

Rebuilding a society for all ages in Ukraine

A call for age inclusive reform and recovery



HelpAge

International

Jonathan Moore/HelpAge International

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Key messages

- **Ukraine's population is ageing rapidly, with major implications for the social and economic recovery of the country.**
- **As Ukraine embarks on its journey to recovery, and to European Union (EU) integration, it has a unique opportunity to access the global support needed to set the country on a sustainable path.**
- **The success of this process will depend on how well the government, the EU and international donors prioritise reforms that recognise the rights and needs of older people today, and respond to the demographic changes ahead.**
- **Reforming long-term care and support, healthcare and pensions and building inclusive infrastructure, are critical priorities to address as Ukraine rebuilds and aligns itself with EU norms and standards.**

Introduction

Ukraine has the largest percentage of older people affected by conflict in the world. Prior to Russia's full scale invasion, one quarter of the country's population was over the age of 60. Since then, older people have disproportionately remained in Ukraine while younger people have fled. This conflict-driven displacement has accelerated a trend towards an older population that is set to continue for the long term.

While longer lives are to be celebrated, as people age their health and care needs are likely to become increasingly complex. Rates of disability also rise and reliance on pensions and other forms of financial support increases as opportunities to generate income through work diminish in older age. While an ageing population needs to be planned for, it should not be feared. Older people are an integral part of Ukraine's economic and social fabric and can make an important contribution to reconstruction.

A changing population

Ukraine's population was already rapidly changing by the time of Russia's full scale invasion. Like many countries in the region, recent decades have seen Ukraine experience both population decline and population ageing.

Prior to the war, the UN estimated that Ukraine's population was 43.3 million,¹ around eight million fewer people compared to the early 1990s.² Twenty-six per cent of the pre-war population was aged 60 years or over.

There is a significant gender dimension to Ukraine's older population. Due to differences in life expectancy, older women significantly outnumber older men, according to data collected prior to the conflict. Women make up 62 per cent of the population aged 60 to 79 years old and 73 per cent of the population aged 80 years and over – equivalent to 265 women for every 100 men.³ As a result, older women are much more likely than men to live alone. Women make up some 86.5 per cent of all single person households over the age of 65 exposing them to poverty and isolation.⁴

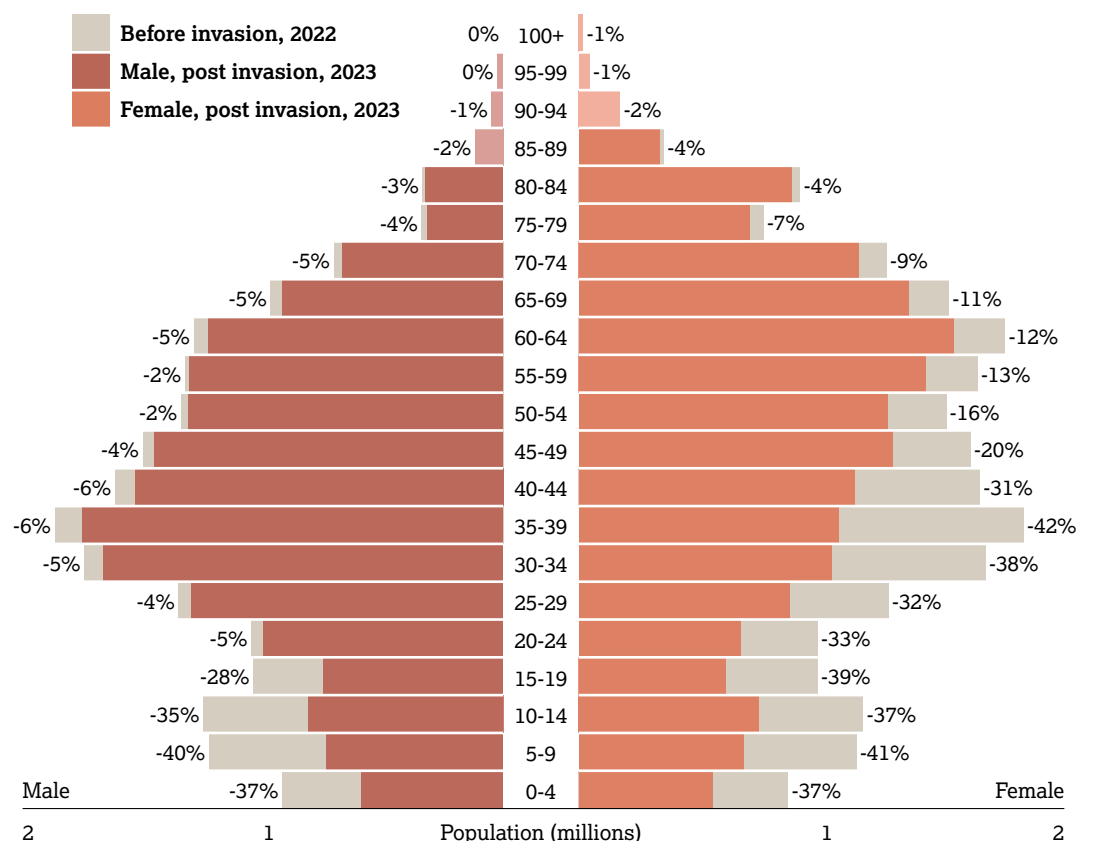
Conflict driving long-term demographic changes

While the population of Ukraine has been undergoing a rapid transition for some time, the war has provided a sudden shock that will have significant implications for Ukraine's demographics in the short and the long term.

According to Eurostat data,⁵ the majority of people fleeing to Europe are under 65 years old; only 5.4 per cent of the refugees arriving in Europe from Ukraine are over 65, the vast majority female. This is a much smaller proportion compared to the share of older people in the population prior to the war.

Analysis by the European Commission⁶ suggests that the impact of people fleeing Ukraine because of the war has changed the population structure of the country. Figure 1 compares the pre-war age and sex structure of the population with current estimates. It shows significant reductions in the working age population, particularly among women.

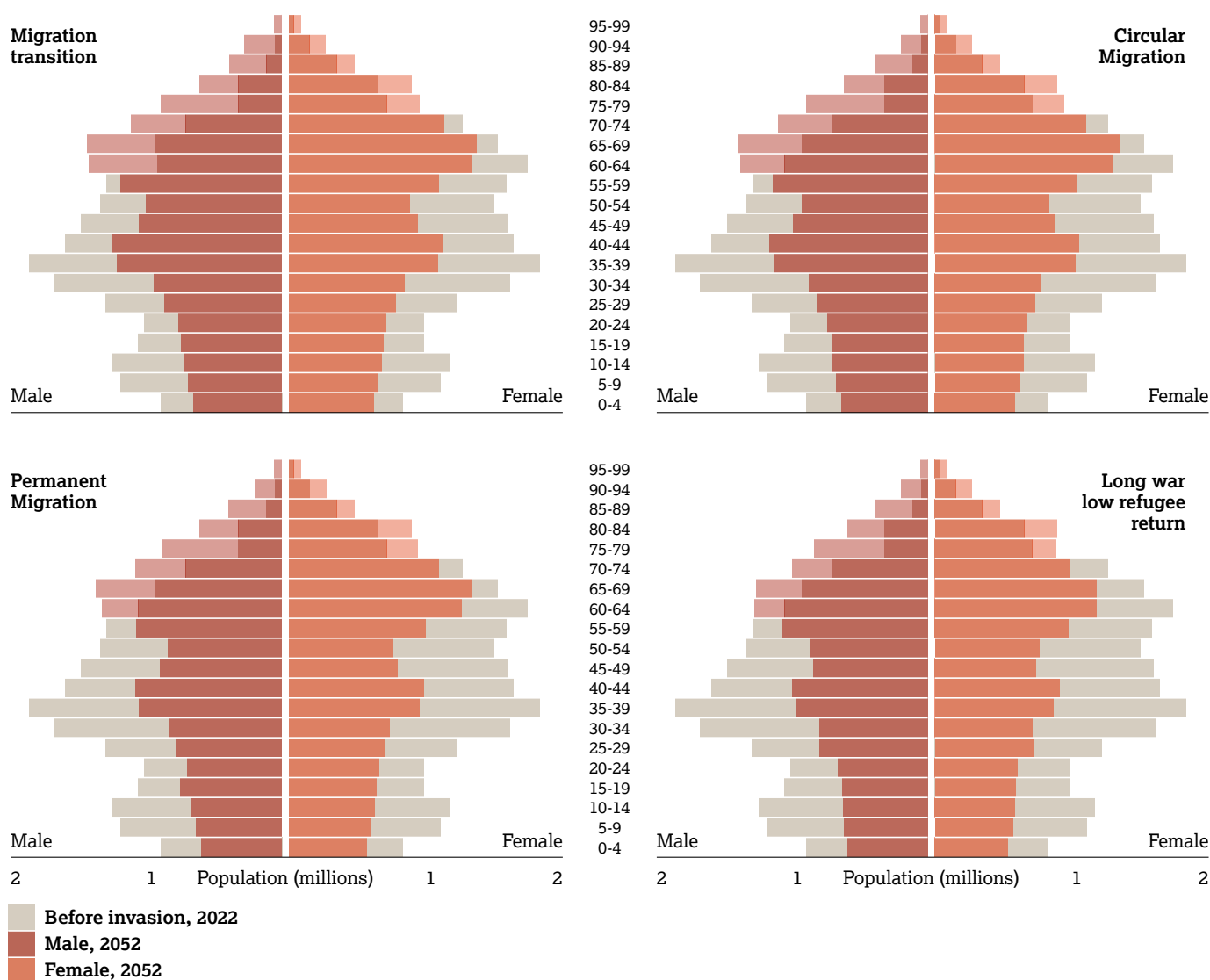
Figure 1: Pre-war age/sex structure of the Ukraine population, and estimates of the the impact of international displacement by age/sex group



Source: Ueffing P. at al., *Ukraine's population future after the Russian invasion – The role of migration for demographic change*, p.15, 2023

To understand the future impact of the war on Ukraine's population, the European Commission has done further modelling to predict the population structure in 2052. This is based on four different scenarios which consider different possibilities for the length of the war and the nature of ongoing migration. It compares these to the population structure in 2022. As Figure 2 shows, rapid ageing is the predicted result across all scenarios.

Figure 2: Comparison of the age/sex composition of Ukraine's population before the Russian invasion in 2022 and in 2052 by migration scenario



Source: Ueffing P. at al., *Ukraine's population future after the Russian invasion – The role of migration for demographic change*, p.24, 2023

Ukraine's application to join the EU is also relevant to the country's demographic future. Among the many benefits of EU membership, Ukraine's citizens will enjoy free movement which, based on the experiences of its recently joined members,⁷ is likely to further contribute to outward migration of younger people and result in greater population ageing.

An initial Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment undertaken in Ukraine in August 2022 by the World Bank, in cooperation with the Government of Ukraine and the European Commission, identified the importance of demographics in identifying short and long-term needs.⁸ This new modelling by the European Commission reinforces the need for both immediate actions and longer-term strategies to address issues such as healthcare, long-term care and support for older people and their caregivers, pensions and accessible infrastructure, housing and communities to set Ukraine on a sustainable path for the future. Improving the availability, analysis and use of sex, age and disability disaggregated data will support Ukraine in the journey ahead.



Dmytro Maksymenko/HelpAge International

Some time ago Valentina lost sight in one eye and her vision is deteriorating in the other as well. While she receives free medicines for high blood pressure and other general conditions, she cannot afford treatment for her eyesight. With no family to support her, she struggles to cover all expenses with her pension.

“These medicines cost more than half of my pension. I don’t have enough money for both food and medicines.”

Health needs increasing as access is curtailed

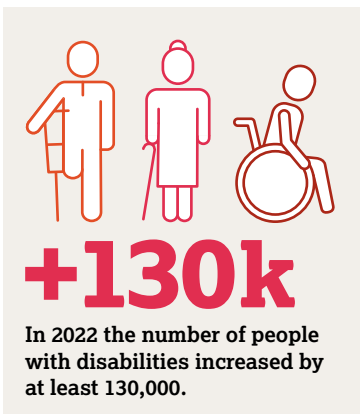
Since the escalation of the war in February 2022, much of the country’s health infrastructure has been damaged or destroyed at a time when health and long-term care and support needs are increasing. An updated Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment (RDNA2) in February 2023, reported damage or destruction to 15.9 per cent of public health facilities.⁹

Older people’s access to healthcare and other basic services has been severely curtailed, particularly for older people who have remained in conflict areas. HelpAge International research¹⁰ has revealed how older people, particularly older women, people over 70, and older people with disabilities, face disproportionate barriers to accessing essential health services, medicines and assistive products. Reduced access to health facilities, alongside reduced incomes and ability to afford medication puts older people’s health at risk and could lead to an increase in disabilities and acute health and care needs as a result of unmanaged chronic conditions.

The World Bank already estimates that the first year of the war has resulted in a rise in disabilities that may increase future needs for long-term care and support in the community, as well as demand for more accessible health and social infrastructure. In 2022 alone, the number of people with disabilities was estimated to have increased by at least 130,000, with an estimated loss of US\$13.2 billion in Disability Adjusted Life Years (DALYs) for 12 months since the invasion and the following 18 months.¹¹

Meanwhile, the impact of the war is taking its toll on mental and psychosocial health and wellbeing. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 20 per cent of people aged 60 and above report being ‘too upset or anxious to go about daily activities’.¹² This is supported by HelpAge research which revealed that over 50 per cent of older people self-reported a negative impact on their mental health.¹³

Repairs to health infrastructure have already been prioritised with 500 facilities partially or fully repaired between August 2022 and February 2023.¹⁴ As the Government of Ukraine embarks on such rapid repairs, it has an opportunity to future proof its current health infrastructure by improving accessibility, in line with commitments to build back better and to build accessible infrastructure.¹⁵ Continued investment in primary healthcare should be prioritised in the short term, alongside medium-term expansion of community-based services delivered close to where people are living.¹⁶



Need for a coherent strategy to develop community-based long-term care and support

Prior to the war, Ukraine set itself clearly on the path to deinstitutionalisation for children, people with disabilities and older people. Having ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2010, Ukraine developed a National Action Plan on the implementation of the UNCRPD in 2021. This included deinstitutionalisation as one of its priorities. Fulfilling these commitments will be essential to Ukraine's ambition to join the EU which has clearly set out expectations of member states in its Union of Equality Strategy.¹⁷

However, the onset of war has seen a significant rolling back of commitments. In just the first four months of the war, more than 4,000 older people in Ukraine, including those who had been living independently prior to the war, are reported to have been placed in state institutions via a simplified process, adding to the estimated 41,000 older people and people with disabilities living in institutions before the conflict.¹⁸ While placing older people in institutions may have been the most pragmatic way of providing safe shelter during the war, continuing this practice segregates older people and puts them at higher risk of neglect and abuse, and is in opposition to the fulfilment of their rights to independence, autonomy and choice.

Meanwhile, a draft Ukraine Recovery Plan¹⁹ prepared last year indicates that the government intends to develop a network of 'boarding houses for the elderly' as a means of repurposing redundant hospitals. This would be an effective expansion of the institutional approach to long-term care in Ukraine, just as it has the opportunity to invest in community-based alternatives. The updated Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment also includes an estimated \$127.5 million of reconstruction needs for residential care facilities between 2023 and 2033. Investment in this system over the coming decade is incompatible with the country's wider commitments and a human rights-based approach.



Bogdan Rozumnyi/HelpAge International

Arkadyy was displaced with his 91-year-old mother to a state institution. He would like to see his home again but, without more support in the community, it is difficult for him to see how he could care for his mother outside the institution.

“I won’t be able to take care of my mother. I can’t bathe her anymore.”

Age inclusive Universal Health Coverage

In the long term, the government, with the support of international actors, must recognise the changing demographics of the country and integrate the physical, mental, and social health and wellbeing of older people into national healthcare strategies and policies as part of a 'health in all policies' approach which addresses the root causes of ill health, poverty and inequality.

Health systems recovery and reform must focus on developing sustainable and universal health and long-term care and support systems that are age, gender and disability responsive. This includes addressing the barriers older people face in accessing services and support; ensuring the inclusion of appropriate, targeted, person-centred and integrated services and support, including long-term care; and protecting older people from financial hardship associated with accessing services. This will require a workforce with the skills and knowledge to deliver age, gender and disability inclusive responses as well as systematic collection, analysis, reporting and use of health and care related data that is disaggregated by gender, age, disability and other characteristics. This is critical to informing equity-based decision making.

A secure income

Russia's war against Ukraine has had a devastating impact on the country's economy and its social infrastructure. In 2022, Ukraine's GDP shrank by 29 per cent.²⁰ The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that employment in 2022 dropped 15.5 per cent below the pre-war level, equivalent to 2.4 million jobs.²¹

The impact of the war has pushed 7.1 million people into poverty, as poverty rates have climbed from 5.5 per cent to 24.1 per cent.²² According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), around 80 per cent of single older Ukrainians live below the poverty line, with 90 per cent of older people unable to pay for even basic medical needs.²³

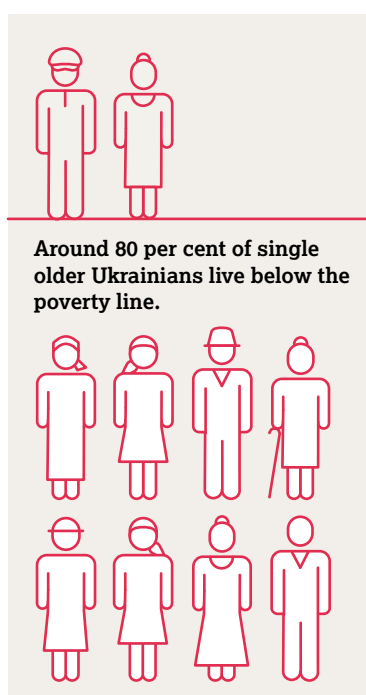
Concerns about income have consistently been raised by older people in HelpAge's research and consultations, including before the war. In an assessment in eastern Ukraine in August 2021,²⁴ 98 per cent of older people told us they rely on a pension as their main source of income. Eighty-nine per cent of older people had no other source of income.

In the meantime, job losses and business disruption have led to a dramatic decrease in social contributions.²⁵ This adds further pressure on a social protection system that was already under extreme strain. According to the OECD, only 36 per cent of people 15 to 64 years old were paying contributions in 2021.²⁶ The government's spending on social protection reached 23 per cent of total budget in 2019, with pensions accounting for more than half of this expenditure.²⁷ At present, the pension system is heavily reliant on subsidies from the state budget and the rising pension fund deficit puts pressure on government finances.

Rapid inflation was outpacing pension amounts prior to the war. With consumer prices growing 26.6 per cent in 2022, the value of older people's pensions has diminished further. This is predicted to continue as disruption to production and supply chains drives prices higher and higher in Ukraine.

Just before the outbreak of war, the government was about to embark on reforms to try to put the pensions system onto a more sustainable footing. There is an urgent need to improve the financial sustainability of the state pension system. A financially robust insurance system can help reduce the growing strain on the state budget and increase the value of pensions and thus enhance the general standard of living of older people.

At the same time, regulatory changes introduced by the government since Russia's full scale invasion have resulted in discriminatory treatment of some groups of internally displaced people (IDPs), particularly residents of territory that was outside the control of the government of Ukraine before the full scale invasion.



The government must urgently ensure equal treatment in pension provision, regardless of displacement status.

The Government of Ukraine and its international donors must prioritise reforms to the pension system that guarantee a sustainable future for the country and dignity for its older people. At the same time, it must ensure that it has the systems in place to capture a population that is on the move to deliver them social benefits without discrimination.



Stefan Trappe/HelpAge International

Mykola and Tetiana fled when their village was shelled. They feel they must return because their farm is their livelihood.

“We have no income. We do not receive a pension because we have always been self-employed.”

The built environment

The scale of damage to Ukraine’s physical infrastructure and the concentration of the conflict in urban areas of strategic importance means that there is a particular focus on housing, transport and urban redevelopment in Ukraine’s recovery efforts. The updated Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment²⁸ identifies housing and transport among the most affected sectors, accounting for 38 per cent and 26 per cent of total losses respectively. Meanwhile, the National Council for the Reconstruction of Ukraine, created by President Zelensky, has established a working group on urban planning and another on restoration of infrastructure²⁹ providing a key opportunity to ensure principles of inclusion and accessibility are considered.

Older people and people with disabilities in Ukraine have always faced significant challenges related to the physical environment, causing barriers to their social participation, physical activity, and overall wellbeing. These have been exacerbated by the damage inflicted by the conflict. The absence of accessible transportation limits not only older people and people with disabilities’ social participation but also their access to health and other services.

The anticipated recovery process presents a unique opportunity for Ukraine to rethink its built environment, bringing it in line with international standards on accessible design. Beyond physical accessibility, it is vital that policies and programmes recognise the value of socially inclusive communities in the broadest sense. This means providing streets and public spaces that are accessible and welcoming, creating opportunities for older people to socialise and access services. This is critical to rebuilding spatial and social connections disrupted by the conflict.



Stefan Trappe/HelpAge International

The recovery process gives Ukraine an opportunity to rethink housing, transport and the built environment, bringing it in line with international standards and ensuring socially inclusive communities for older people and people with disabilities.

Such actions would accelerate the country's ambitions to ensure accessibility which were articulated in the government's National Strategy for creation of the barrierless space in Ukraine,³⁰ adopted in 2021. However, progress to date in these sectors has shown little coherence with this ambitious strategy. For example, government policies seeking to regulate local authorities' purchase of property and construction of temporary housing do not include accessibility requirements, resulting in housing in Ukraine that is inaccessible to many older people and people with disabilities.³¹ Such housing has also been built without consideration for proximity to services on which older people depend.

Meanwhile, investments by international donors in the housing stock have also failed to prioritise inclusive, universal design. At time of writing, 25 pre-fab camps have been built, housing 8,500 displaced people. When a further 30 are complete, 30,000 people will be housed. However, analysis by the League of the Strong has concluded that the camps completed to date are not suitable for people with disabilities and especially for wheelchair users and for people in need of stoma care or with vision disorder.³²

These examples illustrate the importance of ensuring inclusion and accessibility are enshrined in policies and programmes, delivering housing and infrastructure that meet the current and future needs of the ageing population – as well as creating inclusive and supportive communities that will help everyone recover from the impacts of the conflict.

Data and participation

It is vital that recovery is informed by inclusive data systems that provide disaggregated data on all aspects of the population's needs and rights across the life course, enabling equity based decision making. Ukraine's ability to rebuild infrastructure and services that are accessible and meet the needs of the population will continue to be limited by gaps in available data.

Prior to the full scale invasion, the Council of Europe highlighted the lack of a recent population census in Ukraine as a barrier to understanding the discrimination faced by older people. The last census was undertaken in 2001 and rescheduled four times in the intervening period. The Council of Europe reports that international monitors have stressed that a population census is long overdue on multiple occasions.³³

At present, government disability statistics only count people who register their disability, which leads to undercounting due to physical, financial and administrative barriers for those who identify as having a disability.³⁴ A survey conducted in eastern Ukraine in 2020 reveals that 41 per cent of older persons reported at least one severe disability, but only 4.8 per cent had their disability status officially recognised.³⁵

Alongside data, consultation and participation of older people and people with disabilities will be critical to ensuring that infrastructure and services are accessible and sustainable for the long term.



Bogdan Rozumnyi/HelpAge International

Tamara's story

Tamara had to flee her home in 2014 when her town in Donesk was occupied. She settled in a rented flat in another town. In April 2022, she was displaced again, repeatedly moving in and around Lviv until she was offered a place in a nursing home.

"I really didn't want to come here at first – it is a nursing home and I am not that old. I was staying at a school with toilets outside and the Director encouraged me to come here. At least the conditions are good. I have heard bad things about other institutions. I know that many older people are not so lucky.

Income is a big worry. I have a knee problem that needs surgery but it will cost \$1,000. Who will cover that for us? My pension is very little because I worked the last 20 years of my career without paperwork. I had worked 25 years until 1991 and, after that, no one wanted to register us so we worked for cash. Now they say I haven't worked enough years to get my full pension. It still makes me so mad that I've worked for over 40 years and it isn't enough.

When the war is over, I will go back of course. I would like my own apartment but, while the war is ongoing, I will stay here."

Conclusions and recommendations

As Ukraine embarks on its journey to recovery and to EU integration, it has a unique opportunity to access the global support needed to set the country on a sustainable path that upholds the rights and meets the needs of older people today, and responds to the demographic changes ahead.

HelpAge International calls on the Government of Ukraine and its international partners to take the following actions:

- 1.** Ensure that immediate investments in rebuilding housing, health and social infrastructure takes the opportunity to improve accessibility of existing infrastructure.
- 2.** Recommit to closing large-scale residential institutions and developing community-based approaches. Demonstrate this commitment by immediately suspending plans to repurpose hospitals into institutional style long-term care facilities and reorienting planned investment into reconstructing residential care facilities towards community-based services and support, such as assisted living arrangements and home-based care services.
- 3.** Prioritise continued investment in primary healthcare in the short term, alongside expansion of community-based services delivered close to where people are living.
- 4.** Commit to developing sustainable and universal health and long-term care and support systems that are age, gender, and disability responsive in access, service delivery and financing, delivered by a skilled workforce and informed by disaggregated data.
- 5.** Ensure equal pensions access to older displaced persons, including by revising regulatory acts introduced after the full scale invasion which have led to discrimination against some internally displaced people (IDPs).
- 6.** Resume dialogue with international actors (World Bank, ILO, International Monetary Fund) on reform of the pension system to set the country on a sustainable footing.
- 7.** Adopt and implement principles of inclusion and accessibility in the efforts of working groups operating under the National Council for the Reconstruction of Ukraine, particularly on urban planning and infrastructure.
- 8.** Ensure that short-term housing solutions and longer-term investments in the built environment are fully accessible and aligned with the National Strategy for creation of the barrierless space in Ukraine and the UNCRPD and that older people are prioritised and supported to apply for compensation for damaged or destroyed housing.
- 9.** Invest in inclusive data systems that provide disaggregated data on all aspects of the population's needs and rights across the life course and commit to a full population census at the earliest opportunity.
- 10.** Create opportunities for broad and meaningful consultation and participation of older people as reform and recovery plans are developed.

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Bogdan Rezumnyi/HelpAge International

Alla was displaced with her 88-year-old mother a year ago. She wants to go home one day but her home has been destroyed and she worries about compensation for the repairs.

“My house can't be repaired with my pension. How will I pay for it?”



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“I pray that the war ends soon. I want to at least survive, to meet my family. I dream of meeting my children and grandchildren.” Galina, 63 years

HelpAge International is a global network of organisations promoting the right of all older people to lead dignified, healthy and secure lives.

Acknowledgements

We offer our sincere thanks to those older people who took the time to talk to us about their hopes for the future while still suffering the trauma of war and displacement.

As Arkady told us, “If the war was over, we could plan, imagine, dream. As long as it continues, all we can wish for is that it ends.”

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