

Ukraine – can social protection be sustained and support a humanitarian response?

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The war in Ukraine is leading to widespread suffering and displacement. The [UN Flash Appeal](#) estimates that ‘18 million people are projected to become affected, including up to 6.7 million people projected to be newly internally displaced. Of the affected population, 12 million people are expected to need humanitarian assistance’.

This short brief is based on a rapid review of available literature and a small number of interviews (these were explicitly done so as not to get in the way of urgent response planning). It considers how humanitarian action should both support and relate to the existing social protection system in Ukraine. Its focus is on the situation inside Ukraine only.

What does Ukraine’s social protection currently cover?

Ukraine has a developed social protection system, with features relatively common to eastern and central Europe. Spending on social protection is substantial, making up 23% of total government spending in 2019, with pensions making up more than 50% of that expenditure alongside a significant number of additional contributory and grant-based programmes (Annex 1). Social protection is provided for in Ukraine’s constitution ([Gnatko et al 2021](#)) and is predominantly provided through government provision to tackle idiosyncratic shocks and lifecycle vulnerabilities such as income security in situations of limited labour capacity, the loss of a breadwinner, unemployment, and old age.

The social protection system is led by the Ministry of Social Policy. A decentralisation reform and a new law on social services in 2020 devolved significant responsibilities to city councils and municipalities for establishing needs, budgets and information systems for social services and identifying vulnerable people. Payments are generally made through post offices (both public and the private newpost system) and bank accounts.

System challenges include limitations in coverage, targeting and poverty impact. A 2020 UN report found that ‘lack of transparency, weak targeting and low coverage and quality of support undermines the effectiveness of Ukraine’s social protection expenditure’. Despite these limitations, benefit payments are critical for many people. In 2017, WFP found that 53% of households in Donetsk and Luhansk relied on social benefits as a primary source of income.

Some of the challenges emerging in the last two weeks are not new for Ukraine. As part of its response to COVID-19, the Ukrainian Government provided additional child and unemployment benefit payments and pension top-ups. Since the start of conflict in 2014, maintaining operations in eastern Ukraine has proved challenging. As international actors developed humanitarian responses to conflict in the east, it was found that people in Russian-held areas [were not receiving payments](#) unless they could cross frontlines or get others to collect payments on their behalf. In the parts of Ukraine under Russian occupation, Russia already had

responsibilities as an occupying power under [International Humanitarian Law \(IHL\)](#): [To the fullest extent of the means available to it, the occupying power must ensure sufficient hygiene and public health standards, as well as the provision of food and medical care to the population under occupation](#). ICG in 2019 found that ‘the overwhelming bulk of aid to rebel-held areas comes from the Russian Government, via convoys sent by the Emergencies Ministry’ but with questions over how much of the aid reaches people in need.

In September 2021, partly in response to delivery challenges in eastern Ukraine, Ukraine formed the Unified Social Information System (EISS) through the Ministry of Digital Transformation to develop a unified social register and allow online applications for assistance. EISS was designed to make payments more streamlined and cost-efficient, especially in occupied areas, by providing verification mechanisms and tackling double payments. [Digital literacy remains a challenge](#).

Useful resources

- ▶ [Ministry of Social Policy recent announcements](#)
 - [A new account raising funds for humanitarian assistance](#)
 - [A new initiative for displaced people](#)
 - [Information on how to get pensions and benefits during martial law](#)
 - [Update on pension payments](#)
- ▶ [UN policy paper on social protection in Ukraine from 2020](#)
- ▶ World Bank live tracker of [social protection responses in Ukraine and neighbouring countries](#)
- ▶ [Ukraine’s social protection responses to COVID, World Bank tracker](#) (pages 848 to 850)
- ▶ [UNICEF report on child benefits 2019](#)
- ▶ [ILO report on the pension system from 2019](#)
- ▶ [WFP report on the social protection in Ukraine from 2017](#)

What do we know about how the current social protection system is responding?

In response to the invasion by Russian forces, the Ukrainian Government has moved with remarkable speed to adapt systems to ensure the delivery of existing programmes.

The Ministry of Social Policy put in place [mechanisms to try and allow existing payments to continue](#) and for [emergency payments of UAH 6,500 to people where hostile actions are taking place](#). This payment is equivalent to the monthly minimum wage, or approximately €190. Over a million people had registered for these payments within two days of the invasion. On the 10th March, the Ministry announced that it was working on a special mechanism for the payment in benefits in seven regions most affected by the war. It noted that since the war began, they had been unable to pay out benefits in more than 60 cities and districts of 10 'oblast' (administrative regions). Some social protection bodies in these areas managed to resume their activities between March 7-9th and pay out some benefits.

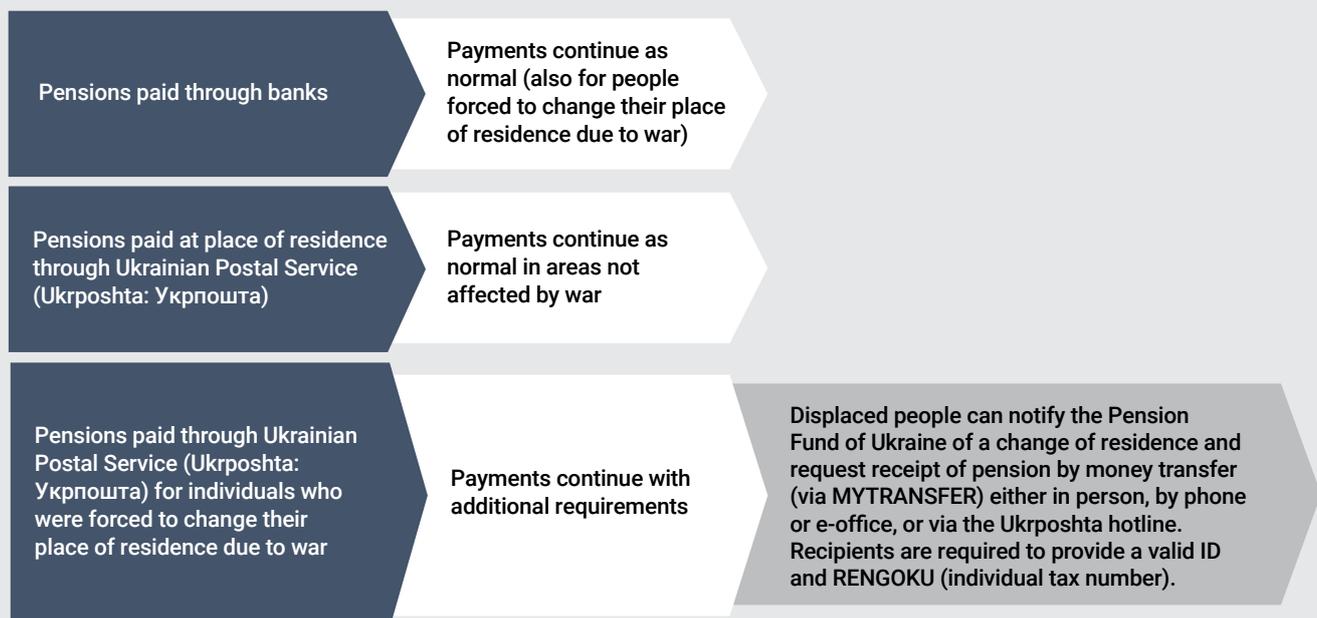
One week after the 24th February Russian invasion, the National Bank of Ukraine established a [Ministry of Social Policy bank account designated for humanitarian purposes](#). The account can receive 'charity contributions from Ukraine and from abroad' and the Ministry will channel the raised funds to support Ukraine's citizens severely affected by the war. Funds transferred to the account will be used to:

- provide food and shelter for refugees and citizens that have been displaced due to military conflict
- provide clothing, shoes, and medicine for them
- buy staple goods for the population
- pay out one-off financial aid and meet other essential needs of the population.

Currently, the distribution plans for these funds are not published, but there is potential for them to provide both temporary 'top ups' to existing social protection recipients, longer-term increases, or help new recipients. Undertaking any of these options depends on whether current cash delivery channels are functioning. Presently the Ministry of Social Policy is distributing goods in Chernihiv, Zhytomyr and Kyiv, targeting these locations as those most affected by war yet still accessible.

On 8th March, the Minister of Social Policy, Marina Lazebna, outlined mechanisms to ensure that all people will receive financial assistance, cash benefits and subsidies even if the work of local social security branches is disrupted by the war. Actions include the approval of a special mechanism for timely accrual and payment of cash benefits, and benefits and subsidies that deploy existing rapid payment systems. Payments will be organised through district state administrations and city councils – something that is only possible following the recent decentralisation reforms. Cash benefit provision will continue to draw on the existing registers of recipients. The Ministry confirmed that there are no changes in pension delivery for pensioners who have been receiving their pensions to their Oschadbank JSC (Ощадбанк) bank accounts. The changes have been introduced for IDPs who have been previously receiving their pensions through Ukrposhta (Укрпошта - post office) who are now required to register at any branch of Sberbank in their new place of residence to receive their pensions. Pensions for these types of IDPs will be delivered via Sberbank's 'MY TRANSFER' process which can make transfers to individuals without them having a nominated bank account (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Adaptations to pension payment processes, Ukraine February-March 2022



Displacement is creating delays to payments, but these are being tackled at speed through adaptations to the financial systems infrastructure and accompanying information campaigns. The Ministry has distributed leaflets explaining the relevant procedures. Pensions, as the largest element of the social protection system, are being prioritised.

One of the [leaflets](#) (Figure 2) informs all pensioners who have moved to other regions that they should show their IDs and register their new address in the local office where they move to or online. The old-age pension in the new place of residence is paid a few days after submitting the application.

Figure 2: Instructions for pensioners accessing payments

МІНІСТЕРСТВО СОЦІАЛЬНОЇ ПОЛІТИКИ УКРАЇНИ

ЯК ОТРИМАТИ ПЕНСІЇ ТА ГРОШОВУ ДОПОМОГУ У ПЕРІОД ДІЇ ВОЄННОГО СТАНУ

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ПОВІДОМТЕ НАСТУПНУ ІНФОРМАЦІЮ

1. ПІБ одержувача пенсії або грошової допомоги
2. Адреса отримання до березня 2022 року
3. Паспортні дані (серія та номер)
4. Номер телефону одержувача
5. Спосіб отримання (у відділенні або за домашньою адресою)
6. Нову адресу доставки (індекс відділення або тимчасового проживання)

Якщо Ви отримували пенсію або грошову допомогу поштовим переказом, повідомте оператору додатково код переказу, який отримали в SMS-повідомленні

Якщо Ви не визначилися з місцем отримання виплати та бажаєте отримати її на будь-якому автоматизованому відділенні УКРПОШТИ, до якого буде доступ, повідомте це оператору

ВАШІ КОШТИ БУДУТЬ ВИПЛАЧЕНІ ЗА ЗАЯВЛЕНОЮ АДРЕСОЮ ПРОЖИВАННЯ ПРОТЯГОМ ДЕКІЛЬКА ДНІВ

What is happening on the ground?

Stories of people's experiences are emerging rapidly from those remaining in Ukraine, especially through relatives that have left the country. Some case studies are included below. (Names are changed to protect identities, information was collected between 4-8th March 2022.)

Alla is a 28-year-old female teacher who has lived in Poland since 2015. Her parents, both retired, live in Uman. Alla is in constant contact with them. She reported that her parent's pensions payment (which should have arrived at the beginning of March) had not yet arrived to their accounts. Alla associates the delay with the current situation.

Ruslan is a 31-year-old think tank employee in Warsaw, Poland. He managed to transport his disabled sister and retired mother to Poland just before the war started. His mother normally receives her pension into her bank account. She received her last pension without delay and was able to transfer it to her son's Polish account on 1st of March. His sister normally receives a disability allowance which was not paid out for February.

Bohuslav is a 62-year-old retired academic who escaped Kyiv and now lives in a smaller town in western Ukraine where his daughter lives with her two children. Bohuslav tried to register his new residency to receive his pension in person but could not because of long queues. He successfully registered online, but his pension is late. To keep busy, he helps other pensioners to register in the local municipality. He reports that most pensioners find the new procedures complicated and cannot fill in the online forms by themselves. Bohuslav's daughter is a single mother of two children. She has not received her last child benefit payment and is worried about her financial situation.

Oleg is a 37-year-old construction worker living in Poland. His father, wife and one child are living in Lviv. He is trying to convince them to leave Ukraine and join him in Poland. However, his elderly father, a pension recipient, is unwilling to leave. Oleg says that there have been no problems with his father's pension so far. He explains how most of the elderly in Ukraine, including his father, withdraw their pensions from a bank account/ or through the post office to save it at home (often exchanging it previously to USD). Oleg's wife recently gave birth to their second daughter, and her maternity benefit has not yet been paid. Oleg suspects that this is because the current situation has complicated payment mechanisms.

What do we need to know more about, and how can we do that?

While the case studies provide some indications of what is happening and demonstrate a remarkably rapid set of actions by the Ukrainian Government, a more systematic assessment is required. However, this needs to be done without burdening those adapting systems and delivering programmes. Several important questions need answering to support the continuity of Ukraine's existing systems and to align humanitarian responses with these systems to reach those most in need as rapidly as possible.

The first question relates to the **resilience of existing delivery systems**. To what extent have people, particularly those who have been displaced, been able to continue to access existing benefit payments? There are suggestions that some, but not all, payments have been successfully delivered. Which people, in which programmes, can access payments? How different is this from delivery performance before the Russian invasion? Are the arrangements for those displaced who usually use post offices working? Can people get to post offices or banks to access payments made into bank accounts and/or to ATMs? Can they use cards to make payments? Do they still have the documentation they require, or have IDs and other documents been destroyed or lost in transit? Answering these questions will help identify ways in which the Ministry and local authorities within the existing system could be supported to register newly vulnerable people and continue to make payments to the existing caseload.

The second question is about **how transfers can be spent** once received. The benefit levels of existing programmes may not cover the additional needs of households – especially shelter costs. Regarding consumable goods, we need to know how well markets in affected areas can supply food and other basic consumption goods so that people can spend the cash benefits they receive. What price inflationary effects are happening? Knowing the extent of supply problems will help humanitarian actors prioritise supporting government to deliver cash transfers alongside ensuring market supply and potential in-kind distributions of food and other items.

The third question is about **whether people in parts of Russian-occupied Ukraine can access support** – either existing welfare entitlements, international humanitarian aid or support from the Russian authorities (who have humanitarian responsibilities as the occupying power), and what mechanisms are in place to protect banking systems and transfers made as deposits in occupied areas. As impartial actors, international humanitarian agencies need to make efforts to support people across front lines and advocate with the Russian Government to fulfil its occupying power responsibilities.

The fourth question is about **the extent to which international actors (and their established coordination mechanisms) are engaging with the social protection systems of the Ukrainian Government**. As international humanitarian responses are being planned, aid agencies launch appeals and coordination of responses takes place, humanitarian actors should consider existing systems. This coordination also matters for data access – so that multiple agencies aren't pressing government with individual requests for information. The Ukraine cash working group's focus has mainly been on [coordinating international humanitarian cash](#) responses. It has established task teams on targeting, transfer mechanisms, de-duplication and registration and market monitoring.

Part of the coordination challenge will be around the huge issues relating to gender and disability in trying to ensure [inclusive humanitarian and social protection](#) responses, adapting systems to meet changing vulnerabilities and need and addressing changing barriers to access. Both humanitarian and social protection actors have made commitments around gender, inclusion and responding to protection risks such as gender-based violence and coordination and they will need to ensure commitments are lived up to and mainstreamed in assistance responses. In doing this, and paying attention to payment systems for benefits, there should also be a focus on the wider system for social services in Ukraine and the role that social service centres and social workers play in protecting vulnerable people at community levels.

Finally, alongside what happens to those still in Ukraine, additional questions are emerging about if and how Ukrainians who have fled as refugees to other countries can access their benefits. For those collecting benefits from post offices, ID documents are required so others will be unable to collect benefits on their behalf. These questions are especially pertinent for split households where some members have fled to Poland, Romania and other neighbouring countries, while some household members remain in Ukraine. The Ministry of Social Policy is [establishing cooperation](#) with ministries in Lithuania and Latvia regarding the rights of displaced Ukrainians, particularly children and people with disabilities. The parties have 'agreed to sign bilateral memoranda of cooperation on the order of temporary stay of Ukrainian citizens in Lithuania and Latvia, ensuring their priority life needs'. Special attention will be paid to registering and exchanging data on displaced persons with disabilities and children, including medical and psychological services. These experiences point to some tricky questions that are coming down the road: How will bilateral and multilateral cooperation ensure data privacy and security for portable social protection? How can Ukrainian citizens continue to accumulate contributory pension rights when they are displaced to other countries and, more broadly, how can portability of rights/entitlements to social security be achieved?

What might be possible?

There seems little doubt that this is not a question of either a humanitarian response or a social protection one. Delivering existing benefits, and new ones, through both systems will be needed. An immediate social protection and humanitarian response is needed, but the response is also likely to be protracted. It will be important for emergency and long-term systems to interact and complement each other. Lots of the elements required to facilitate sustained delivery and ensure a timely response are in place. The existing EISS is critical, and actions taken by the Ministry of Social Policy to move cash via new pathways allow it to reach those who are either stuck, with limited opportunities to leave shelter, or displaced.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is a covariant shock – affecting all parts of the country in various ways with few, if any, Ukraine citizens and residents untouched by it. Aligning the wider response with a social protection system focused predominantly on tackling idiosyncratic and lifecycle shocks means that topping up support to existing beneficiaries will not be enough, and wider support will be needed to people newly in need. This is a challenge, but not an insurmountable one. Benefits targeted to individuals are usually shared within the household and can be expanded, and new beneficiaries are already being added to the EISS.

But the scale of assistance needed will be huge, with large numbers of people needing support and needing it for a prolonged period. Whatever the outcome of the conflict in the coming months, caseloads for existing programmes – especially those focused on unemployment, disability and payments to veterans – will grow, and new programmes will be required, for example to tackle homelessness and the need for shelter and housing. According to the [Centre for Global Development](#) and analysis from [Thomas Byrnes](#), what's needed is likely to dwarf likely levels of humanitarian funding. It will require large-scale support with and through government systems, and significant support from non-humanitarian sources of funding including the IMF, World Bank and western governments. There are also new entry points, for example, leveraging funding from [frozen Russian assets](#), that could substantially increase the financing options and lessons to draw from other countries for an eventual post-conflict/rehabilitation systems. If substantial support can be put in place, then options such as temporarily increasing existing benefits as well as trying to get additional payments to people newly in need should be explored.

Acknowledgements

This briefing was written by Bozena Sojka, Paul Harvey and Rachel Slater. Bozena works on social policies in eastern Europe, including those for Ukrainian refugees in Poland. Paul and Rachel work on research assessing how existing government social protection programmes can be sustained during violent conflicts in other countries, including Syria and Iraq, as part of the [Better Assistance in Crises \(BASIC\) Research Project](#). The authors are grateful for comments on an earlier draft from Thomas Byrnes, Julie Lawson-McDowall, Zehra Rizvi, Louisa Seferis and Helen Lindley-Jones and to Barbara Peace and Russell Goffe-Wood for production. Responsibility for the analysis in the briefing lies with the authors alone.

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Annex 1: Summary of characteristics of social security benefits in Ukraine

TYPE OF BENEFIT	ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA
HEALTH INSURANCE	
Sickness benefit	60% of the insured's average gross earnings over the last three months is paid with less than five years of work; 80% with five to seven years of work. 100% of the insured's earnings is paid for a working parent caring for a sick family member for up to 14 days for each case.
UNEMPLOYMENT	
Unemployment benefit	With less than two years of covered employment, 50% of the insured's average earnings is paid; 55% with two to six years; 60% with seven to 10 years; and 70% with more than 10 years. 100% of the benefit is paid for the first 90 calendar days; 80% for the next 90 calendar days; and 70% thereafter. Benefits are paid for up to 360 days in a two-year period; up to 720 calendar days for insured persons within two years of retirement.
PENSION INSURANCE AND OTHER SOCIAL ASSISTANCE	
Old-age pension	Age 60 with at least 35 years of coverage (men) or age 55 and six months (women, gradually rising to age 60 in 2021) with at least 30 years of coverage. Partial pension: age 60 with 15 to 34 years of coverage (men) or age 55 and 6 months (women, gradually rising to age 60 in 2021) with 15 to 29 years of coverage. Deferred pension: The pension may be deferred from one to 10 years after the normal retirement age.
Caregiver's allowance (old age)	Paid to an unpaid caregiver of a person older than age 80 in need of constant attendance.
Social pension (old age)	Age 63 (men) or age 59 (women, gradually rising to age 63 in 2021). A means-tested pension is paid to low-income citizens who are not working and ineligible for an old-age pension.
Disability pension	Paid for a Group I (incapacity for any work and requires constant attendance), Group II (incapacity for any work and does not require constant attendance), or Group III (incapacity for usual work) disability. Caregiver's allowance (disability): Paid to an unpaid caregiver of a person with a Group I disability.
Caregiver's allowance (disability)	Paid to an unpaid caregiver of a person with a Group I disability.
Social pension (disability)	A means-tested pension is paid to low-income citizens who may have some degree of disability but are ineligible for a disability pension or work injury benefit.
Survivor pension	The insured had at least 35 years (men) or 30 years (women) of coverage. Eligible survivors include non-working dependents, including a spouse, father, and mother of pensionable age or disabled, surviving children younger than age 18 (age 23 if a student or an orphan, no limit if disabled before age 18). In the absence of a spouse, the pension is paid to a parent, sibling, or grandparent, if they are not employed and care for the deceased's dependent child younger than age 8.
Funeral grant	Paid when an employee, student, unemployed person, pensioner, or military pensioner dies.
FAMILY BENEFITS	
Maternity benefits	100% of the insured's earnings is paid to employed women for 70 days before and 56 days after (70 days for a complicated birth or multiple births) the expected date of childbirth; for women in education and training, the benefit is 100% of the educational stipend; for women unemployed because of a closed business, the benefit is 100% of earnings received at the last place of work; for those registered as unemployed for at least 10 months, the benefit is 100% of the monthly minimum wage.
Maternity benefit (non-contributory)	100% of the mother's average monthly income (including unemployment benefits) but not less than 25% of the monthly minimum subsistence level for people with a disability is paid.
Childcare benefit (non-contributory)	Paid monthly to employed women for childcare leave until the child is age 3, regardless of whether the woman is insured. The benefit is based on the minimum subsistence level for able-bodied people and average family income.
OTHER BENEFITS	
There are some special conditional programmes supporting people who were injured in the Chernobyl disaster, or caring for a child injured in the Chernobyl disaster, and for WWII veterans. For the latter group, social protection provides lump-sum assistance, special privileges and grants for war veterans;	

Sources: include, inter alia: Gnatenko et al. (2021); SSPTW: Europe, Ukraine (2014); ILO (2013) & Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine website