evacuating to safer, but often unfamiliar places. Ukraine has been no exception, and the majority of our interviewees stressed this as a main protection challenge. Particularly in rural areas and among elderly populations, people are often unwilling to evacuate and leave behind everything they have known their whole lives. This is exacerbated by information operations by Russia-affiliated actors. Those directly involved in organizing evacuations shared that disinformation about the Ukrainian conscription process as well as the supposedly bad treatment of Russian-speaking Ukrainians in other parts of the country contributed to an unwillingness to evacuate among certain segments of the population. This leaves people at increased risk of harm and the AFU with less freedom of movement. Importantly, it should be noted that decisions to stay do not forfeit the protected status civilians enjoy during armed conflict, nor does it automatically indicate that those who remain behind are supportive of the adversary.

Post-evacuation support and needs

Related to the previous point, many interviewees stressed that lack of clarity on existing post-evacuation support mechanisms and programs is an important reason why some civilians choose not to evacuate. While Ukraine has set up various support schemes for IDPs, for instance related to employment, several Ukrainian civil society representatives argued that these programs fall short of meeting people's actual needs. Accommodation arranged for IDPs is also not always designed for long-term stay, lacking privacy, or is unsuitable for people with specific needs. Reportedly, this has led to situations where some IDPs returned to their original communities, telling others that they could not find suitable jobs or accommodation in the areas of relocation. The relative density of humanitarian aid availability near the front lines also created a dilemma as it makes some people wary of leaving that aid behind, while also leading to aid shortages in western Ukraine where many IDPs have ended up, according to interviewees from leading Ukrainian civil society organizations.

Good practices established by Ukraine

Increased evacuation guidance and coordination

Despite initial challenges, Ukraine quickly adapted to the demands of the new situation following Russia's full-scale invasion, among others by **establishing** the 'Coordination Headquarters for the Mandatory Evacuation of the Population under Martial Law'. This body advises the government and coordinates with various relevant stakeholders, including local authorities, military units, and civil society organizations. Several oblast authorities confirmed that this significantly improved evacuation processes. The new guidelines more clearly define the tasks and responsibilities of the various authorities: local (sub-oblast) authorities are in touch with and have detailed information about the civilians in their community requiring evacuation support, while oblast authorities help coordinate between different local authorities and with other oblasts to provide support with finding proper housing and other assistance for the evacuees. It is further of note that Ukraine shows that early and effective cooperation with transportation authorities like Ukrainian Railways can be vital to the effectiveness of the evacuation process.

Adaptations to decrease targeting risks

Amidst ongoing risks of RAF targeting of evacuees, local authorities involved in the organization of evacuations have launched various adaptive measures to increase civilians' security and protection. Such measures include the organization of more frequent but smaller evacuations to spread the risk and reduce the visibility of such operations; announcing evacuations with less time in advance or through less public channels; and the installation of mobile shelters in locations where people gather ahead of evacuations.

Novel ways to convince people to leave at-risk areas

Various stakeholders involved in evacuations have shown themselves to be similarly adaptive in seeking to convince people to leave dangerous areas. This includes providing people with accessible information on what they can expect once they have evacuated; picking people up from their home addresses if they have trouble reaching official gathering points; using videos with messages from relatives who urge those who have stayed behind to evacuate; and sometimes by also facilitating that smaller pets can be taken along. Research in Ukraine **demonstrated** that official evacuation prompts are more effective when accompanied by an evacuation plan that includes concrete information on the time and means of evacuation. It is also of note that some NGOs have begun carrying out **evacuation exercises** with Ukrainian communities to increase preparedness – and thereby potentially also willingness – for evacuations should these become necessary. Finally, (sub-)oblast authorities have also been pioneering new forms of support to take away some hesitations among potential evacuees. For instance, one local authority shared with PAX their initiative to evacuate entire streets together so that people would retain their social network even in a new environment.

Sharing of lessons learned and good practices

Ukraine lacks a formal mechanism to register and share experiences and good practices regarding evacuations between different (sub-)oblast authorities. Nonetheless, interviewees mentioned various ad hoc initiatives, often undertaken at the oblast level, to bring together different local authorities and sometimes also other stakeholders to exchange information. Interviewees described such meetings as useful as it enabled representatives from different communities to come together and learn from each other's (best) practices. These could perhaps be strengthened through institutionalization.

Conclusion

Recognizing that every conflict will bring its own specific protection challenges and evacuation needs, it is clear that evacuations can be an important means to avoid or minimize civilian harm, while also enhancing military freedom of movement. Exact evacuation scenarios and plans may depend on context, but states and associated military forces **should nonetheless develop general doctrine, policies, and SOPs on the (large-scale) evacuation of civilians**. These should take into account specific protection risks associated with evacuations, the role of the military, and methods of coordination among a variety of relevant stakeholders. States should further ensure that any effort in preparing for evacuations includes **sufficient attention for post-evacuation support needs**.

About this publication

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About PAX and the PoC program

PAX works to build just and peaceful societies across the globe. PAX brings together people who have the courage to stand for peace. The PAX Protection of Civilians (PoC) program seeks to increase the effectiveness of PoC interventions by enabling civilians to hold local and international security actors to account, and by enabling and motivating security actors to design and implement protection strategies that are civilian-centered.

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