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The cost of war beyond the battlefield

As US aid dries up, millions of Ukrainians are being left without critical services. Europe must decide whether it's ready to step in

The faces of the Kyiv Metro commuters had changed since I had last been there in late spring 2021, 9 months before Russia's invasion. The fervour of an achievable victory, one which every Ukrainian keeps deep in their heart, has been trumped by the exhaustion of over three years of war. There is no one left untouched by the conflict, and the faces and stories of everyone met reflects the emotional toll of a war long-run and hard fought. In a country battered by missiles, displacement and death, trauma may be Ukraine's most underfunded front line.

It's not Russian airstrikes that are taking apart the country's humanitarian infrastructure, but the quiet retreat of one of Ukraine's biggest allies. Since the start of this year, funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), once a central pillar of Ukraine's civilian support system, has ground to a halt. In January, USAID funding stopped. In March, broader US aid to Ukraine was frozen by Congress. For thousands of local organisations across the country, the impact has been immediate, and devastating.

In early spring, Ukraine's First Lady Olena Zelenska convened the first meeting of the country's national mental health programme since the cuts began. 'It has been six months since we last met — challenging months for everyone, just as they have been for the entire country', she told the room, which included everyone from grassroots women's shelters to the Head of the Coordination Centre for Mental Health. That meeting came just days after Veteran Hub – a centre offering legal and psychological help to veterans and their families in the central city of Vinnytsia – shut its doors after six years and 700 monthly visitors. It may not be the last.

For a country trying to hold the social fabric together amid a brutal war, the part-collapse of humanitarian support is not just a budget problem. It's a brewing national emergency.

Survivors without safe spaces

Few groups are more affected by the US aid freeze than women and girls. According to the UN's reproductive and sexual health agency (UNFPA), around 640 000 women and girls are now at direct risk of losing access to gender-based violence (GBV) services, mental health support or safe spaces. These are not abstract programmes: they include trauma counselling, domestic violence shelters and legal assistance for survivors of rape or partner abuse, services that have been pushed to their limits since Russia's full-scale invasion began in 2022.

Reports of GBV in Ukraine have surged more than threefold over the past three years. Yet, among the 99 women's organisations surveyed by the UN, over 60 per cent say they've been forced to suspend or significantly reduce GBV-related services since the cuts. More than half cannot meet their contractual obligations. Two-thirds are laying off staff.

'We [women] can be in really difficult situations — with no money, with children, for example. I had many cases of domestic violence from different people', says Natalia Vyshnevetska, who heads the women's NGO D.O.M.48.24. 'I think every woman has such experiences.'

The humanitarian vacuum left by the US retreat is a test not just for Ukraine, but for its international partners.

Without rapid intervention, the humanitarian fallout will not be theoretical. It will be measured in lives unravelled and families left without recourse to even the most basic protections.

It's not just women's organisations that are at breaking point. The aid freeze has torn through services for veterans, displaced people and people with disabilities, groups that represent the human cost of war beyond the battlefield.

The International Organization for Migration estimates that 3.6 million people are now internally displaced across Ukraine. Around half are women and girls. In many areas of the country, particularly in central and western oblasts where evacuees from the east tend to arrive, temporary shelters and 'collective centres' are their only refuge. These sites, some housing over 60 000 people, are supported by the Camp Coordination and Camp Management Cluster, a UN-led effort often directly funded by USAID's Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance. Those funds have now disappeared.

For residents of these shelters, the loss of funding means losing access to essential non-food items: hygiene kits, menstrual supplies, solar lamps,

bedding and winter heating. These are basic tools for survival – and dignity – in conflict. For women, especially, they can also be a first line of protection against violence.

With no safety net and no sign of restored US assistance, many of these families are left waiting — or disappearing from care entirely.

A credibility crisis for Ukraine's allies

The humanitarian vacuum left by the US retreat is a test not just for Ukraine, but for its international partners. And at its heart is a political question: what kind of ally does Europe want to be?

The conversation around aid to Ukraine in Europe has largely centred on weapons and reconstruction — tanks, drones and long-term recovery. But trauma doesn't wait for peace treaties. The costs of the US funding freeze are not abstract accounting errors. They are being paid daily, by some of the most vulnerable people in Ukraine.

For many Ukrainians, the suddenness of the US withdrawal feels like abandonment. As First Lady Zelenska herself put it in March, the psychological toll of war is not something that can be postponed. The country's resilience, its post-war future, even its ability to function as a democracy — all hinge on its capacity to care for its people in the here and now.

European governments should earmark emergency funds to sustain essential mental health and GBV services.

Europe cannot simply 'backfill' American aid. But it can act, and quickly, to stop the collapse of Ukraine's humanitarian front line.

The first step is financial. European governments, through the EU or bilaterally, should earmark emergency funds to sustain essential mental health and GBV services through the next six months. That includes direct funding for NGOs already delivering care on the ground.

Second, programmes like Zelenska's National Mental Health initiative should receive strategic and technical support from European institutions. That means not just grants, but embedded coordination, training and scalable funding models.

Third, and perhaps most provocatively, the EU must advance serious proposals to use frozen Russian assets to support Ukraine's social

infrastructure. There is no moral or political justification for allowing these resources to sit idle while Ukrainian women go without trauma care or shelter.

If Ukraine is to win this war, it must do more than hold the front line. It must hold itself together. The current scramble to find emergency funding – or to simply 'get by' – is no strategy. It's a slow bleed.



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