

HPG working paper

Navigating narratives in Ukraine: humanitarian response amid solidarity and resistance

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Photo: Protesters wave Ukrainian flags in London, March 2022. Karollyne Videira Hubert on Unsplash

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About this report

This paper marks the inception of a project supported by the British Red Cross – in partnership with the Open Space Works Cooperative in Ukraine and Migration Consortium in Poland – examining the role played by narratives in driving policy decisions in relation to the humanitarian response to the war in Ukraine.

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Acronyms

DEC	Disaster Emergency Committee
EU	European Union
HPG	Humanitarian Policy Group
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
NGCA	non-government controlled area
NGO	non-governmental organisation
OCHA	(United Nations) Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OHCHR	(United Nations) High Commissioner for Human Rights
PoW	prisoner of war
TPD	(EU) Temporary Protection Directive
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
US	United States

1 Introduction

This paper marks the inception of a project supported by the British Red Cross – and in partnership with the Open Space Works Cooperative in Ukraine and Migration Consortium in Poland – that will examine the role played by narratives in driving policy decisions in relation to the humanitarian response to the war in Ukraine.

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 marked the evolution of a previously limited invasion by Russia of Ukraine in 2014 into the largest-scale international war in Europe since the Second World War (Neuman and Hurt, 2023). The war and the flow of refugees from Ukraine have triggered extraordinary levels of solidarity and generosity from governments and civil society in Europe and elsewhere. Humanitarian appeals for Ukraine are some of the largest, fastest and most generously funded ever (Guensburg, 2022; Sajjad, 2022). National actors within Ukraine and in neighbouring countries have played significant roles, though they have been somewhat overshadowed by international organisations that received the most funding and have mounted large operations inside Ukraine and in neighbouring countries. The humanitarian response is taking place amid immense geopolitical tensions between Russia and Western countries, which actively support Ukraine politically and militarily and which are also the main bilateral humanitarian donors.

Aid organisations face an acute dilemma: how should they navigate a context where Western governments overtly position their humanitarian assistance to Ukraine as part of a wider political stance on the war? The relevance of the traditional international humanitarian delivery model is also under question: what is the added value of international organisations establishing new operations to deliver assistance directly when they could instead support strong governmental and civil society responses? Actors who have long been involved in assisting other groups of refugees across Europe have also found themselves navigating an emerging hierarchy of refugee protection: on the one hand celebrating the welcome that refugees from Ukraine have received across Europe, while on the other hand continuing to voice concerns about how refugees from other (non-Western) countries are treated.

These dilemmas – particularly in the early weeks following Russia’s full-scale invasion – played out in the context of wall-to-wall coverage across mainstream media outlets and social media in Europe, extraordinarily high levels of political attention across Western governments, and a widespread public outcry. In this context, narratives come to the fore. Narratives are understood here as (Saez and Bryant, 2023b):

stories and frames constructed and deployed to shape beliefs, attitudes and ultimately decisions relating to humanitarian crises and humanitarian aid – in particular, to justify why, when and where humanitarian aid is needed, who should deliver it and how, and who should receive it.

This research project focuses on the narratives that have been put forward by various actors in relation to war in Ukraine: from Western governments and the Ukrainian government itself, to media outlets and the general public, to local and international humanitarian actors. The research explores how

narratives have interacted with key dilemmas for humanitarian responders, and their role in influencing policies and decisions, from governments hosting large numbers of refugees, to humanitarian actors and donor agencies. Focusing on the war in Ukraine itself, and the responses of Poland and the United Kingdom (UK) (see Box 1), the project aims to raise awareness of the role of frames and narratives in shaping the humanitarian response to the war so far, and to contribute to future discussions about the next phase of the response and relevant policy implications.

This working paper is a starting point for wider research, outlining key humanitarian dilemmas and central narratives, which will later be explored in more depth as the research progresses. Therefore, this paper does not aim to give an exhaustive view of all relevant narratives and dilemmas, but to highlight those that appear particularly prominent and cross-cutting from an initial analysis. The paper draws on roundtable discussions convened in 2022 by the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) and the British Red Cross (see Bryant et al., 2022a; 2022b), a top-line review of relevant literature across the three focus countries and the wider region, and discussions with partners as part of the project's inception phase.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of humanitarian dilemmas, focusing on insufficient funding provided directly to local actors, tensions around humanitarian principles, and concerns over double standards in terms of refugee protection. Chapters 3–5 then explore the interplay between these dilemmas and three central narratives: a narrative of solidarity with Ukraine that motivated support to the humanitarian response (alongside wider assistance); the idea of the war in Ukraine being a different kind of crisis; and a narrative of resistance that came in sharp contrast to traditional humanitarian fundraising narratives that centred Ukrainians' suffering and vulnerability. The paper concludes by reflecting on the opportunity to reshape narratives to ensure better outcomes for people in need, including through international support for more locally led and people-centred humanitarian action.

Box 1 Background to the conflict in Ukraine and implications in Poland and the UK

Ukraine became a battleground in 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea and provided support to Russian proxy forces in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, located in the southeast (Masters, 2023). The war intensified in February 2022 when Russia launched a full-scale invasion, sending missiles across the country and deploying troops (OCHA, 2023). In contrast to many initial expectations, a quick Russian victory was forestalled by effective Ukrainian government and civil resistance, supported by allies across Europe and the West.

The war has been marked by continual shelling and air strikes, systematic destruction of civilian infrastructure, and the reduction of towns and cities such as Mariupol and Bakhmut to rubble (ibid.). As of 30 June 2023, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has verified a total of 9,177 civilian deaths during Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Statista, 2023). The full-scale Russian invasion has resulted in significant displacement, including over 6 million people who have fled the country (UNHCR, 2023a). Over 5 million people are internally displaced within Ukraine, the majority as a result of the recent escalation of conflict (UNHCR, 2023b). Acute humanitarian needs have been noted across the country, particularly in areas close to the front line or occupied by Russia (OCHA, 2023).

Around 1.35 million Ukrainians had already migrated to Poland (often on a temporary basis), following Russia's more limited invasion in 2014 (Duszczuk and Kaczmarczyk, 2022). Mobility from Ukraine into Poland increased significantly following the full-scale invasion. At the time of writing, Poland is hosting over 968,000 refugees from Ukraine, by far a higher figure than most countries across Europe and surpassed only by Germany (UNHCR, 2023a). The initial humanitarian response was marked by the rapid mobilisation of Polish civil society to provide relief and accommodation to those fleeing the war in Ukraine, later supported (to varying degrees) by local and central government (Carta et al., 2022; Jarosz and Klaus, 2023). The Polish government has enacted an extremely liberal policy response, granting Ukrainians immediate legal status, with access to Poland's labour market, healthcare and social benefits. Recently, the response in Poland has begun a transition from a short-term emergency to longer-term solutions, as an overburdened civil society looks to authorities to provide a clearer direction and support for longer-term integration of refugees in Poland (Jarosz and Klaus, 2023).

The UK was among the first countries to commit to military support, and the government position remains assertively pro-Ukraine, matching majority public and media opinion. Despite cuts to its Official Development Assistance budget, the UK government has prioritised humanitarian assistance to Ukraine and the region, being among the 10 largest donors. In March 2022, the government launched various targeted schemes to enable Ukrainians fleeing the war to enter and settle in the UK. However, especially in comparison to the UK's rapid military and diplomatic support, these were announced belatedly and following heavy criticism of the government's initial offer. The Ukraine Family Scheme grants applicants the ability to join UK-based family members (British Red Cross, 2023). The Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme, more commonly known as the 'Homes for Ukraine' scheme, allows Ukrainian nationals to come to the UK if they have a named sponsor who can provide accommodation for at least six months (ibid.). As of 22 August 2023, the total number of visas issued through these schemes totalled 238,300, while a further 28,000 people were issued extensions to existing visas through new pathways opened up as a result of the war (UK Home Office, 2023a).

2 Dilemmas for humanitarian responders

The war in Ukraine has raised significant dilemmas for humanitarian responders, closely intertwined with the narratives discussed later in the paper. This chapter highlights three core dilemmas:

- The contrast between a locally led initial response and disproportionate funding channelled to international humanitarian organisations.
- Tensions around humanitarian principles, including challenges to the principles of neutrality and impartiality.
- Emerging double standards in terms of refugee protection, whereby generous policies across Europe towards refugees from Ukraine stand in contrast with the treatment of other groups of refugees.

While none of these dilemmas is unique to the context in Ukraine, the situation's high visibility, and public and media attention, mean that they have taken on an unusually high level of prominence.

2.1 Local action, international funding

One of the most remarkable aspects of the events in Ukraine was the immediate upswell of action in response from citizens – inside Ukraine itself and across Europe more broadly – including but by no means limited to humanitarian assistance. Within Ukraine, millions of citizens abandoned their normal lives to defend their country with 'AK-47 assault rifles, homemade incendiary Molotov cocktails, and even by kneeling to block Russian tanks' (Kizilova, 2022). In March 2022, a survey by Rating Group found that '80% of the Ukrainian respondents said they were ready to defend the territorial integrity of Ukraine with weapons in hand', representing a significant increase compared to the years preceding the full-scale Russian invasion (with 59% saying they were ready to do so in 2020) (ibid.).

Much like most crises, in the early days of the war most humanitarian assistance within Ukraine was collected locally and distributed by Ukrainian networks, sometimes with help from the Ukrainian diaspora or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) linked to networks of friends, or others linked to churches (Grunewald, 2022). The Ukrainian diaspora was well prepared to address the situation in 2022 following experience gained from 2014 to 2022 during the response to the annexation of Crimea and regions in southeastern Ukraine (DEMAC, 2022).

An immense voluntary effort was created overnight – within Ukraine itself but also extending across Europe – which helped organise relief programmes to raise funds and coordinate aid. Reception centres were rapidly set up in Ukraine, as well as arrangements for the collection and distribution of assistance provided in-kind (Grunewald, 2022). Various initiatives offered support in evacuating people from occupied areas, rehabilitating wounded soldiers and civilians, and repairing and restoring damaged buildings (Civicus Lens, 2023). Ukraine Now and similar organisations played a pivotal role in organising and coordinating support efforts. They successfully mobilised a community of activists both within

Ukraine and across international borders, while also serving as valuable sources of information, guiding individuals on how to contribute through donations, volunteer work, advocacy, and assistance for Ukrainian refugees in host countries (*ibid.*).

In Poland, communities mobilised within their local areas and via social media, and travelled to the Poland–Ukraine border, offering assistance ranging from free transportation and meals, to in-kind assistance and offers of housing (Carta et al., 2022; Hargrave et al., 2023; Jarosz and Klaus, 2023). In the UK, communities came together in a show of solidarity and support for Ukraine, organising events, fundraisers and awareness campaigns, and an initially hesitant UK government was pressured by UK civil society to accommodate Ukrainian refugees (Ferguson, 2022).

Meanwhile, United Nations (UN) agencies and international organisations received record levels of funding and private donations. The UN Ukraine Flash Appeal received \$3.77 billion in donations (UN Financial Tracking Service, 2023a). In the UK, the Disaster Emergency Committee (DEC), a group of 15 leading UK charities, launched its Ukraine Humanitarian Appeal on 3 March 2022, raising £55 million in 24 hours and setting a new Guinness World Record title for the most money raised by an online campaign in one week (DEC, 2023a). As of September 2023, the total donations to the DEC Ukraine Appeal amounted to over £420 million (DEC, 2023b), significantly dwarfing the total donations of most of the DEC’s 75 other appeals and placing the DEC as the biggest charity donor in the world to the Ukraine humanitarian response (Wait, 2023; DEC, 2023c).¹

An analysis of the initial response by Humanitarian Outcomes (2022) criticised international organisations’ ability to effectively spend the vast sums of money raised to assist people in need in Ukraine. In particular, the report highlighted their limited progress in directing funding towards scaling up the existing local response. Three months after Russia’s full-scale invasion, a significant portion of the funds remained unused, held by international organisations bound by compliance requirements that proved too burdensome and time-consuming for small volunteer groups to fulfil (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2022). A year later, the presence of international actors in the areas of greatest need remains sparse – although international agencies have since scaled up operations across Ukraine in collaboration with local partners (Stoddard et al., 2023). Ukrainian aid workers remain at the forefront of the crisis, though in some cases now as the partners of international agencies. This is sharply demonstrated by figures collected on humanitarian casualties: the number of Ukrainian aid worker casualties surpassed that of expatriates by a staggering 20 to 1, with the few international fatalities limited to informal volunteers rather than personnel from established international organisations (*ibid.*).

While much humanitarian assistance has been provided by local NGOs, church associations and newly created volunteer-based civil society organisations, they have received very little direct funding (National Network of Local Philanthropy Development, 2022). Based on a January 2023 report by the DEC, the direct transfer of humanitarian contributions to national NGOs in Ukraine has been less

¹ For instance, the DEC Afghanistan Appeal, initiated in December 2021 to address 8 million people on the verge of famine, raised just 12.5% of Ukraine’s total (Wait, 2023).

than 1% so far (Harrison et al., 2023). The UN Financial Tracking Service shows that, while the total UN 2022 Ukraine Flash Appeal brought in \$3.77 billion, national organisations received 0.2% of direct funding (\$8.2 million) and local organisations only 0.1% (\$4.9 million) (UN Financial Tracking Service, 2023a). In the absence of significant additional funding, in the early days and months of the response many Ukrainian NGOs redirected resources from existing projects to humanitarian aid. For example, a representative of a local NGO, Ukrainian People's House, explained how '[internationally funded development projects] and many others stopped operating when the war began, and all our funds were transferred to humanitarian aid' (Ground Truth Solutions, 2023a).

The Grand Bargain Annual Independent Review explains how these dynamics reflect broader trends in the international humanitarian sector: multilateral organisations overwhelmingly receive the lion's share of direct humanitarian funding and local actors receive little if any, in the midst of fraught discussions around power dynamics and capacity (Barbelet, 2019; Metcalfe-Hough et al., 2022).²

Local NGOs in Ukraine have criticised these dynamics, including what is seen as excessive bureaucracy by international partners and donors. For example, a representative of the Association for Democratic Development from Chernihiv city in northern Ukraine said: 'International organisations are extremely burdened by bureaucracy: sometimes it takes several months to approve financial support; thus their support becomes irrelevant with time' (Ground Truth Solutions, 2023a). On the six-month anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, 93 national NGOs in Ukraine wrote an open letter to international humanitarians criticising existing efforts towards partnerships (National Network of Local Philanthropy Development, 2022). A similar letter was also written by Polish NGOs, which noted the need for an 'equal approach to the concept of partnership, respect for the limited time and resources of our organisations, unification of procedures, transparency and frankness' (Migration Consortium, 2022).

2.2 Tensions over humanitarian principles

International humanitarian actors have also found themselves at the centre of a complex debate centred on tensions between traditional humanitarian principles and the unfolding context of the war in Ukraine. This has been seen in particular through discussion concerning the role and adequacy of the traditional humanitarian principle of neutrality. Neutrality is understood here as the principle of humanitarian actors 'standing apart from contending parties or ideologies' and avoiding taking sides in hostilities, as a means to 'enjoy the confidence of all' and, in doing so, facilitate the delivery of humanitarian assistance (Harroff-Tavel, 2010).

In the context of Ukraine, conventional interpretations of humanitarian neutrality are increasingly diverging from the stance of Western donor governments, as they align themselves with Ukraine in its struggle against Russia. As discussed further in Chapter 3, while it is not uncommon to see

² For example, as was seen in Ukraine, in terms of the Afghanistan Humanitarian Response Plan 2022, national organisations only received 0.7% of funding (\$22 million) and local actors just 0.07% (\$2 million) (UN Financial Tracking Service, 2023b).

political interests at play on the part of donor governments, in the case of the war in Ukraine donor governments' political positioning has been especially overt. Traditional humanitarian actors in Ukraine have also found their adherence to neutrality at odds with the government of Ukraine's own understanding of humanitarian assistance, which has long been defined in Ukrainian legislation as assistance provided to those who 'need it due to social insecurity, material insecurity, difficult financial situation, state of emergency', while also encompassing 'preparation for armed defence of the state and its defence in the event of armed aggression' (Parliament of Ukraine, 2023).

Meanwhile, the war in Ukraine has posed numerous questions for how humanitarian actors should navigate a situation where, far from enjoying the 'confidence of all', the very fact of engagement with one party to hostilities (Russia) alienates the other (Ukraine). Most notably, in March 2022 the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) came under intense scrutiny and found itself engulfed in a controversy during access negotiations, when then-president, Peter Maurer, was pictured shaking hands with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov (Ataï, 2023). Section 3.2 discusses in detail the competing narratives surrounding this controversy, the ICRC's efforts to explain its position, and the resulting operational implications.

Challenges to the humanitarian principle of neutrality are by no means unprecedented; neutrality has been described as coming under attack 'every decade or so' (Terry, 2022). Today, questions in Ukraine echo those witnessed in the context of Russia's previous invasion of Ukraine in 2014 (Barbelet, 2017). Other recent examples include when, following the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, local staff employed by international aid agencies encountered a complex dilemma, torn between organisational mandates that stressed neutrality and a populace engrossed in an anti-coup movement (Fishbein, 2021). Hugo Slim (2022) has described a longstanding tension between the traditional humanitarian sector and a competing stance, which he terms 'humanitarian resistance'. Namely, 'the rescue, relief and protection of people suffering under an unjust enemy regime [...] specifically organised by individuals and groups who are politically opposed to the regime and support resistance against it', involving an explicit recognition of taking sides, enmity and confrontation with an enemy. Yet, while dynamics in Ukraine are reflective of these broader debates, the high level of media attention to the war in Ukraine has brought these tensions to centre stage.

Similar tensions have also emerged with regards to the traditional humanitarian principle of impartiality: namely, that the provision of humanitarian assistance should be on the basis of needs alone, prioritising those most in need. Before the full-scale Russian invasion, half of donor funding was earmarked for non-government controlled areas (NGCAs). However, humanitarian access to these areas has since been heavily impeded by the dynamics of the war itself (ACAPS, 2023), as well as restrictions imposed both by Russian military forces and Ukrainian authorities. International humanitarian actors have been hesitant to distribute assistance in NGCAs in the absence of guarantees for the security of their staff from Russian forces (ibid.) and, in some cases, for fear of jeopardising operations across Ukraine as a whole by circumventing Ukrainian restrictions. Banks used by humanitarian organisations across Europe, particularly in the UK, have also reportedly restricted financial engagement in contested or Russian-controlled areas as a consequence of Western sanctions on Russia (Gillard, 2022).

As a result, the UN response plan published in February 2023 articulated the following (OCHA, 2023):

Field consultations indicate the needs of those living near the front-line and in areas under the temporary military control of the Russian Federation are among the most severe. Since the war began, no inter-agency humanitarian convoy has been able to cross into the areas under Russia's military control for aid delivery or assessment, although some local volunteers have reportedly risked their safety and lives to deliver small quantities of aid across the front line.

A notable exception is cash assistance and wider social protection programmes, which have been implemented in NCGAs, though with significant challenges documented (Ground Truth Solutions, 2023b).³

Raising another challenge for impartiality, the extraordinary level of funding channelled to the humanitarian response to the war in Ukraine has posed a significant dilemma for international humanitarian actors and donors, namely in terms of their ability to balance their response to the war in Ukraine with responses to other global crises. For example, places in crisis including Afghanistan, Yemen and the Horn of Africa continue to suffer from dire underfunding and limited attention (Alexander and Rozzelle, 2022). In mid-2022, amid reports that one person was dying every 48 seconds in the Horn of Africa following severe drought, anecdotal evidence suggested that a high-level roundtable in Geneva yielded pledges of just \$300 million in 'new money' for the crisis (Levine and Saez, 2022). As the war in Ukraine dominated humanitarian agencies' resources and attention, agencies struggled to push for the funds needed to accelerate operations at the pace required to address the mounting crisis. An HPG analysis criticised these dynamics: 'If the humanitarian system can't give priority to the most vulnerable, can't do basic triage, then it has failed in its mission' (ibid.). In response to these concerns, some humanitarian actors have allowed a small portion of their Ukraine appeals to be allocated to global emergency funds. However, this is far from fully addressing the challenges posed by an imbalance of resources between Ukraine and other global humanitarian crises.

2.3 Double standards on refugee protection

The war in Ukraine has also made clear the key role of political will in facilitating adequate protection and assistance for refugees, with the comprehensive response across European governments to refugees fleeing Ukraine coming in stark contrast to previous 'fortress Europe' responses to other groups (Sales, 2023). This emerging hierarchy in terms of refugee protection has raised issues for humanitarian responders. This is particularly true for those long-involved in assisting other groups,

³ The government of Ukraine itself continues to provide social payments to Ukrainian citizens in these areas, though this is limited to those who used to receive their social payments via bank transfers (Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine, 2023). International and Ukrainian humanitarian organisations – including the Norwegian Refugee Council, and the Estonian Refugee Council and its Ukrainian NGO partner Gate to Ukraine – have also implemented programmes providing cash assistance through bank transfers (Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine, 2022; Estonian Refugee Council, 2023).

who found themselves navigating a delicate balance between welcoming positive steps taken to offer protection to those fleeing Ukraine and continuing to voice concerns around acute needs and policy obstacles relating to other groups.

The invasion of Ukraine caused Europe's fastest-growing refugee inflow since the Second World War, with millions of people fleeing the country and a third of the population displaced (Politi et al., 2023). In contrast to chaotic, often heavily securitised scenes seen at Europe's borders where other refugees and migrants are concerned, Ukrainian citizens fleeing the country entered the European Union (EU) regularly under existing arrangements, which since 2017 have facilitated Ukrainians' visa-free entry to EU member states (for up to 90 days) (European Union External Action, 2017). One week after the invasion, the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen remarked that 'all those fleeing Putin's bombs are welcome in Europe' (von der Leyen, 2022). This was followed by the first-ever activation of the EU Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) on 4 March 2022, which was approved by the Council of the EU for the first time since its inception after the Kosovo War (Sales, 2023). Through the activation of the TPD, people fleeing Ukraine have been able to acquire protection status without submitting individual asylum applications (see Box 2) (Red Cross EU Office and Ukrainian Red Cross Society, 2023).

Box 2 The EU Temporary Protection Directive

The TPD requires EU member states to grant temporary protection to all Ukrainians escaping the war, as well as persons with protection status in Ukraine, without needing to go through individual asylum claims (Motte-Baumvol et al., 2022). The activation of the TPD has been described as 'a significant step towards a more humane protection regime' (Sales, 2023) and as having 'strengthened the levels of existing solidarity and helped to overcome complex humanitarian challenges and needs' (Red Cross EU Office and Ukrainian Red Cross Society, 2023). The application of the TPD has not been without its challenges. For example, third-country nationals fleeing the war in Ukraine are, in principle, covered by the scope of the TPD, but have encountered difficulties in some countries when registering for temporary protection (ibid.). In addition, the TPD's essentially temporary nature has created uncertainty and challenges; while the TPD was initially due to stay in effect for one year, it has since been extended for a further year until March 2024 (ECRE, 2023). However, overall the approach has allowed fast and comprehensive access to education, accommodation, the labour market, and healthcare systems and other related rights for Ukrainians (Red Cross EU Office and Ukrainian Red Cross Society, 2023).

The TPD was swiftly translated into national law across EU member states. For example, on 12 March 2022 the Polish government enacted the Special Law on Assistance for Ukrainian citizens, giving immediate legal status for 18 months to all Ukrainians fleeing the war, while facilitating their access to work and social benefits. Although the Special Law has since been amended to require those staying in collective accommodation for over 120 days to contribute a portion of their costs (IRC, 2023;

Migration Consortium, 2023), the policy and legal framework in Poland remains broadly inclusive. This is particularly true in contrast to arrivals from the Middle East and Africa to the Poland–Belarus border, where since 2021 Polish and international observers have documented systematic pushbacks and denial of access to asylum proceedings, as part of a heavily securitised response from Poland’s government and armed forces (Czarnota et al., 2021; Amnesty International, 2022).

Similar trends have been seen in the UK, where the government’s warm welcome of Ukrainians stands in stark contrast to its broader policies on refugees and asylum. The UK’s broader policy stance aims to deter asylum applications (particularly from those arriving to the UK on ‘small boats’) by removing employment and other rights of claimants and expediting their removal to ‘safe third countries’ (so far only Rwanda is a signatory to the scheme).⁴ With the UK outside EU mobility frameworks, Ukrainians did not have the same automatic access to visa-free entry seen in EU member states. However, after a short delay, the British government announced various schemes through which people displaced from Ukraine could obtain a visa for the UK (see Box 1) (British Red Cross, 2023). Although relatively small in comparison to numbers hosted by countries such as Poland, refugees from Ukraine nonetheless represent the largest group of refugees to arrive in the UK from any country for over a century, since a quarter of a million Belgians came to Britain after the outbreak of the First World War (Katwala, 2023).

4 In April 2022, the UK government announced plans to transfer certain categories of asylum seeker to Rwanda, where their asylum applications would be processed and managed by the Rwandan government. If their applications are approved and they are granted refugee status, these individuals will be required to reside in Rwanda rather than having their cases assessed in the United Kingdom (Right to Remain, 2022).

3 Solidarity and principled humanitarian action narratives

Dilemmas experienced by humanitarian actors in the context of Ukraine are closely interlinked with multiple, intertwined, and sometimes competing narratives that have framed all aspects of the war and its humanitarian response. Based on an initial analysis, this paper discusses three key narratives:

- A narrative of strong solidarity with Ukraine from governments and communities across Europe (and the wider West), which justified assistance to Ukraine in part as a political stance against Russian aggression.
- A framing – chiefly seen in media reporting, but also echoed by some politicians – that the war in Ukraine and refugee movements throughout Europe represented a different kind of crisis to those seen before in Europe and across the world.
- A narrative, used primarily in fundraising by international humanitarian actors, which emphasised the vulnerability of Ukrainians, echoing wider trends in humanitarian fundraising and in stark contrast to narratives centred on Ukrainians’ resistance.

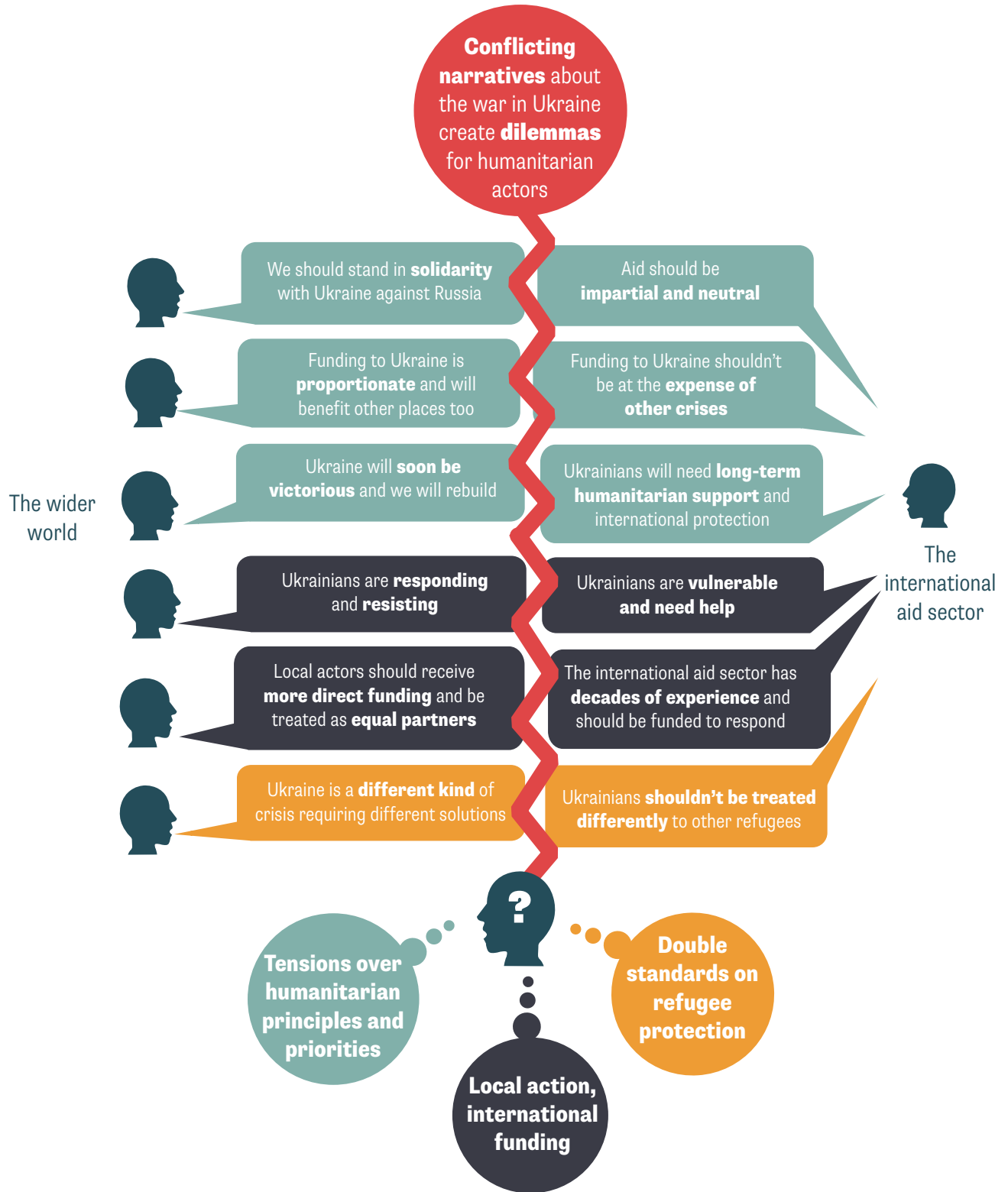
This chapter and chapters 4 and 5 outline how these narratives emerged, alongside the counternarratives that have arisen (intentionally or otherwise). These chapters will explore how these narratives have themselves contributed to the development of the dilemmas for humanitarian responders already, while shaping the way in which these dilemmas are understood and navigated, and the policies and decisions made as a result.

3.1 Solidarity narratives across Europe and the West

The narratives used to frame motivations for supporting humanitarian action in Ukraine created challenging dynamics, and sometimes tensions, between governments, local civil society and traditional humanitarian actors. This largely centred on tensions surrounding a clear and ubiquitous narrative of solidarity. ‘Solidarity’ is primarily understood here as implying a political position vis-à-vis the war in Ukraine and wider geopolitical tensions; namely, standing in solidarity with Ukraine in the face of unprovoked Russian aggression through a combination of military, diplomatic and humanitarian support.

The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine sparked widespread public outcry and condemnation of Russia’s actions throughout the West, standing in contrast to the relatively muted response to the more limited 2014 invasion. From the early days of Russia’s full-scale invasion, Ukraine’s government and citizens deftly used social media channels already familiar to Western audiences to share information about the ongoing assault. This combined with wall-to-wall coverage in mainstream media across the West to create a sense of horror at Russia’s actions in the Western general public and politicians.

Figure 1 Conflicting narratives from different actors in the context of the war in Ukraine



For many, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine was an overt attempt to erode Western ideals of democracy and freedom and seen as an attack not just on Ukraine but on wider Western allies. In Warsaw on 26 March 2022, United States (US) President Joe Biden said, 'We are gathered here at the Royal Castle in this city that holds a sacred place in the history of not only of Europe, but humankind's unending search for freedom' (White House, 2022). According to Biden, 'every generation has had to defeat democracy's mortal foes', and 'today's fighting in Kyiv and Mariupol and Kharkiv are the latest battle in a long struggle: Hungary, 1956; Poland, 1956 then again 1981; Czechoslovakia, 1968' (ibid.). Biden in his speech paralleled the emotive history that binds Eastern European nations and their historical struggles against Soviet aggression with Russia's contemporary actions. This use of a shared 'European' history and future is also prevalent across speeches and statements made by European officials. For example, the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, said that 'the EU will be with you and your people tomorrow and for as long as it takes' (European Council of the European Union, 2023).

Importantly, the expression of solidarity in reference to conflict and humanitarian crises, including by politicians, is not unique to the Ukraine context. However, what set Ukraine apart was how ubiquitous these statements were, and the strong emotional tone taken by leading political figures. For instance, when the Taliban took control of Afghanistan in August 2021, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced the commitment of almost half a billion pounds in humanitarian funding for the Afghan people and emphasised the need to 'help the people of Afghanistan to choose the best of all their possible future' (Johnson, 2021). However, the rhetoric contrasted strongly with his tone in the later case of Ukraine, where he spoke about Russia as a 'bloodstained aggressor' pursuing imperial conquest and attempting to 'redraw the map of Europe in blood' (Johnson, 2022). The expression of solidarity was also far more overt in the case of Ukraine, with Johnson articulating: 'to our Ukrainian friends in this moment of agony, I say we are with you, and we are on your side [...] And in that spirit, I join you in saying *slava Ukraini* [glory to Ukraine]' (ibid.).

Similar sentiments of solidarity were echoed across Central and Eastern Europe, albeit rooted in a longer-standing history, going far beyond Soviet Russia and drawing on centuries-long experiences of Russian imperialism. Markiewicz and Olchawa explain how in Poland and Ukraine the opening lines of the two countries' national anthems are nearly identical, both penned in defiance of Russian imperialism and proclaiming that: 'Poland/Ukraine is not yet lost' (Markiewicz and Olchawa, 2023). Political discourse in Central and Eastern Europe following the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine drew heavily on such sentiments. For example, in an early speech the Polish prime minister deliberately quoted former president Lech Kaczyński who, in his speech during the 2008 Russian invasion of Georgia, warned 'today Georgia, tomorrow Ukraine, the Baltic States the day after tomorrow, and then perhaps the time will come for my country, Poland!' (President of the Republic of Poland, 2022). This framing resonated immediately with the Polish public, the vast majority of whom (85%) in March 2022 agreed that the war in Ukraine was a threat to the security of Poland, while an extraordinary 94% of Poles supported accepting Ukrainian refugees (CBOS, 2023).

Such narratives of solidarity present humanitarian aid as an extension of the political and military support for Ukraine. For example, President Biden in his Warsaw speech claimed, 'alongside these

economic sanctions, the Western world has come together to provide for the people of Ukraine with incredible levels of military, economic, and humanitarian assistance' (White House, 2022). Notably, since last year the US government has provided over \$2.1 billion in humanitarian assistance to the people of Ukraine, both to those inside Ukraine and to those displaced to other countries (US Department of State, 2023).

Ukraine's president Volodymyr Zelensky has used the same rhetoric to attract Western military and humanitarian support, exemplified in his address to the Munich Security Conference, in which he stated, 'Putin began a war against Ukraine, and against the entire democratic world' (Hopkins, 2022). Solidarity with the people of Ukraine is presented as the only logical way to prevent the existential crisis facing the West and providing humanitarian support is seen as integral to that endeavour. Surveys by Rating Group in March and April 2022 indicate that support from across Europe and the West was mostly well received within Ukraine (Rating Group, 2022a; 2022b): in April 2022, approximately 60% of people felt that the diplomatic and humanitarian assistance received was sufficient, though just around 30% felt the same with regards to military support (Rating Group, 2022b).

Over time, narratives of solidarity have also fed into commitments concerning Ukraine's reconstruction. European and other governments across the West – in particular, the US – share conviction with the Ukrainian government that the war will eventually be won by Ukraine with the support of its allies, who will continue standing side by side with Ukraine as attention turns to rebuilding the country. This framing first emerged in the early months following Russia's full-scale invasion. For example, when the president of the European Council announced his support for Ukraine, he also stated 'we will be right by your side to rebuild a modern, prosperous Ukraine firmly anchored on our common European path' (European Council of the European Union, 2022).

Such sentiments have since translated into concrete commitments. In June 2023, the UK and Ukraine co-hosted the Ukraine Recovery Conference in London, where EU and G7 countries underscored their unwavering commitment to Ukraine in the long run. Pledges to facilitate Ukraine's post-war recovery totalled around €55 billion, including a pledge of €50 billion by the EU, equivalent to 45% of Ukraine's financial shortfall until 2027 (KSE Institute, 2023). In addition to the commitments made during the Ukraine Recovery Conference, the UK has also offered \$3 billion in World Bank loan guarantees and earmarked £250 million for its development finance arm, British International Investment, to facilitate economic assistance to Ukraine (Merrick, 2023). The UK also recently announced its participation in a Supervisory Board dedicated to coordinating reconstruction endeavours between Ukraine and its partners, which will include the establishment of a London-based office to facilitate the coordination process (Mills et al., 2023).

Beyond governments, political narratives of solidarity have also been matched at the community level, including as populations across Europe and beyond mobilised to provide assistance to Ukrainians. In Poland, a profound sense of support was evident in public polling, with close to two-thirds of Poles reporting that at least one person from their household had helped refugees from Ukraine without any expectation of compensation (Kostrzyński, 2023). While for some this assistance may have gone no

further than the desire to help a neighbour, for many Poles their assistance was closely intertwined with their broader position on the war, solidarity with Ukraine and opposition to Russia as a common enemy (Hargrave et al., 2023). For example, one volunteer in Warsaw illustrated this sentiment by saying, ‘Everyone is united; the only thing we’re asking is what more can we do – what other sanctions can we put on Russia, what aid can we send’ (Tondo and Strzyżyńska, 2022).

3.2 Tensions between solidarity and neutrality

These narratives of solidarity come in stark contrast to those from traditional humanitarian actors, who – while receiving funding from many of the governments highlighted above – have often framed the motivations behind their operations in Ukraine and neighbouring countries in noticeably less political terms. Many international humanitarian actors have intentionally sought to distance themselves from the geopolitical dynamics within which the war in Ukraine is unfolding. Instead – like in other crises – their actions are framed as being motivated and ultimately guided by the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, independence and impartiality (Ataii, 2023). For example, according to one organisation: ‘all our activities [in Ukraine] are based on humanitarian principles and international humanitarian law and are in line with our mandate to safeguard the life and dignity of the civilian population affected by the conflict’ (Intersos, 2023). Notably, however, there has been some variation in terms of the extent to which different humanitarian organisations have focused on their adherence to humanitarian principles in public communications, with the ICRC the most prominent in this regard.

Recently, the New Humanitarian interviewed several humanitarian actors and found that international aid staff felt that they were ‘having to justify their neutral stance more in Ukraine than in other crises – to the general public and to their aid partners’ (Ataii, 2023). In many ways this reflects a jarring clash between the narratives of solidarity that have been so ubiquitous across political discourse, media coverage and among communities across Europe, and the core principles that are used by traditional humanitarian actors to frame their operations, which are comparatively less widely understood by the general public.

While many debates along these lines have taken place behind the scenes (ibid.), these dynamics have also spilled into the public realm, centred on a controversy over the role of the ICRC in Ukraine. The public reaction to the pictures of the ICRC’s then-president shaking hands with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov exemplified this clash. The move drew widespread criticism within Ukraine. For example, an op-ed in the Kyiv Post demanded that (Dubenko, 2022):

Maurer should give a first-hand account of the reasons for visiting Moscow [...] beyond the trite ‘neutrality’ and ‘impartiality’ stance. Did he confront Moscow over its manipulation of the concepts of safe corridors and evacuation of the victims of war and prisoner of war exchanges?

The outcry over the meeting had direct operational consequences for the ICRC and its Red Cross partners in Ukraine. Most notably, this included the Ukrainian Red Cross which, despite representing a separate entity, was conflated by many among the public with the ICRC. As a result of the controversy, many

Ukrainians publicly discouraged donations to the ICRC and the Ukrainian Red Cross, claiming that the aid was not reaching beneficiaries, and that the ICRC's ostensibly 'neutral' stance was tacitly legitimising Russia's position (Hyde, 2022). Reportedly, the controversy resulted in threats being made towards volunteers of the Ukrainian Red Cross, as the organisation's city director for Kyiv city explained (ibid.):

We practically couldn't work for a week [after the Maurer-Lavrov meeting] [...] [people] just heard the words Red Cross and that was it – we were all traitors and our volunteers were getting guns pointed at them.

Since the incident with Lavrov, the government of Ukraine itself has been among the ICRC's harshest critics – marrying challenges to the ICRC's professed neutrality with criticism of the organisation's perceived track record in delivering meaningful assistance to people in need across Ukraine. For example, President Zelensky publicly castigated the ICRC at a meeting of the G20, stating (Warner, 2022):

We have not found support in the International Committee of the Red Cross [...] we do not see that they are fully fighting for access to the camps where Ukrainian prisoners and political prisoners are held, or that they are helping to find deported Ukrainians.

Dmytro Lubinets, the Ukrainian ombudsman for human rights, has also been a prominent critic, recently stating that every day he is 'faced with the fact that the Red Cross does not want to perform its functions [...] One organisation uses its history and its name to get in the way of doing something impactful' (Wintour, 2023). These remarks reflect a core narrative behind the government of Ukraine's criticisms, though one vigorously denied by the ICRC itself: that the ICRC's engagement with Russia, justified in terms of humanitarian neutrality, has failed to deliver the material benefits that neutrality is framed as facilitating, in terms of strengthening its ability to assist people in need on both sides of hostilities.

In its response, the ICRC has framed these allegations as being part of a disinformation campaign, creating a web page dedicated to combating disinformation about the ICRC's activities and explaining its use of humanitarian principles. The ICRC has sought to share information about the impact of its work in Ukraine. For example, in a speech in July 2023, Director-General of the ICRC Robert Mardini said that 'in the Russia-Ukraine armed conflict, we have visited hundreds of prisoners of war on both sides (and we continue to push for access to all of them)' (ICRC, 2023a). In June 2023, the ICRC reported that since February 2022 it had visited over 1,500 prisoners of war (PoWs) in Ukraine and Russia, while Red Cross and Red Crescent partners had delivered over 2,500 personal messages between PoWs and their families (ICRC, 2023b). The ICRC has also emphasised that the controversial meeting with Lavrov was part of dialogue with both parties to the conflict (ICRC, 2023c).

However, beyond misunderstandings and disinformation, it is also likely that criticisms of the ICRC have resonated precisely because the narratives used by traditional humanitarian actors such as the ICRC to frame their assistance are at odds with, and sometimes explicitly rejected within, the solidarity-based framing that has become dominant across Europe and within Ukraine itself. Mardini explained the ICRC's position: 'aid organisations do take sides: they take the side of victims. Speaking with parties

to conflict does not mean supporting them’ (Mardini, 2022). In a sense, Mardini’s remarks reflect a different sense of solidarity – encapsulated in the traditional humanitarian principle of humanity – that is decoupled from politics, taking the side of affected people who are suffering, through efforts to assist them. Yet even with this understanding, a tension remains between narratives from the traditional humanitarian sector and broader narratives around the war that have reflected a more partisan sense of solidarity. Notably, in her foreword to the 2023 United Nations humanitarian response plan, Denise Brown, the UN Humanitarian Coordinator for Ukraine, maintained a certain constructive ambiguity between different forms of solidarity, ending her remarks with the statement, ‘We will continue to stand with the people of Ukraine’ (OCHA, 2023).

3.3 Tensions between reconstruction and humanitarian support

Tensions can also be identified surrounding the narrative from Ukraine and allied governments centred on Ukraine’s eventual victory. As already discussed, this has had clear and positive impacts in terms of commitments to future reconstruction. However, this can also be seen as coming at the cost of various trade-offs relating to humanitarian support. The strong emphasis on solidarity with Ukraine foregrounded the notably progressive solutions put forward across Europe to the arrival of refugees. However, at the same time, a focus on Ukraine’s future victory has meant that solutions have been developed within the framing that the need for them is time-limited. For example, in response to a petition ‘to give Ukrainians the right to extend stay and settle’ in the UK, the UK government highlighted (UK Government and Parliament, 2023):

Our schemes provide Ukrainians with three years’ temporary sanctuary in the UK, until Putin is defeated and they can safely return home [...] we firmly believe that Ukraine will be safe again. Therefore, and in accordance with the wishes of the Ukrainian Government, the Ukraine schemes are not a route for permanent relocation to the UK but instead allow for temporary protection until they can return home to rebuild Ukraine.

In this way, narratives around the war have constructed a context that limits the potential for refugees from Ukraine to access long-term status and support, even as the war grows increasingly protracted.

Elsewhere, an optimistic narrative from Ukraine’s government – and echoed by its allies – around a swift victory, immediate reconstruction and the recovery of human capital as citizens return to Ukraine also appears to have restricted space for discussion of the challenges this may involve from a humanitarian perspective. For example, in terms of upholding established practice that returns should be safe, voluntary and dignified (UNHCR, 2023c) or ensuring appropriate support to a population that has undergone significant trauma. The agenda of the Ukraine Recovery Conference reflected these tensions, with sessions primarily focused on harnessing private sector investments towards Ukraine’s recovery, while social aspects of recovery were included only in one session, which itself was framed in terms of ‘human capital recovery’ (Ukraine Recovery Conference, 2023).

3.4 Challenges to solidarity

To date, few mainstream political or media actors across Europe and the West have contested the imperative of standing in solidarity with Ukraine. However, as might be expected, the momentum behind this support has somewhat slowed over time, especially compared to the early days following Russia's full-scale invasion. It will be important to track how expressions of solidarity evolve as the war progresses, including in the context of upcoming elections in Poland, the UK and elsewhere.

In the UK, action to support Ukraine has found an unusual degree of cross-party consensus (White et al., 2023), in the midst of otherwise highly polarised political discourse. This is echoed within the US where, despite some Republican Party opposition, bipartisan support for Ukraine remains robust, and is expected to endure for the foreseeable future (Zengerle, 2023). However, this would be put to the test in the event of the re-election of former president Donald Trump in 2024, who has expressed concerns about the implications of support to Ukraine for the US' own military stockpiles (Herszenhorn, 2023).

In Poland, for the first year of the conflict vocal critics were largely limited to far-right media outlets and political parties, for example Konfederacja, who found little traction and toned down initial anti-Ukrainian rhetoric to avoid a public backlash (Tilles, 2023). Yet political pressure has in recent months mounted over a ban on the import of Ukrainian grain to Poland and four other eastern EU member states, which Poland's government called to be extended beyond its initial end-date (Notes from Poland, 2023a). In a July television appearance, Marcin Przydacz, the head of Polish President Andrzej Duda's international policy office, sparked outrage in Kyiv over remarks emphasising that 'what is most important today is defending the interests of the Polish farmer', while also commenting that (ibid.):

Ukraine has really received a lot of support from Poland. I think it would be worth them starting to appreciate the role that Poland has played for Ukraine in recent months and years.

Ukraine's foreign ministry summoned Poland's ambassador to Ukraine following the remarks, in turn escalating the dispute. Following the row, deputy Polish Foreign Minister Paweł Jabłoński made clear the Polish government's view that its support of Ukraine came with certain limitations: 'Poland still wants to support Ukraine [...] [but] we support Ukraine to the extent that it is in Poland's interest' (Notes from Poland, 2023b).

In Poland, concerns have also been raised about anti-Ukrainian sentiment being expressed on social media. According to analysis by the Never Again Association and SentiOne, in the first year of the war almost 400,000 anti-Ukrainian statements were posted on Polish social media, receiving over 500 million views, with related hashtags including #stopukrainizacjiPolski ('stop the Ukrainisation of Poland') (Amnesty International, 2023). This represents a significant concern, and indeed one likely exacerbated by Russian propaganda and disinformation.

Yet, aside from outright hostility, in Poland and other regional host countries the most prominent counternarrative is one of compassion fatigue. That is to say, while the need for solidarity remains,

civil society and communities are likely to reach the limits of their solidarity – and may in some cases have already done so (Jarosz and Kalus, 2023). This is especially true in the context of the difficult economic circumstances across Europe caused by the war in Ukraine, as well as longstanding challenges with public goods (for example, housing and healthcare) that have been exacerbated in countries hosting large numbers of Ukrainians (Carta et al., 2022; Hargrave et al., 2023). Indeed, since the early days of Russia’s full-scale invasion Poles have been clear that, while dominant, their support was not unconditional: CBOS polling in both August and November 2022 found that only a minority of Poles were in favour of government support to Ukrainians for as long as the war lasts, with far greater support for time-limited assistance (CBOS, 2022a; 2022b). Although public support for accepting Ukrainians remains high in Poland, by April 2023 it had dropped over 20 percentage points from its early high to 73%, the lowest level of recorded since March 2022 (CBOS, 2023).

Finally, it is worth noting the stance taken by governments elsewhere in the world, including in the Global South, many of which – though not explicitly aligning themselves with Russia – have abstained in key votes in the United Nations and refused to engage with Western sanctions (Freedman, 2023). Notably, however, some of these positions appear to have cooled over time, following the significant impacts of the war on food and fuel prices elsewhere in the world, Russia’s increasingly intransigent stance and a campaign of diplomacy by Ukraine’s President Zelensky (ibid.). Recently, various peace initiatives have arisen from governments across Africa and from China, Brazil and Saudi Arabia, often framed in line with the UN Charter: emphasising respect for national sovereignty, territorial integrity and international humanitarian law.

4 A ‘different’ kind of crisis

4.1 Explicit focus on the war in Ukraine as a different kind of crisis

From the outset of the full-scale invasion, coverage from mainstream media outlets – and in some cases political rhetoric – was marked by narratives presenting the war in Ukraine as a ‘different kind of crisis’ and Ukrainian refugees as a ‘different kind of refugee’. These narratives play into the dilemmas outlined previously. In particular, they shape and ultimately present a justification for an emerging hierarchy in Europe of refugee protection for different groups: framing the war and related refugee movements not just as a different kind of crisis, but one necessitating a different range of solutions. Narratives framing the war as a different kind of crisis also played into the high levels of funding and assistance channelled to Ukraine compared to other crises.

Where narratives presented the war in Ukraine as a ‘different kind of crisis’, this often drew on Ukraine’s location within and cultural proximity to Europe, alongside the emphasis on solidarity already discussed. The cultural affinity aspect was particularly prominent in media reporting in the early weeks following Russia’s full-scale invasion.⁵ For example, Daniel Hannan – a British reporter for the *Telegraph* and a Conservative member of the House of Lords – wrote: ‘They seem so like us. That is what makes it so shocking. War is no longer something visited upon impoverished and remote populations. It can happen to anyone’ (Hannan, 2022).

In an effort to humanise Ukrainians, many statements pulled on Orientalist tropes and presented war as a natural phenomenon in ‘other’ places outside of the Western world (Kamaliaa and Djatmiko, 2022). Charlie D’Agata, a senior CBS correspondent in Kyiv, said while on air (Kesslen, 2022):

This isn’t a place, with all due respect, like Iraq or Afghanistan, that has seen conflict raging for decades. You know, this is a relatively civilised, relatively European – I have to choose those words carefully, too – city, where you wouldn’t expect that or hope that it’s going to happen.

Al-Jazeera commentator Peter Dobbie used a similar narrative: ‘These are not obviously refugees looking to get away from areas in the Middle East that are still in a big state of war’ (cited in Bayoumi, 2022).

Sales notes how, through dehumanising comparisons – which provided media audiences with a certain set of tools to understand the situation – ‘media coverage gradually helped push and frame a positive narrative on the need to protect Ukrainian refugees because they were similar to Europeans, behaved like Europeans, and had cultural and democratic values close to those of Europeans’ (Sales, 2023). The

5 Cultural proximity or affinity, as referenced in this paper, refers to the perception that people are more likely to feel compassion and support for refugees or migrants who share similar cultural, ethnic, or geographic backgrounds.

language used by television programmes, newspapers and radio, especially in the first days of the full-scale Russian invasion, emphasised the humanity of Ukrainians and represented them as refugees in need of protection (Rosstalnyj, 2022; Swedmark, 2023; Martikainen and Sakki, 2023). These media narratives combined with other factors, including the narratives already discussed foregrounding solidarity and political self-interest, to shape what Sales describes as ‘the right social and political context’ to enable ‘the most comprehensive legal and policy package ever activated to protect Ukrainian refugees’ (Sales, 2023).

Across Europe, political actors played a dual role: responding in policy terms as these narratives played out across the mainstream media, while also contributing to these narratives themselves, in turn informing how European publics perceived the crisis and what solutions they considered appropriate (ibid.). For example, as the Bulgarian Prime Minister Kiril Petkov articulated (European Commission, 2022a):

These [Ukrainians] are not the refugees we are used to [...] These are our relatives, family. These are Europeans, intelligent, educated people, some of them are programmers. We, like everyone else, are ready to welcome them. This is not the usual refugee wave of people with an unclear past.

On the one-year anniversary of Russia’s full-scale invasion, President Biden also drew on the idea of the war representing an exception to the norm, speaking about it as part of ‘an extraordinary year’, pointing to ‘extraordinary brutality from Russian forces and mercenaries’ as well as an extraordinary ‘response of the Ukrainian people and the world’ (White House, 2023).

4.2 Implicit differences and narratives around other groups of refugees

Nevertheless, some politicians did to some extent push back against this framing. In a speech in September 2022, the European Commission’s President von de Leyen said, ‘Our actions towards Ukrainian refugees must not be an exception. They can be our blueprint for going forward’ (European Commission, 2022b). But, in giving further explanation, von de Leyen qualified these remarks as applying to procedural elements, such as EU responsibility-sharing and quickly deployed responses. Notably, she continued to emphasise the need for ‘effective control of [the EU’s] external borders’ in the case of other groups of refugees and migrants, implicitly accepting a different rationale behind overall responses to other groups, focused primarily on border control as opposed to solidarity.

Von de Leyen’s remarks are illustrative of how, even where narratives did not explicitly point to the war in Ukraine as a different kind of crisis – and indeed in the case of von de Leyen, where this framing was explicitly rejected – political and public narratives nonetheless often implicitly reinforced this picture. For example, this can be seen where the dominant frames used to tell the story of refugee arrivals from Ukraine across Europe diverged from those most commonly emphasised in relation to other groups.

As already discussed, in the case of Ukrainians, common frames focused on a sense solidarity with fleeing Ukrainians. A recent study comparing media portrayals of refugee arrivals to Europe from Syria in 2015 and from Ukraine in 2022 noted more positive characterisations of Ukrainian refugees’ potential economic contributions and the validity of their claims to protection, as well as a lesser tendency to

portray those fleeing Ukraine as a threat (McCann et al., 2023). Threat narratives are a well-established frame in public discourse in relation to other groups of refugees and wider immigration, which have found significant traction in public opinion (Dempster and Hargrave, 2017; Banulescu-Bogdan, 2022). Diverging narratives were echoed by differing attitudes across Europe towards accepting Ukrainian refugees, which were notably more favourable in the case of Ukrainians compared with other groups such as Syrians (Dražanová and Geddes, 2022).

Diverging narratives and attitudes across Europe towards Ukrainian refugees as compared with other groups can be attributed to a wide range of factors. These include their race and shared ethnicity, as well as the sense, discussed previously, of a common enemy. However, wider factors can also be identified, including shared language, history and culture in key destination countries, geographic proximity, the controlled arrival of Ukrainians into the EU through legal channels, and the demographics of those fleeing Ukraine (Barton Hronešová, 2022; Dražanová, 2022; Hargrave et al., 2023; Banulescu-Bogdan et al., forthcoming). In terms of this last point, due to military conscription in Ukraine, women and children made up an estimated 90% of refugees, playing into gendered stereotypes of vulnerability and the need for protection (McCann et al., 2023). Following Russia's full-scale invasion, those fleeing Ukraine were cast as the wives and children of Ukraine's male 'fighting heroes' (Hadj Abdou et al., 2022).

These trends have played out in both Poland and the UK, shaped by unique national, cultural and political dynamics. In Poland, Ukrainian refugees were firmly cast as different to refugee arrivals from the Middle East and Africa, being framed as 'part of an "us" – one that is fighting for freedom and European values – in the face of a "them", defined as Russia and its allies' (Hargrave et al., 2023). In contrast, since 2015 refugees from the Middle East and Africa have been framed – particularly by the now-ruling Law and Justice Party and conservative media – as a threatening 'other', posing a risk to Poland's health, security and cultural values, and as 'fake refugees' arriving in Europe for economic reasons (namely, to have better social benefits and life opportunities) (Goździak and Márton, 2018; Klaus et al., 2018; Szałańska, 2020; Mołęda-Zdziech et al., 2021).⁶ These frames are likely to feature heavily in Poland's upcoming election in October 2023, which is due to be held on the same day as a referendum seeking citizens' opinion on the admission of 'thousands of illegal immigrants from the Middle East and Africa' under relocation mechanisms 'imposed by the European bureaucracy' (Gera, 2023).

A tweet from Poland's territorial defence force on 27 February 2022, just days after the full-scale Russian invasion, made the perceived contrast between Ukrainians and other groups of refugees explicit. The tweet showed a picture of two white, elderly (and ostensibly Ukrainian) women appearing to sit patiently while receiving assistance. This was shown alongside the image of a large, visibly

⁶ Negative narratives from 2015 in Poland about refugees from the Middle East and Africa coincided with a sharp uptick of negative opinion towards accepting refugees from countries affected by conflict. Evidence suggests that opinion may have softened in key respects in the years that followed – even before the mass arrival of Ukrainians from February 2022 – though public opinion data on the situation on the Poland–Belarus border has been subject to bias in the wording of questions and has yielded mixed conclusions (Hargrave et al., 2023).

threatening, group of men appearing to attack a barbed wire fence on the Poland–Belarus border. The image was labelled with the caption: ‘What’s the difference between a refugee and a migrant? A picture says a thousand words’ (Babakova et al., 2022).

In the UK, supportive rhetoric from the Conservative government towards refugees from Ukraine also came in sharp contrast to government narratives surrounding other groups. Successive Conservative governments have used increasingly hard-line rhetoric to frame their efforts to reduce the numbers of people claiming asylum in the UK, particularly those arriving via ‘small boats’ (Kumar and Rottensteiner, 2023). These dynamics are echoed in media reporting. A study examining coverage of recent UK government refugee and asylum policies found that ‘both the right-wing and left-wing newspapers combined to produce a dominant British narrative of ecstatic compassion for Ukrainian refugees’ (Barber, 2022). In the case of right-wing papers, far less compassion was evidenced towards refugees crossing the channel, which was explained on the grounds of cultural proximity (*ibid.*).

Various analysts have emphasised how hard-line narratives towards those seeking asylum in the UK come in contrast to overall British public opinion on immigration, which is positive on many metrics (Juan-Torres et al., 2020; Ford and Morris, 2022; Kumar and Rottensteiner, 2023), while being balanced between the values of compassion and control when it comes to asylum (Katwala et al., 2023). In the case of Ukrainians, public sentiment has broadly echoed supportive government and media rhetoric; a YouGov survey in late February 2022 found that 76% of Britons supported the introduction of pathways to resettle some Ukrainian refugees, with 65% agreeing that offering some form of asylum was a moral imperative (Smith, 2022). A later poll found that support for resettling Ukrainians to the UK was significantly higher than support for resettling Syrian, Afghan and Somali refugees (though in these cases close to half of Britons were nonetheless supportive) (Kirk, 2022).

In the UK – and, to a lesser extent, in Poland (see Hargrave et al., 2023) – refugees from Ukraine have not necessarily been explicitly framed as an entirely ‘different kind of refugee’, but as part of a limited number of discrete groups framed at various moments by the public and politicians as being especially deserving of a generous response. In the case of Ukrainians, UK public opinion was a key driver of the generosity of schemes eventually enacted, following criticism of the government’s more limited initial response. This echoed previous experiences in 2015, where, in response to media and public outrage over the lack of action in supporting the mass exodus of citizens fleeing Syria, the UK government introduced a new resettlement scheme for Syrian refugees (Katwala et al., 2023). In other cases, selective openness has more clearly originated from sentiment within the UK’s government. For example, in January 2021, following crackdowns on protest and political opposition in Hong Kong, the UK government proudly opened up a new immigration pathway for British National (Overseas) status holders, granting almost 154,000 visas by the end of 2022 (UK Home Office, 2023b).

4.3 Counternarratives: calling out racism and foregrounding neglected crises

It should be noted that narratives – explicit or otherwise – portraying the war in Ukraine as a different kind of crisis did not go uncontested, and allegations that non-Ukrainians fleeing Ukraine were not receiving the same levels of assistance were brought to the fore. Across Europe, certain commentators, journalists and NGOs condemned media reporting of the war in Ukraine as ‘shameful’ and as sanctioning ‘racial disparities under the guise of “putting it into context”’ (White, 2022; Foresti and Nwajiaku-Dahou, 2022). For example, Nadia White (2022) wrote:

Because of the Ukrainians’ whiteness and proximity to the west, it’s apparently difficult for some political commentators and roving reporters to grasp how this conflict could have come to pass. It’s as though bloodshed and invasion are only to be foisted upon countries inhabited by Black and brown people.

Similarly, according to Rashawn Ray, even though Ukrainian officials said they would first allow women and children on trains and transport out of the country to flee the Russian invasion, many Black people reported being refused at border crossings in favour of white Ukrainians. This reveals that ‘they meant Ukrainian and European women and children’ (Ray, 2022). A press release by Asylum Access highlighted how the different usage of terms such as ‘invaders’ in reference to refugees from the Middle East and ‘neighbours’ in reference to Ukrainian refugees have real-life consequences and made it easier to roll out a policy that discriminates against people based on these perceptions (Asylum Access, 2022). As videos showing Black people being pushed off trains and Black drivers being reprimanded and stalled by Ukrainians went viral across social media, a counternarrative emerged of the real-life consequences of the framing of Ukrainian refugees vis-à-vis their non-European counterparts (ibid.). For many observers, the racism experienced by Black people and people of colour at the borders of Ukraine mirrored the same vein of bigotry across parts of the international media sphere (White, 2022). Such differential treatment, including in the provision of humanitarian aid, was also experienced by Roma refugees across Europe, including in Moldova (Oxfam, 2022), Hungary (Ellena and Makszimov, 2022) and Poland (Durjasz et al., 2023).

Closely intertwined with narratives about the war in Ukraine being unique or unprecedented, humanitarian actors and analysts also expressed concerns about the disproportionate levels of funding being channelled towards the Ukrainian aid response. Narratives from the humanitarian sector criticising these dynamics focused on a potential diversion of resources from other neglected crises. In turn, such criticism of disproportionate funding directed towards Ukraine influenced how donor governments framed their assistance, characterising funding for Ukraine as ‘additional’, acknowledging concerns that resources might be diverted from other ongoing crises and seeking to justify their actions. For example, the UK Foreign Secretary James Cleverly recently denied that the aid provided to Ukraine would siphon funds from lower-income countries, explaining that peace and reconstruction in Ukraine would ultimately benefit citizens in other regions as well. Cleverly argued that people who

are already vulnerable, facing hunger and grappling with the adverse impacts of climate change have experienced exacerbated hardships due to disruptions in grain and energy exports as a result of the war in Ukraine, leading to higher food and fuel prices (Merrick, 2023).

5 Vulnerability and resistance

5.1 Narratives of vulnerability and resistance

Humanitarian needs in Ukraine have been framed in terms of diverging, and often conflicting, narratives propounded by different humanitarian actors. These have ranged from narratives casting Ukrainians as helpless victims, to those foregrounding their agency as part of a wider spirit of resistance. These narratives are closely connected to those, outlined above, seen in relation to refugees from Ukraine, who have alternately been described as both victims and contributors to host societies. Such narratives have also fed into and shaped dilemmas around ‘localising’ humanitarian assistance, while igniting the aforementioned debates around neutrality.

Importantly, international humanitarian agencies have played a pivotal role in narrative construction around the Ukraine crisis, particularly when framing humanitarian needs and in terms of international audiences. Humanitarian organisations often claim that politicians and the media play the leading role in shaping prevailing narratives, whereas humanitarian organisations themselves function independently from such narratives and adhere to a principled approach. However, these organisations also wield significant influence in framing and perpetuating the stories related to humanitarian crises and aid, if not more so than political and media actors (Saez and Bryant, 2023a). Given the sector’s reliance on voluntary donations, the narratives primarily originate from fundraising appeals and project proposals, as humanitarian actors craft these narratives with the primary aim of fundraising (*ibid.*). Moreover, the close connections between humanitarian actors and international journalists – and the power wielded by the former as shapers of news – further contribute to a distortion in framing humanitarian needs and crisis solutions (*ibid.*).

Fundraising appeals for Ukraine used a familiar humanitarian sector playbook, focusing heavily on the vulnerability of people impacted by the war in Ukraine and the role of humanitarian actors (usually international rather than local) and, by extension, their donors, in alleviating their suffering. Most, if not all, of the images and posters used by the DEC for its Ukraine Humanitarian Appeal featured children, with some of the images featuring elderly women or women with children (DEC, 2023d). Similarly, the first 15 seconds of the DEC’s appeal video broadcast across the UK’s main television channels, including ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5, only features young children (DECcharity, 2022). The use of children as the ‘universal icon of human suffering’ is a longstanding practice within the sector, and the Ukrainian child, similar to the ‘Biafra child’ of the 1960s or the ‘Ethiopia child’ of the 1980s, is useful for NGOs in reinforcing the legitimacy of their ‘emergency’ interventions (Manzo, 2008). Kate Manzo further argues that ‘the iconography of childhood expresses institutional ideals and the key humanitarian values of humanity, neutrality and impartiality’, serving as a sort of brand logo that advertises their ‘encoded humanitarian principles, reflecting back their organisational ideals as much as their purposes and objectives’ (*ibid.*).

Crucial to this narrative framing is the dependence of the ‘beneficiary’ on the actions of the donor. Fundraising campaigns usually emphasise ‘lifesaving donations provided by donors, through aid organisations with noble intentions, to deserving beneficiaries’ (Saez and Byrant, 2023a). Consequently, such narratives ‘place aid and the giver of aid – the fundraising organisations and their donors – at the centre, perpetuating the perception that people in crises are resourceless, lack agency and rely on the benevolence of “saviours”’ (ibid.). Within these narratives, the problem, solution and agent are all encapsulated under the humanitarian umbrella, leading to a clear call to action for potential donors to participate and make these efforts possible, thus alleviating suffering (Saez and Bryant, 2023b).

In the context of Ukraine, extremely high levels of public and media interest in the crisis, underscored by the narratives of solidarity discussed above, meant that the task of the fundraiser was not to stir up public engagement with the crisis, but to channel already existing public interest and a desire to help Ukrainians to specific fundraising appeals and organisations. For example, in reaction to an outpouring of efforts across the UK to collect and transport donated goods to Ukraine and neighbouring countries, DEC CEO Saleh Saeed explained his perspective (DEC, 2022a):

While wanting to collect clothes and other items for people in need is laudable, the things people give today may not be what people need tomorrow. Donating through the DEC is the most helpful way people can assist.

Also important to this humanitarian story is the narrator, which in many fundraising campaigns is a celebrity figure. For example, it was actor Kit Harington who presented the DEC appeal broadcast across various British TV channels (DECcharity, 2022). Celebrities form an integral part of fundraising initiatives: for example, on 29 March 2022, artists including Ed Sheeran, Camila Cabello and Emeli Sandé came together for the two-hour Concert for Ukraine to raise money for the DEC Ukraine Appeal (Sky News, 2022). The concert raised over £13.4 million, bringing the total at the time to £260 million (DEC, 2022b). In addition, many celebrities utilised their Twitter and Instagram accounts to support fundraising efforts, using hashtags such as #SolidaritywithUkraine and #StandUpforUkraine (Groth, 2022). According to Chouliaraki and Stolic, the celebrity figure performs ‘solidarity not only by giving voice to the suffering of refugees but also by routinely educating “us” into compassionate ways of feeling and acting’ (2017). However, celebrity advocacy also reinforces the traditional humanitarian practice of ‘orienting accountability for resource management upwards, towards celebrity fan bases as well as Northern elites and lay[s] bare power dynamics that illustrate broader trends of elite engagement in the landscape of development, particularly its top-down nature’ (Budabin et al., 2017).

As Saez and Bryant (2023a) highlight, these narratives are in conflict with and even undermine the policy commitments aimed at creating a humanitarian system that is more people-centred and locally driven. This is because by focusing on the role of the international organisation, they ignore the capacity and agency of countries, communities and individuals to manage risks (Saez and Bryant, 2023b). In Ukraine, such narratives are also in direct contradiction with the reality of what is happening on the ground and broader narratives surrounding the war. From the early days of the full-scale Russian invasion, Western media focused strongly on the Ukrainian government and its citizens’ resistance

against Russian aggression, portraying citizens who took up arms as freedom fighters and praising their use of technology to outsmart ‘Russian invaders’ (BBC News, 2022; Williams, 2022). This spirit of resistance was encapsulated by the defiant statement by President Zelensky, in response to a reported offer by the US government to assist his evacuation from Kyiv: ‘The fight is here; I need ammunition, not a ride’ (CNN, 2022). As already outlined, contrary to the image of the helpless and resourceless ‘beneficiary’ employed by international actors, most humanitarian assistance in Ukraine was distributed locally by Ukrainian networks, while international agencies were slow to scale up and struggled to meet operational needs.

Outside Ukraine, a narrative of Ukrainian agency and resistance overlapped with and fuelled dominant narratives of solidarity. In Poland, communities hosting Ukrainians acted with similar agency and resistance, organising through informal networks and civil society in the early weeks and months to assist those fleeing Ukraine with minimal to no support from the government (Jarosz and Klaus, 2023). State aid was provided later but remained significantly limited in its reach (Marczewski, 2022). A recent analysis of the response in Poland puts forward the narrative of an overburdened civil society, which has to date taken on the bulk of the refugee response without sufficient government support (Jarosz and Klaus, 2023).

5.2 Narratives and local humanitarian assistance

Competing narratives filtered into humanitarian operations in Ukraine and the wider region, as international organisations began to turn the appeals they had fundraised for into operational reality. In the letters penned to international donors from civil society in Ukraine and Poland (see Section 2.1), local civil society organisations engendered their own narrative around the humanitarian response. In particular, they critiqued the prioritisation of international organisations over local ones for direct funding, in direct contradiction to the sector-wide reform commitments of ‘as local as possible, as international as necessary’.

Critical narratives from local civil society focused on arduous and time-consuming due diligence procedures that local organisations were obligated to undergo, often repeating them up to 10 times (Migration Consortium, 2022; National Network of Local Philanthropy Development, 2022). Both letters also focused on the idea that learning and capacity-building should be viewed as a two-sided process, with Polish NGOs criticising the ‘paternalistic’ overtones of the term ‘implementing partners’ and explaining their perspective that ‘You [international actors] bring extraordinary, much-needed knowledge and we are more than willing to learn from you. At the same time be open to learn from us’ (Migration Consortium, 2022). The letters put forward an ideal solution from their perspective: emphasising the significance of offering sustainable funding by investing in long-term projects, back-end operations, and organisational growth (ibid.).

The letter from Ukrainian NGOs also brought into focus a clash between traditional international humanitarian sector narratives and ways of working – particularly with regards to the principle of neutrality – and narratives of resistance emerging from local actors. The latter foregrounded the

agency of Ukrainians working as part of the local humanitarian response; for example, in defining for themselves the nature of humanitarian assistance and what activities are included. In the open letter, Ukrainian NGOs demanded that international actors ‘let local civil society actors decide our priorities and how we wish to act in solidarity’ (National Network of Local Philanthropy Development, 2022). For Ukrainian national actors, priorities included explicitly helping the war effort – a clear red line in traditional humanitarianism, though in line with the government of Ukraine’s own definition of humanitarian assistance.

Many observers rightly critiqued racist underpinnings of the narratives, discussed previously, that this was a different kind of crisis or that Ukrainian refugees were a different kind of refugee. However, an opportunity was missed in the international humanitarian sector to reflect on the ways in which the war in Ukraine *did* represent a unique crisis for the sector, and the opportunities this presented to trial new ways of working. For example, in a context of extraordinarily high media and public attention to the crisis, to what extent did fundraising appeals for international agencies add value? Was there a missed opportunity to instead connect funds from a willing public across the West directly to local organisations already providing assistance and with their own appeals for funding? Or, if fundraising appeals for international organisations did add value, to what extent was there an opportunity to experiment with new ways of framing international fundraising appeals and eventual operations? For example, funding appeals could place more focus on the role of local actors already providing support, in a way that could later set up their greater autonomy in implementation.

Similarly, several international aid organisations – who often operate in contexts where the state is generally weak, services are dysfunctional and local NGOs are looking for funding – found themselves destabilised in a context where Ukraine’s civil society, municipal authorities and state institutions joined the movement to resist the Russian invasion. These local actors and institutions were bolstered by governments and communities across Europe and ‘combin[ed] solidarity, humanitarian aid, civic action and support for defence efforts’ (Grunewald, 2022). Again, there was a missed opportunity to consider the added value and role of international actors in a context such as Ukraine, where humanitarian assistance for civilians already formed part of a wider state-led movement of resistance; or, equally, to reconsider international organisations’ added value in directly implementing operations in an EU member state such as Poland, which was already demonstrating clear political will to welcome refugees.

Recently, Ukraine’s President Zelensky strongly criticised the slow international response to the humanitarian and ecological catastrophe stemming from the breach of the Kakhovka hydroelectric dam, also reflecting frustration over international agencies’ failure to refute Russian claims of innocence regarding the dam’s destruction (Wintour, 2023). Zelensky particularly emphasised concerns regarding a lack of response by international humanitarian actors in Russian-occupied areas affected by the dam’s collapse (Guardian, 2023):

We need international organisations, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, to immediately join the rescue operation and help people in the occupied part of Kherson region. If an international organisation is not present in the disaster zone, it means it does not exist at all or is incapable.

To some extent these remarks stand in contrast with some of the government of Ukraine's own restrictions on humanitarian aid in NGCAs (discussed earlier), which have contributed towards challenges accessing these areas alongside other factors. However, they can also be seen as representing a narrative shift: recognising a unique added value of international organisations in the context of the war – in delivering assistance at scale in areas the Ukrainian government itself cannot reach – albeit one that has remained largely unfulfilled to date. It will be important to track how these dynamics evolve over time, including whether these narratives pre-empt any greater diplomatic push from government donor representatives in Kyiv on these issues.

6 Conclusion

The humanitarian dilemmas, policies and decision-making that developed since the onset of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 unfolded in the presence of multiple narratives, framing everything from the war itself to humanitarian needs and action. This working paper has explored three central narratives that emerged across Ukraine, Poland and the UK, as well as Europe and the West more widely: a narrative of solidarity with Ukraine; the narrative that this was a different kind of crisis; and a tension between narratives foregrounding Ukrainian vulnerability and those centred on resistance. As has been discussed throughout this paper, these narratives have had real-world implications, being inextricably intertwined with key dilemmas in the humanitarian response, including those around localisation, humanitarian neutrality and the emergence in Europe of a hierarchy of refugee protection.

The research following on from this working paper will dig deeper into the different types of narratives that have emerged in Ukraine, Poland and the UK, how these have been shaped by the unique dynamics of each context, and their practical implications. It will also explore how these narratives evolve over time. For example, in the context of the UK and Poland, the research will track any waning of narratives foregrounding solidarity with Ukraine, particularly as the crisis becomes protracted and as both countries approach elections. In the context of Ukraine itself, the research will consider how narratives evolve over time in line with ongoing dynamics in the war.

The research will ultimately consider how these narratives could be reshaped to ensure better outcomes for people in need, including through international support for more locally led and people-centred humanitarian action. While this working paper highlights potential missed opportunities, it also demonstrates an important opportunity for humanitarian actors, as part of a wider ecosystem of voices; namely, the opportunity for humanitarians to proactively shape the very narratives that influence the dilemmas navigated in their work and that impact their ability to provide relevant and effective assistance.

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