

# HUMANITARIAN OBSERVATORY

## FOR CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

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## FROM THE EDITORS

### About the Newsletter

This issue presents an overview of key humanitarian, legal and policy developments shaping the regional landscape in the first months of 2026. The analyses highlight the transition from emergency response to longer-term governance frameworks, while underlining the continued fragility of humanitarian systems across Central and Eastern Europe.

### What's inside this issue?

- **Ukraine** remains a central humanitarian concern, as the country enters the fourth year of Russia's full-scale invasion. The contributions document persistent large-scale humanitarian needs, continued displacement, and the long-term consequences of repeated attacks on energy infrastructure. Particular attention is given to the impact of international funding cuts on humanitarian capacity, including growing pressure on local and women-led organisations, rising protection risks for displaced women, and emerging forms of exploitation linked to the war, including forced recruitment and trafficking.
- **Belarus** continues to illustrate the intersection of repression and humanitarian vulnerability. Reports highlight ongoing politically motivated prosecutions, restrictions on civil society, and cases revealing precarious conditions faced by migrants and foreign nationals. Recent developments include international investigations into alleged crimes against humanity, as well as documented humanitarian concerns related to detention practices and access to basic services.
- **Poland** is undergoing significant institutional and policy adjustments related to migration governance. The issue analyses reforms aimed at integrating Ukrainian refugees into broader legal frameworks, the digitalisation of migration administration, and consultations on national integration strategies. At the same time, contributions point to emerging challenges, including labour exploitation of migrants, disinformation targeting migrant communities, and continuing humanitarian concerns at the Poland-Belarus border.

Ukraine remains at the centre of regional humanitarian dynamics, as large-scale displacement, infrastructure damage, and growing funding constraints continue to affect the sustainability of humanitarian response. Recent analyses highlight the compounded impact of energy insecurity, reductions in international assistance, and rising protection risks, particularly for vulnerable groups, including women and internally displaced persons. At the same time, developments in Poland illustrate the ongoing transition from emergency response to longer-term governance frameworks, including reforms of protection regimes for Ukrainian refugees, digitalisation of migration administration, and emerging challenges related to labour exploitation, disinformation, and border governance. In Belarus, persistent repression and

restrictions on civil society continue to shape humanitarian realities, with ongoing concerns related to migrants' rights, detention practices, and limited access to assistance.

Across all three country contexts, this issue highlights the growing importance of coordinated responses to complex and interconnected challenges, including shrinking humanitarian space, digital threats, and structural funding gaps. Alongside country updates, the newsletter also presents recent academic contributions and policy-relevant analyses, reaffirming the role of research and evidence-based dialogue in supporting more sustainable and inclusive humanitarian governance in Central and Eastern Europe.

## NEWS FROM OUR PARTNERS

### POLAND

Sarian Jarosz, Benjamin Cope

#### Legal reforms on assistance to Ukrainian refugees

One of the most important legal developments in the first months of 2026 concerns the restructuring of the [protection framework for Ukrainian refugees](#). From 5 March 2026, Poland has begun phasing out the special national legal regime introduced after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Beneficiaries of this system are being integrated into the broader EU temporary protection framework and the general Polish

law on foreigners. The change aims to harmonise national rules with EU legislation and streamline residence and employment procedures for displaced Ukrainians. At the same time, the reform introduces stricter administrative requirements and reduces access to certain social benefits (Association for Legal Intervention 2026). The motivation for introducing this law is political, fitting a narrative that Poland has provided enough special support for Ukrainians and that Ukrainians should by now have succeeded in normalizing their life situations in Poland. While the law ensures continued legal residence for working Ukrainians in Poland, it

further reduces and makes unpredictable access to welfare support for the most vulnerable (the elderly and sick, those looking after children and not working).

In March, Polish civil society organizations, academia, IGOs and other stakeholders were invited to participate in preliminary consultations on the [new \*Integration Strategy\*](#), led by the Department of Social Integration in the Ministry of Family, Labour, and Social Policy. Approximately 70 people from 40 CSOs attended the meeting with the Ministry to discuss the challenges and opportunities for the integration of migrants in Poland.



*Photo: Anna Dąbrowska; Grupa Granica.*

Complementing these legal reforms, Poland is also advancing the digitalisation of migration administration. In 2026, the government plans to introduce a fully digital system for residence permit applications through the Moduł Obsługi Spraw (MOS) platform - Case Management Module. The system is intended to simplify procedures for migrants and refugees, reduce waiting times at regional offices, and centralise case management across the country. However, the much-trumpeted introduction of this system has been subject to repeated delays, with the latest promised implementation date set for late spring. Equally, humanitarian

organisations have noted that digitalisation may also create access barriers for vulnerable groups lacking digital literacy or stable internet access, highlighting the need for complementary legal and social support services.

### **Disinformation and labour exploitation: a post-humanitarian challenge?**

Another feature of this period was an intensification of disinformation and fake attacks against Ukrainian-led organisations in Poland. These include fake accounts, deep-fake videos, fake letters sent in the name of Ukrainian organisations [to Polish politicians and fake internet sites](#). These attacks [engage the resources of Ukrainian organisations, which are already under pressure](#), render more difficult communication about Ukrainian issues in Poland and pose threats to social cohesion in Poland. This situation requires new cooperation between NGOs providing humanitarian support and Polish state services responding to the challenges of cyber-security.

Another important theme in recent analyses concerns labour exploitation and socio-economic vulnerability among migrants. A report prepared by the Migration Consortium, in cooperation with the International Organization for Migration (IOM 2025), indicates that migrants in Poland face increasing risks of exploitation in employment and housing. The study documents cases of excessive working hours, withheld wages and substandard accommodation, affecting migrants from several regions, including Latin America and Eastern Europe. These findings have reinforced calls from civil society organisations for stronger labour inspections

and improved legal protections for migrant workers. The new reports and investigations confirm this trend of exploitation, with the Nomada Association [report highlighting the exploitation of Colombian workers](#).

### **“The other crisis”: no right to asylum at the Polish-Belarusian border**

The humanitarian situation at the Poland–Belarus border remains another key issue influencing migration policy and public debate. Media reports and field analyses continue to document difficult conditions faced by migrants attempting to cross the border, as well as legal controversies related to humanitarian assistance provided by activists and volunteers, as the numbers of crossings this winter and early spring [are significantly lower](#) than in the previous years. These developments illustrate the tension between border security measures and humanitarian protection obligations within the EU’s external border regime. The new report of the We Are Monitoring Association [‘They didn’t let us speak’](#) is a testimony-heavy

analysis from [the year of suspension of the right to asylum in Poland](#) - the anniversary met with protests across Poland in the last week of March.

In academic research, we would like to recommend the new [working paper](#) by Ricardo Yela Triviño who analyses pathways to citizenship in Poland compared with Spain, highlighting how legal frameworks and institutional practices shape migrants’ access to long-term integration and political membership. Also, Witold Klaus and Sarian Jarosz [describe the otherization](#) mechanisms at the Polish borders with Belarus and Ukraine. Finally, Olawale Fathiah Olamide, supporting activities of the Humanitarian Observatory for Central and Eastern Europe on behalf of the Centre of Migration Research, University of Warsaw, has contributed to the ISS Blog Bliss with the article on [“Experts from Below”: Why Local Health Educators are Leaders, Not Just Helpers, during Outbreak Response in Lagos, Nigeria](#).

## **BELARUS**

Kyrill Kofanov

Between January and March 2026, humanitarian and human rights developments in Belarus continued to be shaped by the ongoing repression that followed the disputed 2020 presidential election and subsequent protests. According to the Human Rights Watch [World Report 2026](#), Belarusian authorities persisted in politically motivated prosecutions and

repression of dissent, with at least 1110 political prisoners remaining in detention and reports of torture and ill-treatment in custody. Courts also restricted transparency by removing public access to hearing schedules for politically sensitive trials. A March 2026 report by the UN expert group further suggested that systematic persecution, imprisonment, and ill-treatment of political opponents may amount to crimes



Photo: Amnesty International.

against humanity, reinforcing concerns expressed in academic and policy analyses on authoritarian repression and transnational persecution by the Belarusian state. Parallel developments included limited prisoner releases and international legal initiatives: in March 2026, the International Criminal Court opened [an investigation](#) into alleged crimes against humanity linked to the forced deportation of political opponents, illustrating growing international scrutiny of Belarus's human rights record. The [release of the 250 political prisoners](#) in March 2026 by the Belarusian government included [prominent human rights defenders](#), such as Marfa Rabkova and Nasta Loika.

### Complaints from Indian workers highlight risks for migrants in Belarus

Recent media [reports](#) highlighted complaints from Indian nationals who travelled to Belarus after being promised employment opportunities but reportedly found themselves without jobs, accommodation, or support upon arrival.

Some described being left in precarious situations and struggling to understand their legal status or access assistance. These [cases](#) became visible largely due to media reporting; without public attention, the individuals involved might have remained in severe humanitarian conditions without broader awareness.

### Migrants held in airport transit zone

Human Constanta's monitoring also raised concerns about [reports](#) involving a group of migrants stopped at passport control at Minsk airport. According to media sources, the group included citizens of Armenia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Russia, and an athlete from Haiti.

They were reportedly left waiting in a separate room for an extended period without explanation. Sources also reported inappropriate and disrespectful treatment by staff, as well as concerns about whether the individuals had adequate access to food while being held in the transit zone.

In an official request, Human Constanta asked authorities to clarify whether the migrants had access to food, drinking water, medical assistance, and information about their legal situation. The response mainly reiterated general border control procedures and did not address these humanitarian concerns.



Photo: Human Constanta.

### Human Constanta continues to receive requests for assistance from migrants in vulnerable situations in Belarus

One recent case concerns a woman from Guinea living in Minsk with her seven-year-old son, who has been repeatedly falling ill and requires medical care and proper nutrition. The family currently relies on

temporary accommodation with acquaintances. After contacting social service providers, we were informed that the family does not fall within the target group of the relevant social center. The organization also reported that it stopped providing temporary accommodation in 2025 due to new state requirements for facilities offering such services. The only possible assistance

mentioned was a one-time material payment, if available.

This case illustrates a broader structural challenge: when access to assistance depends on strict institutional criteria, people in urgent humanitarian situations may remain without adequate support, even when vulnerable children are involved.

## Ukraine

Maryana Zaviyska

### Four years of full-scale war: humanitarian needs remain high

As Ukraine marks the fourth year of Russia's full-scale invasion, humanitarian needs remain severe and widespread. According to the [2026 Ukraine Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan \(HNRP\)](#), 10.8 million people are projected to require humanitarian assistance, including large populations living close to the front line where shelling, displacement, and destruction of infrastructure continue to disrupt daily life.



Photo: Open Space Works Ukraine; Matti Karstedt.

Around 3.7 million people remain internally displaced, while 5.9 million Ukrainians live as refugees abroad, mostly in Europe. Despite some returns, insecurity, damaged housing, and limited access to services prevent sustainable recovery. The UNHCR report [Ukraine Emergency: Four Years On \(2026 Update\)](#) also notes that civilian casualties rose by 31% in 2025 compared to 2024, reflecting the intensification of hostilities and continued attacks on civilian areas.

### Energy insecurity deepened the humanitarian crisis

Attacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure remain a major driver of humanitarian need. The [REACH analysis Energy Insecurity in Ukraine: Humanitarian and Socio-Economic Impacts \(2025\)](#) highlights how repeated strikes on electricity generation and distribution have caused widespread power outages and heating failures. These disruptions affect access to water systems, healthcare facilities, and schools, while also increasing household costs and undermining local economies. Energy insecurity particularly concerns conflict-affected oblasts such as Kharkivska, Sumska, Donetsk, Chernihivska and Khersonska, where exposure to attacks combines with high socio-economic vulnerability. The report also warns that uncertainty around

international funding for the energy sector could further weaken Ukraine's capacity to stabilise infrastructure and protect households from future disruptions in the 2026-2027 heating season.

### **Funding cuts put women-led organisations under pressure**

As Ukraine enters the fourth year of Russia's full-scale invasion, a shifting global aid landscape is creating new pressures on the humanitarian response. A recent ACAPS analysis, [\*Ukraine: One Year On – The Implications of US Foreign Aid Cuts on Humanitarian, Development, and Government Programmes \(2025\)\*](#) documents how reductions in US assistance have significantly disrupted humanitarian operations across the country. US humanitarian funding reportedly dropped from 23.8% of total funding in 2024 (USD 640 million) to 10.8% in 2025 (USD 157 million), contributing to a broader contraction of humanitarian capacity. As a result, the number of humanitarian partners operating in Ukraine fell by around 20% between 2024 and 2025, while coverage under the Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan was reduced by 20% despite continued high levels of need.

The cuts have translated into concrete operational gaps. In 2025, humanitarian organisations reported declining programme coverage across protection, shelter, health, and WASH sectors, with some estimates suggesting that up to one million people who were expected to receive assistance did not receive support due to funding constraints. Supply chain disruptions have also emerged, with around 50 fewer operational humanitarian storage facilities compared to 2024, reducing response capacity in high-risk

areas such as Kharkivska and Mykolaivska oblasts.

Local and national organisations have been particularly affected. According to the ACAPS study, national NGOs reported far lower rates of funding recovery than international organisations, with only a small number able to replace lost funding through alternative donors. The report warns that these structural inequalities risk reversing progress on humanitarian localisation and weakening frontline response capacity.

Separate [\*research by the Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group \(2026\)\*](#) highlights how these funding reductions are affecting women's rights and women-led organisations across Ukraine. In a survey of 108 organisations, 79% reported moderate or significant operational impacts, while nearly half experienced severe programme reductions or suspensions. Women's organisations collectively lost an estimated USD 27.4 million in international assistance in 2025, with further losses expected in 2026. Many organisations report reductions in specialised roles such as gender-based violence caseworkers, safeguarding officers, and monitoring and evaluation staff, raising concerns about declining service quality and protection risks for women and girls.

Beyond immediate humanitarian programmes, the cuts are also affecting Ukraine's longer-term recovery capacity. The termination of major initiatives such as USAID's Energy Security Project has reduced technical support for maintaining energy infrastructure at a time when Russian attacks on power systems continue to escalate. At the same time, the withdrawal of US budget support has created a projected USD 45 billion gap in funding for government

social and civilian spending in 2026, increasing pressure on Ukraine's fiscal stability and social protection systems.

Taken together, these studies suggest that funding cuts are not only reducing humanitarian coverage but also reshaping the structure of the aid ecosystem in Ukraine. Smaller local organisations – often the closest responders to affected communities – are among the most vulnerable to these shifts, raising important questions about the sustainability and localisation of humanitarian assistance as the war enters its fifth year.

### **Protection risks for Ukrainian women displaced by war**

Four years after Russia's full-scale invasion, displacement remains one of the defining humanitarian consequences of the war. According to UNHCR estimates, 3.7 million people remain internally displaced in Ukraine and 5.9 million have sought safety abroad, including 5.3 million across Europe. Despite some voluntary returns, insecurity, destroyed housing and limited access to services continue to prevent sustainable return for many families.

A new report by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), [\*Seeking Safety from War: Violence and Rights Abuses Against Women from Ukraine \(2026\)\*](#) highlights the specific protection risks faced by women displaced by the war. Based on a survey of 1,223 Ukrainian women living in Czechia, Germany and Poland, the study examines their experiences of violence, exploitation and access to services after fleeing Ukraine.

The findings show that women fleeing the war face heightened risks of physical, sexual and psychological violence not only in

Ukraine but also during transit and after arrival in EU countries. Many respondents reported encountering potentially exploitative offers of transport, housing or employment while fleeing the war, in some cases showing indicators of human trafficking.

The report also documents the profound psychological impact of conflict-related violence. Among women who had been interrogated by Russian forces, around half reported physical humiliation and nearly one-third sexual humiliation, experiences that have long-lasting consequences for survivors. At the same time, displaced women often carry strong fears for their children's safety: two-thirds of mothers with daughters reported concerns about the risk of sexual violence by Russian troops, while similar fears were expressed for sons.

The report emphasises the importance of EU protection mechanisms, particularly the Temporary Protection Directive, which allows displaced Ukrainians to live and work in EU Member States and access services. The directive has been extended until March 2027, but the FRA warns that survivors of violence may face renewed vulnerability once temporary protection ends, if long-term support systems are not strengthened.

Overall, the findings highlight that displacement from Ukraine is not only a humanitarian and migration challenge but also a fundamental rights and protection issue, requiring stronger gender-sensitive policies and support systems for survivors of violence across Europe.

### **Deportations of Ukrainian children recognised as crimes against humanity**

In March 2026, the [UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on](#)

[Ukraine](#) concluded that the deportation and forcible transfer of Ukrainian children by Russian authorities constitute crimes against humanity. The Commission has verified the deportation or transfer of more than 1,200 children from at least five regions of Ukraine, many of whom were placed in institutions or families across 21 regions of the Russian Federation and in occupied territories. Four years into the full-scale invasion, around 80% of the documented children have not been returned, leaving families separated and struggling to locate their children. The Commission found evidence that deportations were facilitated through coordinated legislative and administrative measures and implemented as part of a policy executed at the highest levels of the Russian leadership.

### Trafficking and deception: foreign recruits in Russia's war against Ukraine

New research by Fortify Rights and Truth Hounds (2026) highlights how Russia's war against Ukraine is increasingly sustained through the deceptive recruitment of foreign nationals. The report [“I Was Tricked into the War”](#) documents how brokers targeted men from countries such as Bangladesh with promises of civilian employment abroad, only for them to be transported to Russia and forced into military service. Many recruits signed contracts written in Russian that they could not understand and were transferred to military training facilities shortly after arrival before being deployed to the frontlines in Ukraine.

Based on 24 interviews conducted between May 2025 and February 2026, the study identifies recurring patterns of deception,

coercion, and exploitation that may amount to human trafficking under international law. Recruits reported confiscation of passports, beatings by commanders, denial of wages, and threats when attempting to leave military service. Families in their countries of origin were often left in significant debt after paying recruitment fees to intermediaries who promised overseas employment opportunities.

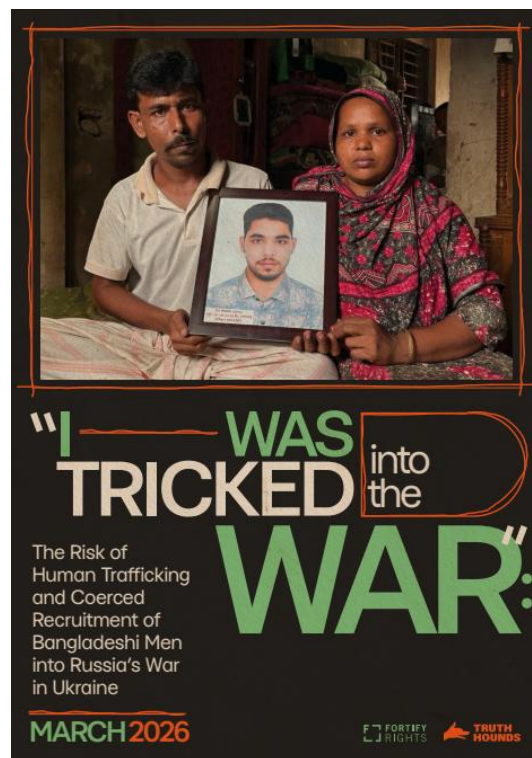


Photo: Fortify Rights.

The report warns that these recruitment practices reflect a growing transnational dimension of the war, in which vulnerable migrants are turned into expendable manpower for Russia's military operations in Ukraine. It calls for stronger international action to dismantle trafficking networks, protect victims, and ensure accountability for deceptive recruitment practices linked to the war.

# INSIGHTS & REPORTS

## STAY INFORMED!

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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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