

HUMANITARIAN OBSERVATORY FOR CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

No 1/2025

FROM THE EDITORS

We are pleased to present the inaugural issue of the **Humanitarian Observatory for Central and Eastern Europe Newsletter**. This quarterly newsletter is an initiative of the Humanitarian Observatory for Central and Eastern Europe, established in 2024 as part of the global network coordinated by the Hague Humanitarian Studies Centre at Erasmus University Rotterdam. The Observatory serves as a collaborative space, bringing together organisations from academia, humanitarian action, and civil society to critically engage with humanitarian governance, refugee response, and crisis management in the region.

About the Newsletter

Our newsletter seeks to provide timely, accessible, and evidence-based updates on humanitarian issues, migration trends, refugee protection, and border management in Central and Eastern Europe. It serves as a platform to amplify local voices, share reflections from the ground, and foster dialogue among practitioners, researchers, and decision-makers.

Following our editorial guidelines, the newsletter is designed to reach a wide audience, moving beyond academic language to ensure clarity and inclusivity. Each issue aims to bring a balanced overview of key humanitarian developments, giving space to various actors and focusing on cross-cutting topics such as inclusion, ethics, and the effectiveness of humanitarian responses.

What's inside this issue?

In this **first issue (1/2025)**, we take a sobering look at the ripple effects of the **USAID funding cuts across the region**.

- In **Poland**, the humanitarian sector has faced an abrupt setback as US aid cuts and the re-evaluation of foreign aid programs led to the suspension or downsizing of critical refugee support services. This has particularly affected women, children, the elderly, and people with disabilities among the nearly one million Ukrainian refugees in the country. According to information provided by the Migration Consortium and the Ukrainian House, these changes have significantly impacted the availability and continuity of

essential assistance – as well as the prospects of future response.

- In **Ukraine**, communities are reeling from the sudden halt in support for agriculture, energy infrastructure, and veteran mental health services. Open Space Works Ukraine together with Ground Truth Solutions highlight how cash assistance remains crucial, yet often inaccessible for those closest to the frontlines or living with war injuries.
- In **Belarus**, Human Constanta reports a rise in distress calls from migrants stranded at the Belarus-EU border. With the collapse of voluntary return programs and dwindling humanitarian support, migrants – particularly women – are

pushed into extreme survival strategies, including transactional sex.

Additionally, the issue reflects upon the Amplifying Community Voices workshop in Kyiv, where researchers and practitioners examined how participatory research methods can ensure truly community-driven humanitarian responses. The discussions underscored both the power and the challenges of engaging affected populations in shaping aid efforts.

We hope this first edition sets the tone for a thought-provoking, collaborative, and regionally relevant newsletter. We warmly invite feedback, contributions, and ideas for future issues.

NEWS FROM OUR PARTNERS

POLAND

Poland: aid cuts and solidarity at a crossroads

From January to May 2025, similarly to the worldwide trends, Poland's humanitarian landscape has been shaped by US aid cuts, which accelerated the exit strategy of international actors and significantly damaged the local refugee response. An executive order on the reevaluation of US foreign aid on 20th January 2025 resulted in local organisations receiving notifications to halt their activities and sharp cuts in UN-funded programmes, such as the UNHCR Refugee Response Plan ([Mapuj Pomoc 2025](#)). In February, 77 humanitarian organisations in

Poland appealed for USD 392 million for the years 2025-2026 to support nearly one million Ukrainian refugees, 80% of whom are particularly vulnerable groups: women, children, the elderly, with disabilities ([UNHCR 2025](#)). The Mapuj Pomoc survey from this period, based on responses from 38 local NGOs, indicated that, firstly, all of these organisations received direct and/or indirect support from USAID and, secondly, 29 of them were forced to suspend or severely restrict their activities for an indefinite period (only three declared “continuation of activities without changes” [Mapuj Pomoc 2025](#)).

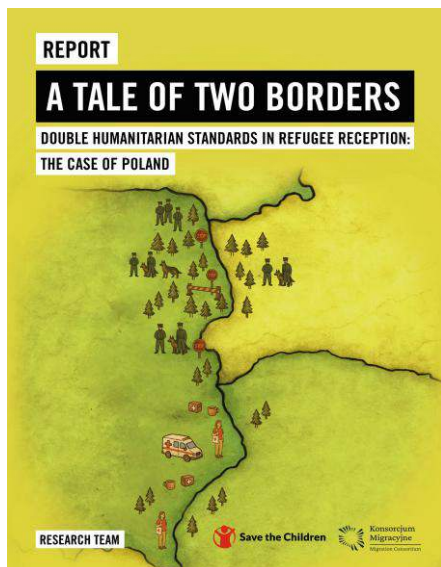


Photo: Migration Consortium's report on double humanitarian standards in Poland, published in May 2025

Localisation and compassion fatigue

Aid cuts have severely affected both the Polish-Ukrainian humanitarian response and the aid delivery on the Polish-Belarusian border, where a parallel humanitarian crisis has been ongoing since August 2021 ([We Are Monitoring 2025](#)). Poland's bottom-up humanitarian response – described by the global humanitarian community as “solidarity-driven” and “[unprecedented](#)”, and by others as “an [unfinished story of localisation](#)” – has been called into question as humanitarian fatigue sets in and anti-refugee sentiment grows during of the Polish presidential campaign. In the wake of this, Ukrainian organisations in Poland have been subject to disinformation attacks and legislative proposals have emerged to toughen migration regimes (e.g. removing the child benefit from refugees who are not working). [The new ODI study](#) on humanitarian narratives on Ukrainian reception shows how the Polish response was strongly shaped by the narratives of solidarity, resistance and exceptionalism, while the [new HLA study](#) proves that the civil society in three years of

full-scale war has moved from hospitality to exhaustion and securitisation.

INGOs’ expectations that the state would assume a leadership role following their withdrawal from Poland have reportedly not been met: the project for state/NGO cooperation in a [new network of Centres for Immigrant Integration](#) has been undermined by organisational gaps, that have led to these centres becoming a fuel for expressions of local anti-immigrant resentments. Additionally, at the time of writing, there is no official information as to whether temporary protection for Ukrainian refugees will be extended beyond [the current deadline of September 2025](#).

Securitisation and migration control

The discourse on securitisation remains prevalent in policies and political debate regarding the Polish-Belarusian border, [still crossed by hundreds of irregular migrants](#) (mostly from Middle East and African countries). Poland has intensified its border security measures with Belarus, planning to complete a reinforced barrier by summer 2025: a project that cost over 0.6 billion USD. In February 2025, the Polish parliament [enacted legislation](#) in practice allowing for the temporary suspension of asylum rights for individuals crossing the border irregularly, particularly in response to a perceived “instrumentalisation of migration” by foreign states such as Belarus and Russia. This move is part of the broader migration strategy introduced in October 2024. The strategy has faced criticism [from human rights organisations](#) for potentially violating international law and EU standards; and from [academia for ignoring the experts’ recommendations](#).

UKRAINE

Impact of USAID funding cuts on communities in Ukraine

A [recent rapid study](#) by Open Space Works Ukraine and Ground Truth Solutions highlights the severe consequences of the sudden USAID funding pause for communities across Ukraine. Farmers in southern oblasts lost access to agricultural support during the critical planting season, endangering domestic food security and exports. Humanitarian energy projects, vital for protecting power and heating infrastructure under attack, were halted, leaving entire settlements vulnerable to blackouts. Veteran organisations were forced to suspend services, including vital mental health support. Local leaders warn that the long-term effects of these cuts will undermine Ukraine's recovery, gradually degrading public services, infrastructure, and humanitarian capacities at the local level. The abrupt nature of the cuts left little time for adaptation.

Cash assistance through the eyes of Ukrainians

Cash assistance has proven vital but uneven in Ukraine. The final round of the [User journeys of \(and by\) cash recipients in Ukraine](#) explored how cash grants for agriculture, small businesses, and winter needs supported people's livelihoods – particularly in frontline areas. Recipients shared how timely agricultural grants helped sustain rural economies, and small business grants empowered women to rebuild amid displacement and hardship. Yet gaps remain. People living near the frontline reported significant barriers to accessing aid, while ex-combatants recovering from war injuries

were often overlooked by humanitarian cash programmes. Their experiences reveal the urgent need for a more inclusive design, stronger consultation with affected communities, and a shift from short-term assistance towards building real resilience.

Amplifying community voices: reflections and lessons from participatory research

During the *Amplifying Community Voices* workshop held in Kyiv in March 2025, researchers and practitioners reflected on how participatory approaches can strengthen humanitarian action in Ukraine. Discussions underscored that engaging aid recipients throughout the research process – from question design to interpreting



Caption: Humanitarian researchers during the *Amplifying Community Voices* workshop held in Kyiv, March 2025, exchanging experiences on participatory research approaches in humanitarian settings.

Photo credit: Taras Tymchuk

results – leads to more grounded and credible findings. However, barriers persist: the fear of repercussions for giving critical feedback, fatigue from repeated surveys, and limited coordination between humanitarian actors. Returning results to communities, validating findings locally, and promoting a stronger culture of learning and collaboration across the sector are seen as

critical steps towards ensuring that humanitarian responses reflect real needs rather than assumptions.

BELARUS

Escalating humanitarian needs at the Belarus-EU border

Since the start of the crisis at the Belarus-EU border, Human Constanta has been closely monitoring the situation on the Belarusian side. [The organisation has conducted surveys with migrants, engaged with government and international stakeholders, and analysed data from open sources.](#)

Health emergencies worsened by fear and lack of access

During this period, we have observed a rise in urgent requests for assistance from migrants of various genders, ages, nationalities, and legal statuses in Belarus. Many are stranded in the country with serious medical conditions, including fractured limbs, dog bite wounds, and life-threatening shortages of essential medications such as insulin. Fear of arrest or deportation prevents many from seeking medical care, leading to severe health consequences. For example, we are aware of a woman from Congo who was forced to undergo a finger amputation after being unable to access insulin in time.

U.S. funding cuts cripple voluntary return programs

The U.S. funding freeze has significantly impacted the operations of international organisations in Belarus. As a result, we received confirmation from IOM that their

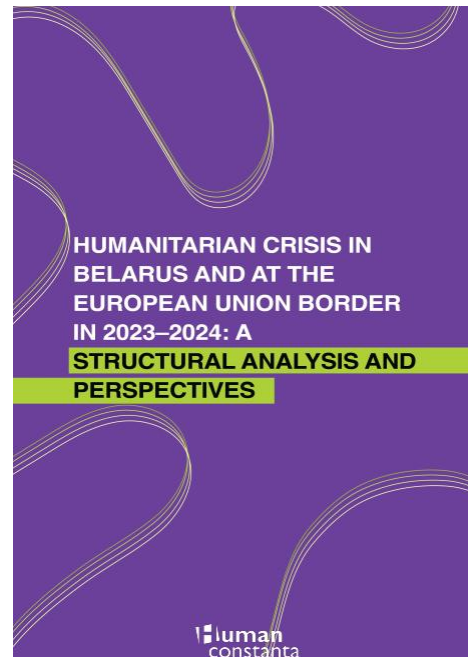


Photo: Human Constanta's report on the crisis at the Belarus-EU border, published in April 2025.

ability to support voluntary return programs is now severely restricted. Assistance is currently provided only in exceptionally vulnerable cases, assessed individually. However, the lack of transparency regarding vulnerability criteria leaves migrants in uncertainty, unsure whether they will receive help. This forces many to seek alternative, often dangerous ways to escape their crisis.

Trapped and vulnerable: migrant women facing survival exploitation

We have documented at least two cases of African migrant women in critical situations in Belarus. Both reported being completely without resources, unable to find safe shelter, and receiving no support from the state or local organisations. In their struggle to survive, they were forced to engage in survival sex — exchanging sexual services for food and temporary accommodation.

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PROJECT

The [Humanitarian Observatory for Central and Eastern Europe](#) was established in 2024, as a new member of the international network of [Observatories](#). It is an organised space and network that undertakes activities dedicated to understanding local, regional or national humanitarian governance. It is self-governing, and consists of a Host Organisation, and multiple participating individuals and/or organisations from sectors including, but not limited to, academia, humanitarian action, research, government, civil society organisations. The network coordinator for the Observatories is [The Hague Humanitarian Studies Centre](#), based at Erasmus University Rotterdam.

The aim of the cooperation is to develop joint research activities, identify key thematic areas for exchange and collaboration in humanitarian ethics, reassess humanitarian studies and promote inclusion and effectiveness in humanitarian action, with the regional focus on Central and Eastern Europe, and refugee response.

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