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RESILIENCE DESPITE DESTRUCTION: UNHCR'S unwavering commitment to support the people of Ukraine

When I applied for the position as UNHCR Representative in Ukraine and then arrived in Kyiv on 19 May 2021 to take up the post, I never imagined that I would live through the experiences I have had over the past four years. I witnessed the start of a full-scale war in Europe and the largest forced displacement of people since World War II. It was a shock on multiple levels, but not one that leaves you incapacitated and lost. Instead, it was the type of shock that propels you into action, allowing you to work with great focus, adrenaline, and determination. This is what I experienced in myself and witnessed everywhere around me. I saw the Ukrainian people mobilising themselves and others to help those most in need, those fleeing towards relative safety from areas under direct attack. I saw people opening their homes to displaced families arriving by evacuation trains to central and western regions of Ukraine, having left their houses and all belongings behind; and people handing out water, home-cooked meals, blankets, and hygiene parcels to people arriving at transit sites in cities such as Dnipro and Lviv. I saw women who had fled the bombed and burning city of Mariupol create IDP-led organisations to help other internally displaced people (IDPs) seeking community support in places like Mukachevo. I saw how my Ukrainian colleagues channeled their shock over the fact that this was really happening — the Russian Federation had launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine and was forcing many of them to flee and become IDPs, some for the second time since 2014 — into humanitarian action, aimed to help others in greater need.

I saw a whole-of-society response that efficiently and with great compassion helped those in urgent need, even as people were still trying

to process their own shock over what was happening. It was as if the whole country was united around a common mission: to survive and to stay strong and resilient together.

This mission — of resilience, grit, and community engagement — has remained highly visible in the many communities and families I have visited across the country over the past years. I have seen it again and again in the aftermath of brutal aerial attacks on cities such as Kharkiv, Kryvyi Rih, Odesa, Zaporizhzhia, and Kyiv, where the local authorities, state emergency responders, humanitarian organisations, and volunteers are immediately present on the ground, helping those affected cope with the shock. And how the residents, within just a few hours of these attacks, sweep up the glass from their broken windows and cover the holes with the plywood boards — starting the process of physical and psychological recovery.



Кароліна Ліндхольм Біллінг відвідує район Харкова, що постраждав внаслідок російського ракетного удару 2024 року (© УВКБ ООН)

Karolina Lindholm Billing visits a neighbourhood in Kharkiv affected by the Russian missile attack in 2024 (© UNHCR)

A central component of UNHCR's mission in Ukraine has been to support people and local communities in these moments of shock. Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, UNHCR and our network of committed and strong NGO partners have responded to missile, drone, and glide bomb attacks thousands of times, providing more than 470,000 people with emergency shelter materials like plywood boards and tarpaulins to help them cover broken windows, roofs, and doors. As part of the emergency response, we also provide essential relief items, psychological first aid, and legal assistance to help people cope with trauma and restore destroyed identity and property documents.

Though I feel enraged by the sight of civilians in shock and despair after their homes have been destroyed in horrendous attacks, I am also humbled and filled with hope when I see how quickly families mobilise their determination and start to repair and rebuild with the support of local authorities and partners like UNHCR and the civil society organisations we work with.

Our mission at UNHCR is to support people's resilience and determination to rise and recover from the war by enabling them to rebuild their lives and homes.

One concrete way we do this, following the initial emergency response, is by helping people repair damaged houses and apartments. In July 2022, UNHCR launched its home repair programme in the de-occupied war-affected communities in the Kyiv region, like Borodianka, Makariv and Irpin. The programme thereafter expanded to the Chernihiv and Sumy regions. Since then, we have supported the repair of more than 40,000 homes across eighteen regions of the country. These repairs not only restore physical structures and provide people with a secure roof over their heads and warmth during winter, but they also contribute to the psychological recovery and the rebuilding of communities devastated by war, allowing families to remain in or return to their homes.

'We are so happy to have our house repaired. But even if UNHCR had not helped, we would have returned home anyway, just to be on our land,' 72-year-old Leonid from the village of Kukhari in the Kyiv region told me when I visited him in his newly repaired home, which had been heavily damaged during the Russian occupation.

This longing to remain and return to one's own land — to home — has been another recurring theme in my meetings with people over the past four years. I have witnessed this most vividly when travelling to frontline

areas, where remaining residents spend much of their time in underground cellars due to constant shelling. I will never forget the faces and emotions of the people I met in Iziurm in September 2022, just days after the territory was retaken by the Ukrainian Armed Forces; or in Kherson on 14 November 2022, when I joined a UN convoy to the city less than 72 hours after its de-occupation. These moments showed me the importance of presence — for people to see that they are not forgotten or alone. Reaching out and being present in the most remote and heavily affected areas must therefore be a top priority in the humanitarian response, to ensure that those most in need are neither forgotten nor left behind.



Ірина Верещук, Міністерка з питань реінтеграції тимчасово окупованих територій України (2021–2024 рр.), 29 вересня 2022 року відвідує будинки на Київщині, відновлені за підтримки УВКБ ООН (© Міністерство з питань реінтеграції тимчасово окупованих територій)

Iryna Vereshchuk, Minister of Reintegration of Temporarily Occupied Territories (2021–24), visits homes repaired by UNHCR in the Kyiv region. 29 September 2022 (© Ministry of Reintegration of Temporarily Occupied Territories)

This lies at the core of UNHCR's protection mandate: to support those in the most vulnerable and exposed situations to access their rights and administrative, social, judicial, and other services on an equal basis — to ensure they are fully included in the society. One key way through which we do this is by providing free legal assistance to people who have lost or left behind their personal documents, such as passports or birth and marriage certificates, which are essential for accessing administrative

and social services, as well as for applying to eVidnovlennia — the government's compensation programme for damaged or destroyed property. Since 2022, UNHCR and our NGO partners have provided over half a million legal consultations to people missing vital documents.

Another approach is 'social accompaniment', which means accompanying older people and those with reduced mobility to social protection departments and other authorities, helping them complete forms and apply for government assistance. At the same time, we have provided equipment such as laptops and scanners to social protection departments, refurbished damaged social infrastructure, and supported the training of social workers to expand their capacity to serve more people in need. Our protection activities also include psychosocial support, which has been provided to more than 310,000 war-affected people since 2022.

All of these programmes, including our cash assistance programme, which has provided over \$636 million to more than 2.2 million people since 2022, have been implemented in close alignment and cooperation with the Ukrainian government, line ministries, and regional and local authorities. This collaboration ensures that we complement the strong systems already in place and support national leadership and sustainability.

To reinforce this approach, since 2022, we have signed Memoranda of Understanding with several line ministries, including the Ministry of Reintegration of the Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine (dissolved in January 2025), Ministry of Social Policy (retitled to the Ministry of Social Policy, Family and Unity in July 2025), the Ministry of Territorial Communities and Infrastructure Development (retitled to Ministry for Development of Communities and Territories of Ukraine in 2024), the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of National Unity (merged with the Ministry of Social Policy, Family and Unity in July 2025). We have also formalised cooperation with the Office of the Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights, the Olena Zelenska Foundation, and 20 regional administrations through MOUs.

I am very grateful for the efficient cooperation and trust we have enjoyed with the Ukrainian authorities at all levels, and not least with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, throughout these turbulent and trying years. It has truly been a partnership, which has enabled UNHCR to support the authorities in addressing some of the most critical needs of vulnerable war-affected people in a timely manner. This partnership

has been built over the course of more than 30 years, beginning in 1994 when UNHCR started its work in Ukraine to support the repatriation of Crimean Tatars who had been deported from their homeland during World War II. In the 1990s, UNHCR assisted returnees in rebuilding their lives by providing housing, legal aid to obtain civil documentation, and support in establishing citizenship processing centres across the Crimean Peninsula.

UNHCR's work in Ukraine later expanded to support the establishment of an asylum system for people fleeing wars and conflicts in other parts of the world and seeking international protection in Ukraine. We also contributed to the development of a legal framework and procedures for preventing and resolving cases of statelessness. After the start of the war in 2014, UNHCR helped facilitate freedom of movement for people crossing the contact line separating the government-controlled areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions from those under Russian control.

I visited the entry-exit checkpoints at Novotroitske in the Donetsk region and Stanytsia Luhanska in the Luhansk region several times in 2021 and early 2022 and saw how important it was for families separated by the contact line to be able to meet and stay connected.

I am proud that since the onset of the full-scale invasion, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi, has visited Ukraine six times, travelling by road and rail across eight regions to meet with war-affected people, the authorities and our partners working tirelessly on the ground. Each visit has been a powerful gesture of solidarity with the Ukrainian people and a testament to UNHCR's steadfast commitment to supporting those affected by the war. These visits have reinforced the importance of our presence on the ground and have helped draw international attention to both the immense humanitarian needs and the extraordinary resilience of Ukraine's communities.

I would like to express my gratitude to our Member States and donors for entrusting us with the funds and confidence to design and implement programmes providing protection, emergency shelter and housing, as well as cash and in-kind assistance to people in need of humanitarian and recovery support across Ukraine. It is a huge responsibility: towards the war-affected people themselves, the local authorities and communities who rely on us to contribute efficiently to the response, and towards the donor governments and their citizens who have generously provided the financial means. I am therefore extremely grateful to all the Ambassadors and their colleagues who have joined me and my team on field

visits across the country — from Kharkiv and Kherson to Lviv and Uzhhorod — over the past years to meet with war-affected people and listen to their stories and accounts about why solidarity and sustained support from the international community is so crucial for people's and communities' ability to stay resilient.

As the full-scale war is now, sadly, well into its fourth year and intensified Russian attacks in 2025 have led to a staggering rise in civilian casualties compared to last year, it is more important than ever to continue supporting the people of Ukraine, particularly those who have become most vulnerable and are now in need of humanitarian assistance and protection services as a direct result of the war. They do not want or need to be 'assisted' as 'vulnerable people' but rather supported and empowered in their own efforts and capacities to rise and recover. I have heard, countless times, war-affected people say that timely and relevant humanitarian support fuels their resilience and reassures them that they are not alone and not left behind.



Кароліна Ліндхольм Біллінг спостерігає за осушеним Каховським водосховищем із виглядом на Запорізьку АЕС під час поїздки до постраждалих районів Херсонської та Миколаївської областей після руйнування греблі Каховської ГЕС 6 червня 2023 року (© Управління ООН з координації гуманітарних справ / Таня Любімова)

Karolina Lindholm Billing looking across the dried-up Kakhovka reservoir at Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant during a visit to areas in the Kherson and Mykolaiv regions heavily impacted by the destruction of the Kakhovka dam on 6 June 2023 (© OCHA / Tanya Lyubimova)

International presence and solidarity with the people of Ukraine also help sustain the hope of return among the millions of Ukrainians who have fled the country and sought refuge from the war abroad. Intention surveys conducted by UNHCR since 2022 among Ukrainian refugees and internally displaced people show that the majority still hope and plan to return home one day. As expected, safety and security concerns remain the main obstacle, but access to work, safe housing and basic services in areas of origin or intended return remain key factors influencing people's plans and ultimate decisions, which need to be based on objective and up-to-date information. This is why, in 2024, UNHCR launched a platform called Ukraine is Home (at: ukraineishome.org) with information on how to access housing assistance, job and reskilling opportunities, and services in Ukraine enabling free and informed decision-making. And this is why it is so important to early on invest in economic recovery and areas such as housing, including immediate repairs and social protection services — this enables the refugees and IDPs who decide to return to do so successfully and sustainably.

I feel humbled and privileged to have had the opportunity to live and work in Ukraine during the past four extraordinary years. It may sound strange to call it a privilege — to end up in the midst of the biggest war in Europe since World War II and separated from my family. But it has been a privilege, to experience first-hand how people and communities can rise from a shock, come together to support each other to find safety and recover, and build a resilient nation. As many uncertainties still lie ahead, my hope is that the community solidarity and whole-of-society response that I witnessed in the early days of 2022 — and still see today when meeting with people in rural areas, towns, and cities — will remain strong and supported by the international community.

UNHCR is firmly committed to continue working with and for the people of Ukraine, as we have done for the past 30 years, through every new challenge and step toward recovery and peace. For as long as we are needed, we will remain in Ukraine as a trusted partner steadfast in our commitment to accompany the Ukrainian people on their path towards recovery and a just and lasting peace.

Article dated 31 July 2025