

Protection of Civilians

Ukraine briefings

Briefing 4/4



About this series

▲ Photo: Alina Smutko/PAX

Between May-September 2024, the PAX Protection of Civilians (PoC) program conducted desk-top 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).

Responding to harm in LSCO: Ukraine

27 May 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) when applied to large-scale combat operations (LSCO). This briefing is focused specifically **on responses to civilian harm**. While traditionally – in a CHM context – this refers to activities undertaken by security actors in reaction to civilian harm caused by own operations, it is here discussed in terms of broader Ukrainian efforts to respond to harm that is overwhelmingly caused by the Russian Armed Forces (RAF). This expanded focus is more appropriate to a context of large-scale, inter-state war whereby one party to the conflict is defending its territorial integrity. Ukraine is facing immense reconstruction challenges amidst ongoing hostilities. Nonetheless, it has been quite successful in setting up response programs for its population. These can be strengthened through a more **civilian-centric approach** to ensure these better meet people's needs, enhancing Ukraine's overall resilience. This briefing explores several current Ukrainian mechanisms for strengths and gaps from a civilian perspective. This should inform ongoing Ukrainian efforts in this area, and those by other states developing response frameworks or preparing for LSCO scenarios.

Civilian harm in Ukraine

Ukraine has had to consider how to respond to civilian harm since the beginning of armed conflict in its Donbas region in 2014. This challenge increased exponentially with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The UN [estimates](#) that between February 2022 and March 2024, the war killed close to 13,000 civilians and injured over 30,000 civilians. Particularly over the last weeks, there have been renewed escalations of violence aimed at civilians by the RAF, such as the [4 April strike](#) near a playground in Kryvyi Rih, which killed 19 civilians, 9 of whom were children. Vital civilian infrastructure [has not been spared](#) either: hundreds of healthcare facilities have been damaged or destroyed, as well as over 1,700 educational facilities. Attacks on residential areas have continued, affecting people's access to critical services like water and electricity. Approximately 3.7 million civilians are [internally displaced](#). This is not even to mention the many reverberating and long-term negative impacts that Ukraine's population is facing because of the war. The vast majority of this harm is perpetrated by the RAF, which routinely engages in strategies and tactics to maximize civilian harm, such as ['double tap' strikes](#), [siege tactics](#), and the use of [conflict-related sexual violence](#) (CRSV), particularly in (illegal) detention settings.

Contextualizing Ukrainian response efforts

The war requires large-scale response efforts. This typically encompasses a range of activities: from acknowledging or apologizing for harm, to providing financial, medical, or other forms of support to civilians harmed by military operations, or even setting up commemorative events or memorials. The needs in Ukraine are immense and this briefing cannot do justice to all forms of response. Rather, it will apply a more narrow focus on mostly financial support programs and initiatives. Available research – both [internationally](#) and in [Ukraine](#) – indicates that this is typically a priority for civilians, constituting both an acknowledgement of the harm that has befallen them, as well as a useful means to address immediate needs. This briefing considers two efforts – included in text boxes below – that highlight strengths and gaps in Ukraine's overall approach, but other financial support initiatives may be referred to where useful and appropriate.

At the outset, it should be noted that civilian harm response does not equal reparations. Reparations [are](#) efforts to acknowledge and repair harm from international law violations by the state that has perpetrated these. In Ukraine, Russia should make reparations because of its illegal invasion of Ukraine and the many unlawful acts that the RAF have since committed. However, experts [note](#) that a singular focus on legal reparations creates major risks for civilians: legal procedures will take years and there is no guarantee that these will lead to Russian payments. Even when they do, [it is unlikely](#) that this could fully cover and repair the many harms suffered by Ukrainians. This focus can also result in civilians feeling that their experiences are overlooked. One interviewee shared, for instance, how many CRSV survivors in Ukraine have struggled to come forward with their experiences because government and international actors' campaigns predominantly focus on the pursuit of criminal responsibility or even as reparations to be claimed against Russia or its supporters as a form of making them pay. The focus is therefore less on the current status of victims, their ongoing needs, and the risks of their re-traumatization. While the pursuit of legal justice is necessary and important, there is thus also a need for Ukraine – aided by its international supporters – to simultaneously initiate and continue programs in support of harmed individuals. This is sometimes also referred to as an ['administrative approach'](#) to reparations.

This is an especially challenging endeavor for Ukraine with the US' recent decision to [terminate](#) most of its foreign aid support, which has an [outsized impact](#) on Ukraine, as the country has been the number one recipient of USAID funds since 2023. Clearly, it is a critical moment for other states to step in and help address this gap. Most current international aid to Ukraine is focused on military support, rather than on addressing war-caused needs. Over the longer term, this risks undermining Ukraine's [resilience](#). If [frozen](#)

Russian assets are released to Ukraine, the international community should therefore consider spending this on response programs for its war-affected population in addition to, or instead of exclusively on military support.

eRecovery: national efforts to support restoration of damaged property

In spring 2023, Ukraine set up eRecovery. This provides compensation to homeowners whose property got damaged or destroyed as a result of the war. It is linked to 'Diia': a pre-existing government-launched app that combines multiple governmental services, such as business registrations and access to a digital passport. Through Diia, people can apply for up to 350,000 or up to 500,000 Ukrainian hryvnia (ca. 8,500 or 12,000 US dollars) for a damaged apartment or house, respectively. Following the online application, a local committee will come to inspect the property and determine the amount of compensation. As of December 2024, the Ukrainian government had reportedly disbursed 200 million US dollars in compensation through this scheme.

The initiative is of great significance to the reconstruction of Ukraine and the rebuilding of individual civilian lives. Throughout PAX's research, interviewees from both Ukrainian local government and civil society repeatedly stressed its importance. However, many also saw the need for further improvements to the scheme, as it is not sufficiently victim-centric in its current set up. The most frequently cited concerns included the high evidentiary requirements needed for a successful application through eRecovery, and the fact that property in areas that are occupied or the site of active hostilities is excluded from compensation, even though these are typically the areas with the most urgent reconstruction needs. Another grievance of civilians is that people who had already repaired their houses through their own means prior to eRecovery's launch are no longer able to receive financial assistance.

Interim reparations for CRSV: a victim-centric initiative

In May 2024, the Ukrainian government – at the initiative of and in collaboration with the INGO Global Survivors Fund – launched a pilot project to provide interim reparations to survivors of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV). Since the February 2022 full-scale invasion, CRSV in Ukraine has increased dramatically, particularly in detention settings in occupied areas. The pilot provides survivors of CRSV – also including people victimized during the phase of armed conflict between 2014 and February 2022, and regardless of whether the act was perpetrated by RAF personnel or not – with ca. 3,300 US dollars in financial assistance while also offering referral services to medical care, psycho-social assistance, and legal aid. The pilot is explicitly designed to operate in a victim-centric and trauma-sensitive manner: It adopts a low evidentiary threshold to encourage applications, and to avoid people's re-traumatization by having to relate their experiences or provide evidence of harm. One way through which this is achieved is by interviewing applicants in a personal manner, based on a flexible template, and often by psychologists or psychiatrists. The project's board is further partially made up of survivors to ensure that decisions are reflective of CRSV victims' needs. However, as a pilot project, its limited funds narrow its potential reach.

Promisingly, the pilot is also used to feed into national discussions on a corresponding law. In late 2024, the Ukrainian parliament adopted legislation that recognizes CRSV survivors as victims and that ensures the creation of a concrete mechanism to provide them with prompt reparations. This 'Bardina law' is expected to come into effect in the summer of 2025. As per the pilot project, the law is survivor-centric in its design. The law further makes Ukraine the first country to implement urgent reparations for CRSV survivors during an ongoing armed conflict.

Ensuring civilian-centric responses to harm

Based on the lessons from eRecovery, the interim reparations for CRSV, and several other financial support mechanisms, PAX has identified four recommendations to ensure a civilian-centric approach to civilian harm response efforts. These can be of value to Ukraine and its international supporters in developing new, or improving existing, initiatives that help address the immediate and longer-term needs caused by the war. The recommendations can further guide other states that are developing response frameworks and/or preparing for LSCO scenarios.

1. Apply low evidentiary requirements to access support.

A consistent point of critique regarding most financial support initiatives researched by PAX is that these often place a high evidentiary burden on applicants. This is problematic for several reasons. First, particularly in war settings, people may not or no longer have access to required documentation. Crucial documents, for instance proving home ownership (a requirement for eRecovery), may have gotten lost as people have fled dangerous areas or have disappeared altogether given that the RAF has caused considerable damage to local archives. With regards to the latter, one interviewee from a notable Ukrainian civil society organization (CSO) stated that in cases where Ukraine has been unable to protect local archives, the government should not make the existence of official documentation a requirement for accessing state support. Second, even without the war, documentation related to home ownership is not a given in Ukraine. According to [some estimates](#), Ukraine's property registry was only 40 percent complete prior to Russia's full-scale invasion. Ukrainian CSOs further shared that it is not uncommon practice – in more rural areas in particular – for property to be inherited from one family generation to another, without this being notarized or otherwise made official. In one [research](#) by IOM, over 30 percent of respondents owning damaged property did not apply for compensation through eRecovery, citing lack of legal documentation as one of the main reasons. Finally, the emphasis on providing evidence can re-traumatize already vulnerable populations.

Crucially, alternative models are available. The CRSV interim reparations pilot project has chosen to assume a good faith approach in selecting beneficiaries, rather than relying on evidence that may not exist or that may re-traumatize survivors. There is [international precedent](#) to this practice: In Colombia, the [Victims' Law](#) similarly presumes the good faith of applicants for compensation, requiring a low burden of proof. In other conflict contexts, housing, land, and property (HLP) restitution processes [have allowed for](#) alternative – often easier to acquire – evidence, such as electricity and water bills, thereby [expanding](#) the pool of eligible claimants.

2. Actively involve civil society and/or affected civilians in designing response mechanisms.

States can set up more civilian-centric support mechanisms by meaningfully involving potential beneficiaries, or the CSOs advocating on their behalf, in the design and implementation phases. This ensures the involvement of people with expertise on what beneficiaries need and the practical challenges they may face in accessing support. A good practice example is the interim reparations for survivors of CRSV pilot project. Conversely, Ukrainian civilians who were arbitrarily detained by Russia and who have since sought to access financial support from the state [have expressed their concerns](#) that the commission evaluating applications is not sufficiently representative. This has resulted, among other things, in complex processes, unclear outcomes, and even at times insensitive communication from the commission towards former detainees.¹

3. Avoid duplication of response efforts to the greatest extent possible.

Ukrainian CSO representatives in PAX's research as well as other analysts have flagged as a concern that Ukraine has set up a variety of registers to keep track of civilian harm and corresponding support mechanisms. This demonstrates an important commitment to supporting a war-affected population, but the existence of multiple (inter)national registers and mechanisms is not without risks. It is not always clear how the various registers relate to one another, it can make it overly complex for harmed civilians to understand where to apply for assistance, may raise unrealistic expectations in terms of the support civilians can receive, as well as increase the bureaucratic burden on the Ukrainian government itself. Ideally, governments should create one overarching, victim-centered compensation framework to streamline the various response mechanisms and processes.

4. Recognize that there are different needs among different groups in society.

A civilian- or victim-centric approach requires the recognition that not all survivors of harm will have the same needs or face the same challenges in accessing support. Consequently, response mechanisms must be tailored to meet these different needs. For instance, many interviewees lauded the Ukrainian government's attention for (war-related) psychological needs, such as through the 'How are you?' campaign that actively shares information and raises awareness about mental health issues in Ukrainian society, provides a hotline for direct support, and creates materials with advice on different mental health-related topics. At the same time, several interviewees were worried about the specific mental health needs of returning veterans – particularly those of female veterans – as current programs tend to be tailored to the experiences of male soldiers. Conversely, NGO staff working on CRSV shared that most support for survivors of sexual violence – even down to promotional posters and brochures – is based on the sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) response approach. As such, it is focused mainly on women because of limited understanding that men can be victims, too. However, CRSV in Ukraine is often linked to detention settings where men are at great risk of being subjected to this type of violence.

Conclusion

Amidst ongoing hostilities and the destruction waged on its population on a daily basis, Ukraine has proven committed to addressing and alleviating the many harms suffered by its civilians. More can be done, however, to have these initiatives successfully meet people's needs. At the same time, Ukraine is understandably focused on pursuing reparations from Russia for the illegal invasion of its territory and for the many harms inflicted upon its population. This is an important endeavor, but – as previously discussed – it should not be the only focus or come at the cost of other forms of support. Ukraine, supported by the international community, should seek to complement this legal approach with more and expanded civilian harm response programs, so that people can address their most urgent needs and society remains more resilient overall.

Endnotes

- 1 More about the social protection challenges faced by civilians who have been unlawfully detained during Ukraine's defensive war against Russia, as well as on the strengths and gaps of current Ukrainian support mechanisms can be found in the [March 2025 report](#) by NGOs Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights and the Eastern Ukrainian Centre for Civic Rights.

About this publication

Research for this briefing was carried out by Erin Bijl, Kai van Rosendaal, and Marieke Droogsma. Erin Bijl wrote the briefing and it was edited by Terri Beswick and Carrie Huisman.

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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 internal 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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