

# HUMANITARIAN OBSERVATORY

## FOR CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

No 3-4/2025

## FROM THE EDITORS

### About the Newsletter

The double issue No. 3-4/2025 of the Humanitarian Observatory for Central and Eastern Europe reflects a period of intensifying pressure on humanitarian action in the region, shaped by the convergence of war, political recalibration, infrastructure collapse and the shrinking space for civil society. The analyses collected in this issue document not only escalating humanitarian needs, but also the growing complexity of the environments in which humanitarian and human rights actors operate.

### What's inside this issue?

- **Ukraine** remains at the centre of compounded humanitarian risks: rising attacks on humanitarian workers, the systematic targeting of energy infrastructure and winter blackouts as a crisis multiplier, and renewed geopolitical uncertainty linked to discussions of a potential US-Russian deal. At the same time, the 2025 localisation progress report points to a familiar gap between procedural advances and limited structural change, with power, resources and decision-making still concentrated among international actors.
- **Belarus** illustrates the deepening fusion of repression, migration control and digital authoritarianism. Alongside the conditional release of political prisoners, civil society organisations document the expansion of digital repression, cyber-surveillance, online criminalisation and disinformation practices that increasingly affect activists, migrants, journalists and humanitarian actors.
- **Poland** stands at a crossroads between integration-oriented reforms and restrictive border practices. As most international organisations complete their exit, local NGOs face widening protection and research gaps, while migration debates are shaped by selective narratives, securitisation and the growing influence of online disinformation and hostile rhetoric.

Across all three country contexts, funding volatility, cybercrime, disinformation and digital threats emerge as cross-cutting challenges, undermining humanitarian access, public trust and the operational safety of civil society organisations.

This issue also features a dedicated **VARIETES** section, which broadens the

analytical lens beyond country updates. It includes the announcement of a new research project examining the consequences of USAID funding cuts for civil society organisations in Poland from a decolonial perspective, as well as insights from the AfrikuEurope International Webinar, which explored climate-induced migration, humanitarian governance and Europe–Africa policy responses. Together, these contributions highlight the importance of research, dialogue and knowledge exchange

in addressing complex and interconnected humanitarian challenges.

Taken together, the materials in this issue underline that humanitarian action in Central and Eastern Europe cannot be understood in isolation from geopolitical bargaining, digital threats and structural inequalities in aid governance. They also reaffirm the need for sustained attention, accountability and locally grounded responses at a time when humanitarian space across the region is becoming increasingly fragile.

## NEWS FROM OUR PARTNERS

### UKRAINE

Maryana Zaviyska

This update examines NGO warnings over a potential US-Russian deal, rising attacks on humanitarian workers, the compounding effects of winter blackouts, and evidence that localisation progress remains largely procedural rather than structural. As 2025 draws to a close, humanitarian action in Ukraine is under growing strain from intersecting political, security and infrastructure pressures.

#### Humanitarian risks in focus as NGOs warn over a potential US-Russian deal on Ukraine

As discussions around a potential US-Russian deal on Ukraine intensified toward the end of 2025, Ukrainian and international humanitarian organisations publicly warned that the direction and substance of the peace process could have serious consequences for

civilian protection and humanitarian response.

In late November 2025, Oxfam, together with Ukrainian civil society partners, issued a [statement](#) cautioning that any deal negotiated over Ukraine's future without full Ukrainian participation and consent risks entrenching injustice and undermining international humanitarian law. While recognising the urgent need to end hostilities, the organisations stressed that peace arrangements involving territorial concessions or frozen conflicts could legitimise violations committed during the war and leave affected communities without accountability, safety or sustainable recovery prospects.

From a humanitarian perspective, NGOs warned that a politically expedient deal could reduce international attention, funding and

access before conditions on the ground are stable. Aid actors noted that premature declarations of “peace” risk triggering early donor disengagement.



Photo: Ales Ustinau, Pexels.com.

Humanitarian organisations also raised concerns that an agreement lacking strong guarantees for civilian protection, freedom of movement and unimpeded humanitarian access could complicate aid delivery in areas under contested control. Previous experience in other conflict settings shows that ceasefires or political settlements that fail to embed humanitarian safeguards often result in restricted access, politicisation of aid and uneven recovery, particularly for displaced people and communities near former front lines.

These warnings echo broader positions long articulated by international and Ukrainian NGOs: that peace processes must be grounded in international humanitarian law, accountability for violations, and sustained support for affected civilians, rather than narrowly focused geopolitical arrangements.

### Rising threats to humanitarian workers

Throughout autumn and winter 2025, humanitarian workers in Ukraine continued to face grave dangers while delivering life-saving assistance amid sustained hostilities.

Autumn 2025 brought a sharp reminder that humanitarian staff and assets remain directly exposed to hostilities. On 4 September, the [UN Humanitarian Coordinator condemned](#) an attack in the Chernihiv region that killed two Danish Refugee Council colleagues and injured eight more; the statement noted that at least four humanitarian workers had already been killed and 34 injured in 2025 before that incident.

In October, a UN inter-agency aid convoy delivering hygiene kits, medicines and shelter materials to Bilozerka (Kherson region) came under attack by drones, with two clearly marked World Food Programme (WFP) trucks damaged and set on fire. Fortunately, staff were not physically injured in this incident, but the targeting of protected humanitarian assets drew [strong condemnation from UN leadership as “utterly unacceptable”](#) and potentially in violation of international humanitarian law.

Beyond individual incidents, humanitarian operations in Ukraine have been affected by hundreds of access-related security incidents reported across the country, including fire directed at distribution points and threats to convoys and field teams.

According to humanitarian monitoring data, between January and October 2025, over 230 access incidents were [logged](#), with aid workers increasingly exposed to danger. These incidents underscore a shrinking operational space for frontline deliveries, especially where communities may go months without assistance.

### **Blackouts as a humanitarian crisis multiplier**

As Ukraine moved into late autumn and winter 2025, renewed large-scale attacks on energy infrastructure pushed power outages from a chronic disruption into a central humanitarian concern. According to the [UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine \(HRMMU\)](#), multiple coordinated missile and drone strikes in October and November severely damaged electricity generation and transmission facilities, triggering nationwide blackouts and emergency outages that in some regions lasted more than 36 consecutive hours. Human rights monitors warned that these attacks placed civilians at heightened risk as temperatures dropped and basic services became increasingly fragile.

These blackouts have also significantly strained humanitarian operations. Aid agencies report that unstable electricity affects nearly every aspect of response delivery – from communications and coordination to cash assistance, which depends on functioning banking and digital systems. Health facilities and mobile medical teams increasingly rely on generators and fuel supplies to maintain life-saving services and protect cold chains for vaccines and essential medicines. According to the [UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs \(OCHA\)](#), operating under blackout conditions has increased costs, slowed

response times and reduced operational flexibility, particularly in hard-to-reach and frontline areas.

At the same time, the loss of power has driven additional humanitarian needs. Winter blackouts have increased demand for winterisation assistance, emergency heating solutions and so-called “safe and warm spaces”, even as insecurity and damaged infrastructure complicate access. Humanitarian partners report that communities already affected by displacement, poverty or proximity to hostilities experience the most severe cumulative effects ([OCHA Humanitarian Needs Overview 2025](#)).

This convergence of energy insecurity and active war is unfolding against a broader humanitarian backdrop in which 12.7 million people – around 36 per cent of Ukraine’s population – required humanitarian assistance in 2025, according to OCHA. As repeated attacks on energy infrastructure continued, humanitarian agencies stressed that blackouts were no longer a secondary operational challenge but a core driver of vulnerability, shaping both civilian survival strategies and the ability of aid actors to respond effectively.

### **Key findings from the humanitarian localization progress report 2025**

[The Humanitarian Localization Baseline for Ukraine: Progress Report 2025](#) shows steady rhetorical and procedural progress on localization but limited structural change. Ukrainian organisations remain central to humanitarian delivery, yet control over resources, risk, and decision-making continues to sit largely with international actors. Direct funding to national and local organisations remains constrained. Most

resources still flow through international intermediaries, with short funding cycles, delayed disbursements, and limited coverage of core costs undermining organisational sustainability and long-term planning. Localization is therefore advancing primarily at the level of implementation, not governance.

The report highlights persistent power asymmetries in partnerships. Ukrainian actors increasingly carry operational and security risks, while compliance, reporting, and due-diligence requirements – designed

for large international organisations – place a disproportionate burden on local NGOs, particularly smaller and community-based organisations.

Participation in coordination mechanisms has improved, but influence remains uneven. Ukrainian organisations are more visible in formal spaces, yet their ability to shape strategic priorities, programme design, and funding decisions is inconsistent. Information asymmetries and informal power dynamics continue to affect whose knowledge is valued.

## BELARUS

Kyrill Kofanov

### Human rights context and the release of political prisoners

Throughout late 2025, major human rights monitors and local NGOs ([such as Viasna](#)) continue to document systemic repression by the Belarusian state against dissent, civil society actors, journalists, and ordinary citizens. In October 2025, Viasna recorded 114 cases of politically motivated repression, including arrests and property searches. These cases involved criminal and administrative prosecutions. As of the end of October, at least 9044 individuals have been subjected to criminal prosecution on political grounds since 2020. The European Parliament [passed a resolution](#) on the situation in Belarus, calling for providing support to the Belarusian pro-democracy forces.

A significant development in late 2025 was the release of substantial numbers of political prisoners, including key opposition figures and human rights advocates: On December 13, the Belarusian authorities [freed 123 detainees](#), among them Nobel Peace laureate Ales Bialiatski and prominent opposition leader Maria Kalesnikava, after negotiations tied to the United States easing certain sanctions. Viasna has published [their summary](#) of the human rights situation in Belarus for 2025.

In December 2025, Human Constanta published a report [From Streets to Screens: digital repression in Belarus](#). This report examines the transformation of repressive practices in Belarus since 2020, with a focus on the systematic persecution of online activity. As offline protests were violently suppressed, the digital space became a central arena for state control, criminal prosecution, and intimidation.



The research demonstrates how social media comments, anti-war statements, donations, participation in online initiatives, chat administration, and even minimal forms of digital interaction are increasingly used as grounds for criminal and administrative cases. The report combines quantitative data, analysis of court practice, and detailed case studies, showing how Belarusian anti-extremism legislation has effectively turned into a universal tool of political repression.

### Refugees' rights in Belarus: case studies

Migrants remained stranded at and around the Belarusian side of the EU border, often in precarious conditions with limited access to humanitarian assistance and heightened exposure to abuse by border security personnel from both Belarusian and EU member state sides. [Human rights documentation](#) notes ongoing deaths and serious mistreatment of migrants in these zones. On December 12<sup>th</sup>, [180 non-Belarusian migrants](#) entered Poland irregularly through a tunnel on the country's border with Belarus. According to Polish Border Guard officers, 130 members of the group who made the crossing near the village of Narewka in the Podlaskie region were detained shortly afterwards.

Human Constanta has provided some case studies highlighting the challenges that both protection seekers and NGOs face, trying to navigate the difficult legal and humanitarian context.

**Mariam:** After being expelled from Belarus, Mariam is now in Guinea while her newborn daughter Sabina remains in Belarus. Despite ongoing efforts, they still have no possibility of reunification. Their separation continues because a single bureaucratic barrier – the absence of documents – prevents a mother

and her baby from being reunited. Mariam has received none of the documents needed for Sabina's travel papers, nor any official information about her daughter's legal status. Repeated attempts to seek assistance have led nowhere. To push for urgent action, Human Constanta has launched a public [petition](#) calling for the issuance of Sabina's documents. Your signature can help move this humanitarian case forward.



Photo: Human Constanta

A recent [incident](#) in Minsk – where a foreign journalist known for praising the authorities was suddenly detained and placed in degrading conditions – shows how vulnerable foreigners in Belarus remain. Even public loyalty offers no protection from arbitrary actions or poor detention conditions. Our monitoring confirms broader systemic issues: shrinking access to legal aid, lack of information for relatives and embassies, limited consular presence, and no family support within the country, leaving detainees without basic necessities. Belarus also has no specialized detention facilities for foreigners – instead, they are held in general temporary detention centers, where staff are not trained to work with non-nationals and conditions are often harsh and inappropriate. This case underscores a troubling reality: any foreign national in Belarus can face dehumanizing

treatment, regardless of their background or status.

Human Constanta was also following the case of an Indian citizen who sought protection in Belarus, received a refusal, and lost his passport - leaving him unable to leave the country. After suffering severe exposure to cold, he underwent a double leg amputation and has spent over a year in a medical facility. Despite receiving life-saving care, no steps have been taken to resolve his

## POLAND

Sarian Jarosz

From October to December 2025, Poland's humanitarian landscape was marked by significant policy shifts – concerning labour. In October Poland adopted a standalone [Act on Conditions for Admissibility of Entrusting Work to Foreigners](#), which is a major policy shift regulating migrant employment, aiming to protect foreign workers from exploitation and improve integration outcomes. The law introduces digitalised employment procedures and transparency measures, alongside a program for foreign student inclusion.

In November the Polish government introduced changes to the Act on assistance to Ukrainian citizens, changing the access to collective accommodation for people displaced from Ukraine, imposing modest fees and limiting eligibility rules for vulnerable groups, while integration support was coupled with governmental program Razem do Niezależności. Additionally, in late December, local NGOs received the proposal of the amended [Act on Assistance](#), with just a few days to consult 800 different legislative

situation. He has not received support to restore his documents, struggles to understand migration officials, and fears deportation. His basic needs remain unmet, and even the wheelchair he depends on is shared among several patients, sharply limiting his mobility and affecting his wellbeing. His case illustrates how, without coordinated action from Belarusian and Indian authorities, a person can remain trapped in prolonged uncertainty and vulnerability.

elements. Some organisations, such as the Association for Legal Intervention, [published their opinion on the proposed changes](#). Though initiated earlier, the Polish Migration Strategy for 2025-2030 continued to shape policy dialogue in late 2025, influencing debates among states and civil society about security, protection, and integration goals. Additionally, public consultations on the 2026 Development Cooperation Plan, with wide input from NGOs (e.g., Caritas Polska, PAH, IPM, Polskie Forum Migracyjne), were concluded in December.

### Poland after the exit strategy: protection and research gaps remain

Migration and humanitarian research underscored persistent gaps: a [Protection Brief](#) based on over one thousand interviews with Ukrainian refugees detailed protection needs and service access patterns throughout 2025. Previous reports from Polish NGOs (e.g. Migration Consortium) highlighted systemic barriers faced by LGBTQI+ refugees and asylum seekers, calling for tailored protection and inclusion measures. With almost all international organisations leaving Poland at the end of the year (including [Save the Children](#)), the

planned transition of aid activities and the protection of vulnerable groups from the INGO sector to public administration remained incomplete.



Photo: Sarian Jarosz

Human rights watchdogs like [HRW](#) noted in their World Report 2025 that despite Poland's hospitality toward Ukrainian refugees, pushbacks and border exclusion practices persisted at the Belarus frontier,

raising humanitarian and legal concerns. The 'selective restrictions' and change of narratives have been noted by academia - for example in Łukasiewicz, Pachocka and Yelisseyeu's [paper](#), as well as by the Nomada Association in their new reports describing the rise of anti-migrant rhetoric and increase of targeted violence in the municipality of Wrocław (2025).

### Border realities during winter

The drop in temperature at the Polish-Belarusian border, the gradual sealing of the border wall, and the militarisation of the region, combined with the effective implementation of asylum law, led to an expected significant decrease in the number of border crossings. In December 2025, [according to data from the We Are Monitoring Association](#), there had been 13,000 pushbacks and 26,000 requests for humanitarian assistance since October 2021. Trends at the Polish-Ukrainian border are stable, and, according to [UNHCR data \(December 2025\)](#), there are 968,000 refugees from Ukraine registered under UKR PESEL in Poland.

## VARIETES

### New Research Project Announcement

Marta Kindler, Katarzyna Kubin

In August 2025, researchers at the [Centre of Migration Research \(CMR\)](#) at the University of Warsaw, Dr. [Marta Kindler](#) and Dr.

[Katarzyna Kubin](#), launched a new research project entitled "'A blank spot' on the map of USAID areas of support – A preliminary assessment of the consequences of USAID funding cuts for civil society organisations in Poland and an analysis of the gaps in media discourses regarding the situation in Poland and EU's East from a decolonial perspective."



The study is a rapid response to the situation that resulted from the newly sworn-in President of the United States, Donald Trump's, announcement in the first quarter of 2025 about closing the US Agency for International Development (USAID). Leading up to and following this decision, media attention focused primarily on the consequences that the lack of USAID funding would have for countries and communities in the global South. Yet, it rapidly became clear that this decision also has an impact on Poland and the wider region East of Europe (e.g. see the recent [report by the Dalan Fund](#) and the [Caspian Policy Center](#)).

In light of this situation, the objectives of this rapid response study are twofold. The first aim is to carry out a preliminary diagnosis of the situation of civil society organisations (CSO's) in Poland that have been directly affected by the closure of USAID, with a particular focus on those that work with and

support refugee, migrant and LGBTQI+ communities. The study looks at the situation of CSO's holistically in the current context of complex shifts that result from, on the one hand, the changing funding landscape, and, on the other, the demographic changes caused by the ongoing war in Ukraine. This part of the study is based on interviews with representatives of local CSO's in Poland, INGO's that operated or continue to operate in the country, and other local stakeholders, in order to gain a better understanding of the internal capacities and structures of local CSO's, the potential changes introduced in the scope of and/or approach to service provision to at-risk communities, and the CSO's plans and prospects for continued

operations. The second objective of the study is to undertake a preliminary review of media narratives (both in Poland and outside of Poland) that address the USAID closure. The aim is to evaluate to what extent regions East of Europe were present in media narratives regarding the USAID closure and, if so, how were these regions represented. The potential gaps or silences in media discourses will be considered with reference to imaginaries about the global regions and populations that are in need of international development aid.

Initial insights from this ongoing research indicate that, from local CSOs' perspectives, the closure of USAID came at a time when the strategic priorities of many other existing funding sources, which had been available in Poland, changed in a way that negatively impacted CSOs. Furthermore, the timing also coincided with a reduction of operations or full retraction of many INGOs, which had been supporting local CSOs in Poland in their humanitarian response after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. In effect, the USAID closure deepened what was already being experienced by many CSOs as a funding crisis, which is yet another in a series of crises that affected CSOs in Poland in recent years.

This rapid response study is possible thanks to funding from the [Centre of Excellence in the Social Sciences \(CESS\)](#) at the University of Warsaw. Initial results of the study will be shared in 2026 at relevant conferences as well as in less formal seminar events, both in Poland and outside of the country. It is anticipated that the project will be followed up with a longer and more complex study.

# AfriquEurope International Webinar – SUMMARY

Marta Pachocka

The Humanitarian Observatory for Central and Eastern Europe co-organized on 21 November 2025 the AfriquEurope International Webinar, titled "Migration at the Crossroads: Europe–Africa Responses to Climate Change, Forced Displacement, and Humanitarian and Policy Challenges," which served as the core activity of the AfriquEurope Policy Debates Project funded by the Erasmus+ Program. The project aims to generate concrete policy recommendations through collaborations across academia and civil society in Europe and Africa. The webinar, moderated by Marta Pachocka (member of the research team of the AfriquEurope project at SGH Warsaw School of Economics and Co-coordinator of the Humanitarian Observatory for Central and Eastern Europe at the Centre of Migration Research of the University of Warsaw), focused on how climate-induced migration phenomena and humanitarian challenges are framed and governed. The event was attended by almost 60 participants.

One of the central themes of the webinar was the innovative response of the Humanitarian Observatories (HO) Network, which was one of the event's key co-organisers. Gabriela Anderson, Community and Project Manager at The Hague Humanitarian Study Center (HSC), presented the initiatives. She stressed that they serve as venues for learning, strategic thinking, and influence. For instance, Gabriela mentioned cases like the Ethiopia Humanitarian Observatory, which wrote a statement to the government

about aid diversion, illustrating their investigative and advocacy role. The observatories are rooted in promoting solidarity and humanitarian justice, operating on principles of self-governance and independence.



Photo: AfriquEurope International Webinar.

Specific observatories featured prominently in the discussion. Namibia Humanitarian Observatory, driven by Caritas Namibia, focuses on climate change awareness, assisting subsistence farmers, and managing rural-urban migration. Guests Sister Agrippina Nandjaa and Joseph Kalokela (from Caritas Namibia) explained that their outputs are contextually grounded, utilizing radio broadcasting to communicate vital information (e.g., dealing with droughts or flooding) to affected communities, recognizing that websites are often ineffective.

## Findings on Climate Migration and Legal Frameworks

The webinar highlighted specific challenges across Africa and Europe related to environmental mobility:

In Namibia, natural disasters like droughts and floods drive both international migration (e.g., from Angola) and internal rural-urban migration. Migrants frequently lack necessary national identification, making assistance difficult. Internal migration also presents urban challenges, requiring

municipalities to upgrade sewer systems and make land available for settlement.

In Cape Verde, a small island state highly vulnerable to extreme weather, the population historically views migration as a fundamental survival strategy against prolonged drought and resource scarcity. This has led to a drastic demographic reversal: 70% of the population, rural at independence, now lives in urban areas. Migration also provides significant economic support through remittances.

In Serbia, the absence of a legal category for "climate migrant" was noted. The country operates a "dual system" of protection: refugees from the Ex-Yugoslav Republics receive a different level of protection than recent asylum seekers from North Africa and the Middle East, based on the conflicting national laws.

From the perspective of the European Union, the lack of a standardised term or definition for environmental migration was stressed. International law, including the Geneva Convention, does not cover climate-related displacement. Although the EU Temporary Protection Directive was successfully used for forced migrants from Ukraine, its application to environmental disasters outside the EU is considered unlikely due to political reluctance and procedural requirements.

## Policy Recommendations and Positive Impacts

The discussion underscored the necessity of holistic and ethical policy-making:

1. Strengthening Legal Frameworks: Nations like Cape Verde need specific legal frameworks for climate migrants, a category currently absent. The EU needs to develop a more coherent legal system providing general guidelines for national authorities to handle environmental migrants.

2. Prevention and Resilience: Europe should continue supporting African countries in climate adaptation, green transformation, infrastructure improvement, and early warning systems, to boost local resilience and reduce forced migration. Cape Verde, for example, is constructing dams and dikes to retain rainwater and combat soil erosion.

3. Positive Impacts and Cooperation: Speakers highlighted the positive role of migration through the transfer of skills and social capital. Cooperation between Africa and Europe should focus on expanding safe and legal pathways (labour mobility, scholarships) and actively engaging the African diaspora in trade, innovation, investment, and knowledge transfer to boost local economies.

The full recording of the webinar with the agenda are available here: <https://afriqueurope.eu/webinar-11-25/>

# INSIGHTS & REPORTS

## STAY INFORMED!

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- Scovil, J. (2025). [Two borders, two logics: Future-oriented narratives on migration from Belarus and Ukraine to Poland](#). *Central and Eastern European Migration Review*, 14(2), 333-354.
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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, and 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 a regional focus on Central and Eastern Europe, and refugee response.

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