

A photograph of three women in a meeting room. The woman in the center, wearing a tan sweater and glasses, holds a blue marker. The woman on the right, in a black blazer, holds an orange marker. The woman on the left is partially visible, wearing a grey jacket. They are standing in front of a purple wall covered with colorful sticky notes. A whiteboard is also visible in the background.

**FRONTLINE**  
NEGOTIATIONS

CENTRE OF COMPETENCE ON  
HUMANITARIAN NEGOTIATION

OPERATIONAL REPORT

# Humanitarian negotiations in wartime Ukraine

Lessons from the CCHN's engagement 2022-2025



Report Type: Operational Report  
Date: May 2025  
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## THE CENTRE OF COMPETENCE ON HUMANITARIAN NEGOTIATION

The Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation (CCHN) is a joint initiative of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Médecins Sans Frontières Switzerland, the World Food Programme (WFP), and UNHCR.

It was established in 2016 to provide concrete opportunities for frontline humanitarian negotiators to share and analyse their negotiation practices, to build practitioners' capacity to address recurring challenges and dilemmas in humanitarian negotiation, and to foster peer-to-peer exchange across agencies and regions in a safe environment.

Its core objectives are:

- To foster a community of professionals engaged in frontline humanitarian negotiations.
- To promote critical reflection, learning and exchanges among peers within this community.
- To develop a stronger analytical framework and greater capacity for effective practice.

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## Executive summary

**From 2022 to 2025, the Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation (CCHN) has played a strategic role in supporting humanitarian actors across Ukraine.**

**Against the backdrop of one of Europe's most complex and volatile humanitarian crises, the CCHN has worked to strengthen negotiation capacities among frontline staff, civil society actors, and international organisations facing multidimensional challenges in access, protection, and legitimacy.**

This report synthesises insights gathered from over 15 events organised in Ukraine and its neighbouring countries – including negotiation workshops, facilitator trainings, thematic exchanges and humanitarian diplomacy sessions. It highlights how the CCHN's peer-based methodology has supported humanitarian actors in navigating complex negotiation dilemmas. Such dilemmas may range from negotiations with local and national authorities, such as addressing restrictive visa regimes and the implications of staff conscription, to engaging with military actors to secure safe passage and the evacuation of civilians. The cases and reflections presented in the report are not exhaustive but offer a significant glimpse of the challenges faced and the negotiation strategies applied in the Ukrainian context.

Key themes explored include:

- The role of the communities, local actors and civil society organisations in humanitarian negotiation;
- The use of humanitarian diplomacy to align frontline negotiation with policy engagement;
- The negotiation of protection outcomes amid overlapping mandates and political pressures;
- Administrative and legal hurdles that constitute active barriers to humanitarian operations.

The report concludes with strategic recommendations for donors and partners, including expanding localised capacity building to ensure sustainability, reinforcing the protection-negotiation nexus, and strengthening peer-based support and learning for negotiations in complex and high-risk environments.

# Contents

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY ..... 2**

Introduction..... 4

Context and strategic engagement in Ukraine..... 4

Approach and methodology ..... 5

Operational highlights and events overview..... 6

Dilemmas and challenges in humanitarian negotiation ..... 7

    Challenges..... 7

    Dilemmas ..... 8

Negotiating with and by communities ..... 9

Humanitarian diplomacy ..... 10

Negotiation for protection outcomes..... 12

Bureaucratic and administrative impediments..... 14

**Conclusions and lessons learned ..... 16**



## Introduction

The Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation (CCHN) has intensified its programming on Ukraine in the wake of the 2022 escalation of hostilities. As humanitarian needs surged and access became increasingly contested, the CCHN further engaged with frontline humanitarians to better understand and support negotiation dynamics on the ground.

Through field missions, workshops, peer learning, and scenario-based exercises, the CCHN has gathered extensive insights into the dilemmas and practices that are shaping humanitarian negotiations in Ukraine. This report gathers these findings to inform future programming, reinforce peer exchange, and guide strategic direction in a shifting humanitarian landscape.

## Context and strategic engagement in Ukraine

Since the full-scale escalation of conflict in February 2022, Ukraine has become one of the most operationally complex and politically sensitive environments for humanitarian action globally. With shifting frontlines and mass displacement, humanitarian actors must negotiate in a landscape shaped by both insecurity and fragmentation.

By late 2024, over 14.6 million people required humanitarian assistance and more than 5.9 million were internally displaced. Despite the strong efforts of the local civil society sector, humanitarian coordination remains heavily internationalised. Access is often constrained by security threats, administrative hurdles, or political interference.

These realities reinforce the need for strategic engagement that builds local capacity and supports principled negotiation at all levels. The CCHN has responded to this need by cultivating a growing community of practice, which includes almost 200 members and more than 20 trained facilitators as of April 2025. Recent efforts have focused on localising negotiation support, improving access for Ukrainian civil society, and ensuring that negotiation tools and events are accessible in both Ukrainian and Russian.

Increasing engagement and the understanding of local communities' negotiation dynamics in frontline regions, such as Donbas and Luhansk, has become a strategic priority for the next year – depending on the evolving situation. Strengthening the local footprint is not only a matter of equity and diversity; rather, it is essential for sustaining a negotiation culture that reflects the needs and dynamics of communities at the frontlines, who must be equipped to navigate intensified conflict and to lead humanitarian negotiations that will eventually foster stabilisation and peacebuilding.

### Current humanitarian situation and funding challenges

The ongoing crisis is exacerbated by massive donor cuts, which have significantly impacted protection activities such as demining, the prevention of gender-based violence (GBV), child protection, and the medium- and long-term humanitarian strategy. Local organisations, which are often the first responders in communities, are facing severe funding shortages as donors increasingly prefer to channel funds through larger international

organisations. This trend has left many local actors with the capacity to reach populations in need of assistance without the necessary resources to operate effectively.

Despite the ongoing ceasefire negotiations between Russia and Ukraine, the situation remains dire with continued airstrikes, casualties, and escalating humanitarian needs. Many humanitarian agencies were forced to scale down operations or terminate contracts due to funding cuts, raising significant concerns about the sustainability of the response. In turn, scaling down has unfortunately become the only option for many local actors and frontline responders.

More than ever, humanitarians require robust support from both states and donors to continue operations effectively. There is

a compelling need for the international community to recognise the importance of a long-term strategy that goes beyond lifesaving operations at the frontlines. Protection activities, such as GBV prevention, demining, and child protection, must remain a priority to ensure the safety and dignity of affected populations, particularly those living in conflict-affected areas. Humanitarian actors must be supported in maintaining their operations and extending their reach, especially in a context where local organisations are being pushed out of the funding landscape.

“Local actors are the ones evacuating communities at the frontlines. They know how to engage with local authorities and have the trust of communities.

Yet, they are the ones losing funding now, especially following the major cuts from donors like USAID. A locally led, pooled fund for smaller organisations is essential.

Donors often struggle to reach local NGOs directly, but these are the actors doing the most sensitive and high-risk work along the contact lines.”

- **Frontline negotiator, Ukraine**

## Approach and methodology

The CCHN methodology combines field-driven analysis, peer learning, and scenario-based design to equip humanitarian actors with the tools they need to negotiate in high-pressure, rapidly evolving contexts. In Ukraine, this approach has been adapted to support both international and local responders navigating complex access and protection challenges.

Core components of the CCHN approach in Ukraine include:

- **Scenario-based learning.** Realistic case studies drawn from frontline dilemmas, such as negotiating access to communities at the frontlines or negotiations with local authorities the delivery of life saving assistance or implementation of mental health and psychosocial support programs, are used to support reflection and prepare for future engagement.
- **Peer exchange and facilitation.** The CCHN events are rooted in peer feedback and co-learning, enabling field actors to share practices and refine their strategies across agencies and roles.
- **Thematic “deep dives”.** Dedicated sessions on humanitarian diplomacy, negotiation for protection outcomes, and negotiating with communities have helped unpack sensitive dilemmas and identify actionable solutions.
- **Trainings of Facilitators.** The first Training of Facilitators for Ukraine, held in Moldova in collaboration with the International Organization for Migration, allowed to equip 23 professionals – mostly international staff – with the skills to facilitate workshops and effectively share their knowledge with colleagues. The CCHN is now seeking to mobilise this cohort and expand it to include additional Ukrainian humanitarians from local organisations, particularly based in hard-to-reach regions.

- **Localisation and language accessibility.** Most activities have so far been delivered in English, although CCHN materials exist in both Ukrainian and Russian. Moving forward, the CCHN will focus on delivering training and other activities in local languages to foster broader participation and relevance.
- **Digital engagement.** In 2024, the CCHN initiated efforts to reconnect with professionals who had previously participated in learning activities through virtual events and targeted outreach. This laid the groundwork for new digital initiatives such as the “Ukraine Community of Practice (CoP) Forum” and other context-specific content on the CCHN’s platform.

By supporting local humanitarians, translating tools into Ukrainian and Russian, and expanding into underserved areas, CCHN is embedding negotiation support where it is most needed: at the intersection of field practice and community response.

## Operational highlights and events overview

Between 2023 and mid-2025, the CCHN led and supported more than 15 activities specifically focusing on Ukraine, both across the country and online. These events, which reached hundreds of practitioners, included training, peer exchange, and thematic sessions. They were grounded in the complex dilemmas faced daily by humanitarian actors working on access, protection, and community engagement among others. Key initiatives include the following.

- As soon as the Ukrainian conflict intensified in early 2022, the CCHN team reacted promptly by organising **three webinars** (on negotiating humanitarian corridors during hostilities and under occupation in April 2022, on the negotiation of protection outcomes in May 2022, and on mis- and disinformation in June 2022) to provide professionals in Ukraine and its neighbouring countries with practices and lessons learned. More than 300 participants joined these online events.
- Due to security constraints, the CCHN partnered with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to launch its first **Training of Facilitators for Ukraine** in Moldova. IOM played a key role in hosting the event and facilitating the safe transport of humanitarian staff from various agencies working in the country. This initiative laid the foundation for a national facilitation network, equipping participants, primarily from international organizations, with the CCHN methodology and tools.
- A **negotiation workshop for Ukraine and neighbouring countries** was held in Moldova and Poland in March 2023. Following the Training of Facilitators, the newly trained facilitators co-led peer exchanges in Moldova and Poland, engaging humanitarian practitioners working in Ukraine and the neighbouring countries.
- In May 2023, an **Advanced Humanitarian Negotiation** Workshop delivered in Kyiv focused on cross-cutting protection dilemmas, stakeholder mapping, and multi-level negotiation strategies.



Humanitarian professionals gathered in Kyiv collaborate to map relevant stakeholders in their negotiation.  
Photo: Igor Evdokimov / CCHN

- On the occasion of **“Women Negotiators’ Month”**, an initiative launched by the CCHN throughout March 2024, an online series elevated the experiences of female professionals navigating negotiation spaces in sectors ranging from GBV response to civil-military coordination.
- A **humanitarian diplomacy workshop** was held in Kyiv in December 2024. Co-hosted with the Ukrainian Red Cross society, this session addressed the interface between political advocacy, humanitarian diplomacy and operational negotiation, highlighting both opportunities and risks.
- During the same month, an **in-person session with civil society organisations** in Odesa brought together local organisations active in southern Ukraine to reflect on humanitarian negotiation – notably with municipal authorities and religious institutions. Local legitimacy, trust-building, and power mapping were core themes of this exchange.
- Focused on visa delays, military service, procurement barriers, and other administrative obstacles that shape humanitarian access in Ukraine, a “peer circle” (informal online exchange) on **negotiating bureaucratic and administrative impediments** took place in March 2025.
- In April 2025, a public **webinar on “Geopolitical Realities at the Frontline”** gathered more than 400 registrations. With the support of experts and humanitarian professionals, it explored how geopolitical dynamics in Ukraine, Sudan, and the Occupied Palestinian territories shape humanitarian negotiations, impact field operations, and challenge efforts to protect civilians and deliver aid.

Future events will deepen this engagement, with a particular focus on underserved areas. Planned activities include a new Advanced Humanitarian Negotiation Workshop in Odesa (to be held in May 2025) as well as an event on humanitarian diplomacy in collaboration with the Swiss Embassy in Ukraine.

## Dilemmas and challenges in humanitarian negotiation

Through its engagement in Ukraine, the CCHN has identified a series of recurring challenges and dilemmas reported by humanitarian actors.

### Challenges

#### *Trust and relationships with authorities*

- A lack of trust between humanitarians and local, regional or national authorities, including in the context of prevalent corruption and bribery; perceptions of unwillingness to coordinate.
- Difficulty in establishing meaningful and consistent relationships with key decision-makers.

#### *Corruption and misappropriation of humanitarian aid*

- Counterparts making excessive material demands (“shopping lists”); aid being misappropriated by intermediaries or military actors during distribution.

#### *Non-partisanship and neutrality*

- Balancing neutrality while maintaining credibility with stakeholders or counterparts.
- Differing priorities and expectations between humanitarian actors and local authorities.

### *Access and security*

- Limited access to rural and frontline areas due to security risks and logistical constraints.
- Limited access to occupied territories.
- Restrictions resulting from risk thresholds, movement regulations, and unclear coordination structures.
- No clear communication between parties to the conflict, making it difficult for humanitarians to navigate the environment and understand political developments.
- Diplomats and coordination actors in Kyiv are often uncertain about the broader situation, limiting their ability to support field operations with timely updates.

### *Aid delivery and coverage*

- Aid is not always reaching vulnerable populations efficiently or equitably.
- Prioritisation of assistance in strategic areas may exclude marginalised groups.

### *Staff turnover and capacity*

- High staff turnover disrupts continuity in operations and relationships.
- Difficulty in recruiting staff with the experience and skills needed for negotiation in complex environments.
- Military conscription for male staff has forced organizations to adjust team structures, sometimes increasing risks for women staff.

### *Bureaucratic and administrative impediments (BAI)*

- Visa delays, customs bottlenecks, and financial compliance challenges continue to disrupt humanitarian operations.
- Some agencies rely on informal workarounds to keep operations running, raising concerns about transparency and sustainability.

### *Donor pressures*

- Funding priorities have increasingly shifted toward life-saving assistance, while protection work (e.g. demining, GBV response, child protection) receives limited support — undermining long-term, holistic responses.

## **Dilemmas**

### *Negotiation choices*

- Whether to continue working with existing authorities or escalate to other actors.
- How to coordinate negotiation roles across agencies to ensure coherence and avoid duplication, especially in contexts where unclear leadership can undermine collective efforts, but stepping forward too assertively may strain inter-agency relationships or be perceived as overstepping one's mandate.

### *Strategic engagement*

- How to create agreements that are binding enough to build trust, but flexible enough to adapt to changing conditions.

### *Bribery and access trade-offs*

- Humanitarians may be asked for bribes or favours in exchange for access to vulnerable populations. Refusing can result in denial of access or strained relations with local authorities; yet agreeing risks compromising humanitarian principles and organisational integrity.

### *Safety vs. service*

- Whether to suspend operations in high-risk areas or operate through partners.
- When and how to communicate operational limitations to communities or donors.

### *Resource allocation*

- Deciding how to allocate resources between rural and urban areas, or between frontline and safer zones.
- Balancing limited access and high needs with operational feasibility and risk.

### *Compliance vs. protection*

- Whether to enforce donor-mandated documentation and registration requirements (knowing it may exclude vulnerable individuals fearing conscription or taxation), or rather circumvent them to ensure the assistance reaches those most at risk – at the expense of compliance.

## Negotiating with and by communities

Negotiations taking place at community level are essential for humanitarian access and impact in Ukraine, particularly in frontline areas where formal authority structures are fragmented. The CCHN's engagement with local civil society organisations underscored how frontline actors frequently operate in environments where humanitarian identity must be continuously renegotiated.

This was particularly apparent from the exchanges that took place during the humanitarian negotiation session held in December 2024 in Odesa and co-facilitated with Nonviolent Peaceforce. Participants from Odesa, Mykolaiv, and Kherson emphasised the importance of local legitimacy – which is not conferred by international mandates but rather earned through proximity, cultural alignment, and responsiveness to local dynamics. A common dilemma concerns humanitarian actors being denied access by political leaders due to perceived foreign agendas; in such cases, legitimacy-building relies on adapting communication styles, making use of local mediators, and demonstrating sustained presence.

The CCHN's legitimacy assessment tools and stakeholder mapping exercises proved particularly useful in these contexts. By identifying influential community actors (mayors, governors, community leaders...) participants were able to reflect on how to better calibrate their negotiation approaches. Several civil society leaders shared that the legitimacy tool provided them with valuable insights into the importance of aligning their interests as field negotiators with those of their counterparts. This deeper understanding helped them realise that fostering connections is not just about advancing negotiations but also a way to build trust and collaboration that can ultimately ensure sustained access to communities at the frontlines.

A key takeaway from this engagement is that community negotiations are not a scaled-down version of humanitarian operations; they rather require their own strategies, timelines, and understanding of local



dynamics and legitimacy. In polarised areas, being perceived as “too close” to either international actors or national authorities can close doors rather than open them. For civil society organisations negotiating humanitarian space under pressure, trust-building, regular presence, and careful framing of humanitarian principles are crucial.

### **Community-led negotiations: A successful example**

In southern Ukraine, a child-safe space was established near the frontline within a government-owned community centre. Staff from the organisation managing the site noticed individuals in military uniform entering and exiting the premises, carrying boxes resembling ammunition.

Concerned about the risks posed by reconnaissance drones and the potential impact on children’s safety, the organisation raised the issue with local authorities. They were informed that the boxes were part of preparations for a war heritage museum.

The organisation initiated a dialogue with the authorities, referencing international humanitarian law, protection standards, and the need to maintain a neutral and safe space for children.

After several rounds of discussion, supported by the involvement of an international NGO that lent weight to the request, an agreement was reached.

Military personnel would no longer visit the premises, and no new exhibits would be brought in until the security situation improved. Existing military displays were relocated to a separate, locked room to ensure the space remained safe and appropriate for children.

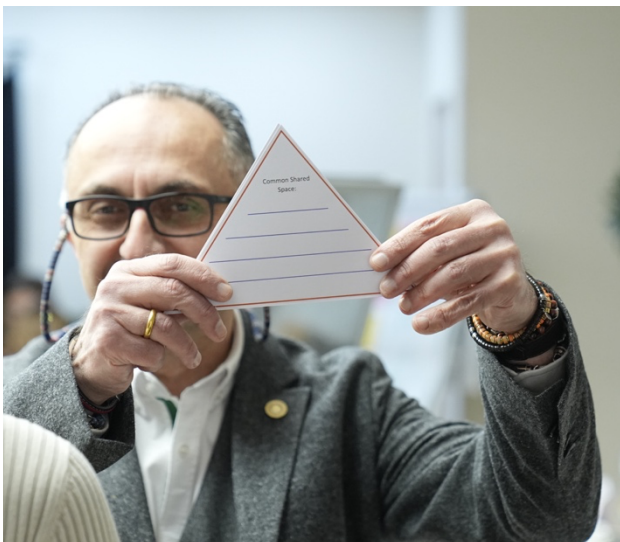
Going forward, the CCHN will continue to support localised workshops and co-develop negotiation curricula tailored to frontline community actors. These will focus on managing perceptions, adapting humanitarian language, and handling community tensions with inclusive and participatory approaches.

Support to communities, civil society organisations and informal volunteer networks, many of whom operate in high-risk environments, remains a strategic priority. As a key lesson learned, it is vital for civil society and local communities to be well-equipped to engage with counterparts for humanitarian reasons, whether

for conflict preparedness or post-conflict reconstruction. Humanitarian agencies working in these communities must take responsibility for ensuring these groups are supported in becoming solid negotiators. The CCHN will work closely with these actors to foster their negotiation skills and enable effective collaboration in the future.

## **Humanitarian diplomacy**

The role of humanitarian diplomacy in Ukraine has become increasingly prominent as humanitarian access is shaped not only by operational factors but by national security priorities, political interests, and shifting alliances. The humanitarian diplomacy workshop that the CCHN co-organised with the Ukrainian Red Cross Society’s Humanitarian Diplomacy division (URCS) in Kyiv in December 2024 created a space for reflection among humanitarian practitioners and coordination leads on the intersection between field negotiations and high-level diplomatic processes.



The CCHN organised a humanitarian diplomacy workshop particularly tailored at senior decision-makers in the humanitarian sector.  
Photo: Igor Evdokimov / CCHN

Participants expressed concern over the disconnect between strategic decisions made in certain cases in Geneva, Brussels, or New York and the realities faced by field teams. Discussions were structured around four core priority issues: access to occupied or temporarily occupied territories, upholding International Humanitarian Law, preserving humanitarian principles, and addressing the erosion of trust in humanitarian organizations. For each, participants mapped relevant actors, identified needs and interests, and developed priority messages and tactics to guide diplomatic engagement.

Access to populations in need, especially in contested or restricted regions, was a key concern. Participants emphasised the importance of securing formal access agreements through sustained dialogue with

governments and donors, while exploring alternative strategies such as third-party mediation (through United Nations agencies or neutral states) and leveraging community-level relationships to overcome bureaucratic obstacles. The Ukrainian government, the European Union, and the United States of America were identified as key actors, while Belarus was noted as a strategic player in relation to cross-border access.

Upholding humanitarian norms in politically sensitive settings was also seen as essential for both operational credibility and the protection of humanitarian staff and civilians. Participants highlighted the need for tailored advocacy with both state and non-state actors, complemented by IHL training and legal partnerships. Messaging focused on reinforcing that neutral humanitarian assistance is a life-saving necessity, not a political act.

The workshop also acknowledged the growing difficulty of maintaining neutrality and impartiality amid politicised narratives and donor expectations. There was a shared concern that pressure to align with stabilisation or political agendas could undermine principled action. Participants recommended increased transparency, regular community consultations, and public information efforts to clarify humanitarian mandates and reduce perceptions of bias.

### Negotiated repatriation of children via Qatari mediation (2024)

As reported by several media outlets, in November 2024 humanitarian negotiations facilitated by the State of Qatar led to the successful repatriation of nine children across conflict lines between Russia and Ukraine. Seven Ukrainian children, aged six to sixteen, were returned from Russia, while two Russian children were repatriated from Ukraine.

These cases required discreet, high-level dialogue involving both parties to the conflict and a neutral third-party mediator to ensure the safe reunification of families.

The process underscored the need for trust-building, impartial facilitation, and a strong humanitarian mandate to navigate political sensitivities.

This negotiation illustrates the crucial role of humanitarian diplomacy in advancing protection outcomes—especially in contexts where geopolitical tensions directly impact the rights and safety of children.

Finally, the issue of diminishing trust in humanitarian organisations was addressed through strategies aimed at strengthening local partnerships, community engagement, and independent monitoring. Emphasis was

placed on ensuring that humanitarian action is not only accountable to donors but also responsive to the needs and expectations of affected communities.

As a next step, participants committed to sharing the workshop's key messages with diplomatic actors, donor representatives, and humanitarian leadership. This includes engaging political stakeholders such as the United States, the European Union and Belarus; advocating in international forums; and supporting local actors in amplifying these messages on the ground.

This workshop underscored that humanitarian diplomacy in Ukraine must be grounded in field realities and built on principled, multi-level engagement. It remains essential for sustaining access, ensuring protection, and maintaining trust in a rapidly evolving operational landscape.

## Negotiation for protection outcomes

The protection needs identified in Ukraine are vast and varied. Forced displacement due to ongoing conflict has left many families, including children, fleeing from front-line areas to safer parts of the country, with internally displaced persons (IDPs) facing increased vulnerability in accessing shelter, healthcare, and support services. Elderly people and persons with disabilities, particularly those with limited mobility, remain in frontline areas, requiring urgent protection, medical care, and basic assistance.

Women and children are at an elevated risk of gender-based violence; unaccompanied children need dedicated protection services; psychosocial support for them is equally critical. Pregnant women and those with specific health needs also face heightened risks.

The destruction of homes from bombings and artillery attacks has led to a lack of safe housing, particularly for displaced persons. The interruption of essential services like water, heating, and electricity, especially during cold weather, exacerbates protection challenges.

Psychosocial distress – particularly among children, the elderly, and former military personnel – demands immediate mental health support and trauma care. The risk of mines and unexploded ordnance in front-line areas further endangers communities, necessitating education and prevention efforts. These issues remain significant concern, highlighting the need for services such as safe spaces, legal support, and healthcare.

The disruption of social structures due to conflict and displacement calls for community-based protection activities to prevent exploitation and abuse and restore social cohesion. These protection needs were consistently raised during CCHN events and are critical to address in response to the ongoing crisis in Ukraine.

Due to a lack of trust in humanitarian actors, it has been difficult to integrate protection programming with local and regional authorities, leading to a stronger focus on assistance activities. As most of the humanitarians working with the CCHN do not have access to the occupied territories, negotiations around protection outcomes in these areas have been largely absent in the discussions.

Protection-related negotiations often involve coordination with a wide array of actors: local and regional governments, armed forces and community leaders. Participants shared how access to bomb shelters, evacuation routes, or even psychosocial services for women often requires negotiation at multiple levels – each with its own sensitivities and agendas. The discussions outlined how humanitarian actors faced dilemmas such as negotiating with officials requesting population data for military purposes.

There is significant pressure to relocate populations from their communities to western Ukraine, where support structures for hosting them are either insufficient or non-existent. Tensions arise as host communities view these displaced people with suspicion due to differences in language or because they come from specific regions. Moreover, the lack of infrastructure to accommodate internally displaced persons exacerbates the situation. Additionally, some community members in frontline villages are unwilling to leave their homes; humanitarian workers are sometimes pressured by authorities to persuade them to relocate, rather than focusing on delivering aid and allowing them to remain in their current locations.

A recurring theme in these exchanges was the lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities. Humanitarian actors described being pulled into mandates beyond their scope and vagueness over humanitarian mandates has been clearly exemplified when it comes to process of evacuating civilians from embattled towns and villages close to the highly fluid frontline. This problem is also often exacerbated by the actions of local authorities, many of whom either prevent access to settlements near the frontline or seek to pressure humanitarian organisations to forcibly evacuate civilians – sometimes against their will. The risk of instrumentalisation was a frequent concern, particularly in negotiations involving vulnerable groups such as children, LGBTQI+ individuals, or ethnic minorities.



**The CCHN has supported practitioners in applying negotiation strategies to anticipate the influence and develop principled negotiation strategies.**

**Photo: Igor Evdokimov / CCHN**

To respond to these dilemmas, the CCHN has supported practitioners in applying negotiation strategies such as “red lines and bottom lines” tool<sup>1</sup> and the “stakeholder mapping” analysis to anticipate the influence and develop principled negotiation strategies.

What emerges from these conversations is the need to better articulate what protection means in specific contexts, align with humanitarian law and principles, and advocate for space to act with neutrality and independence.

Looking ahead, the CCHN will prioritise more targeted support for protection actors through thematic peer exchanges and collaborative scenario development, with a particular focus on community-based protection in frontline areas.

These dilemmas underscore that negotiation in Ukraine is a continuous, high-stakes process. The CCHN’s peer-based learning spaces allow practitioners to reflect, strategise, and share concrete methods for navigating these difficult trade-offs, ensuring humanitarian action remains principled and responsive under pressure.

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<sup>1</sup> In the CCHN’s negotiation model, “red lines” are non-negotiable boundaries based on humanitarian principles, legal obligations, ethical considerations or organizational mandates. “Bottom lines” represent the threshold where risks start outweighing the benefits.

## Bureaucratic and administrative impediments

Bureaucratic and administrative barriers in Ukraine are not just operational hurdles, but rather active negotiation fronts. These constraints were explored in detail during the “peer circle” (informal exchange) organised in March 2025 to draw insights from practitioners across sectors. The discussions highlighted that access, staffing, procurement, and compliance challenges consistently delay or derail humanitarian operations.

One of the most cited issues was staff mobility. Visa regimes remain complex and exclusionary, especially for non-EU and staff from the “global south”. Agencies reported delays of up to six months, with visas often denied for staff from Middle Eastern or North African countries under Ukraine’s migration risk index. Meanwhile, Ukrainian male staff between the ages of 18 and 60 face compulsory military service, creating high turnover and burnout. While United Nations staff automatically receive exemptions, some NGOs that have obtained “critical enterprise” status have later seen it revoked when additional payments were requested. Others have negotiated informal exemptions with authorities or again have adjusted team structures to rely more heavily on female staff.

“My organisation is working to re-sign a Memorandum of Cooperation in Southern Ukraine. While a similar agreement was signed with the Regional Administration in 2023, they now require us to engage directly with the Department of Social Protection.

I secured a brief meeting with the Head of the Department, during which I presented our two-year project on protection activities including mental health and psychosocial support and emphasised our ongoing work in the region. She agreed to review the Memorandum required by our donor; she accepted a paper copy and requested the digital version. However, she remained unresponsive for over a month.

Following a reminder by my supervisor, a second meeting was scheduled. We submitted a report on current activities along with the Memorandum. Three weeks have passed, and I’ve been told the Head is personally handling it, though she remains very busy.

- **Frontline negotiator, Ukraine**

Procurement and customs processes continue to pose significant operational challenges. Humanitarian actors must often choose between procuring items locally, where taxes and procurement procedures apply, or sourcing internationally, where goods are classified as humanitarian relief but face delays due to border scrutiny. Deliveries entering Ukraine are subject to strict inspection, partly due to concerns linked to the high corruption index. This has resulted in notable delays, particularly for essential items such as medical kits and hygiene supplies. Until recently, Atlas Logistique (Humanity & Inclusion’s technical unit specialising in humanitarian access and aid delivery) has facilitated the reception of incoming aid; however, the closure of its Ukrainian operations in April 2025 due to shifts in global humanitarian funding is expected to create further complications for organisations dependent on this support.

Financial compliance frameworks (particularly from donors) have also tightened, requiring full tax integration and registration for programme delivery. Administrative concerns among the recipients of humanitarian assistance (for instance, the fear of conscription or taxation linked to aid registration) create protection issues and hinder access. Many Ukrainian displaced people in situations of vulnerability indeed avoid registration for these reasons. Humanitarian staff are sometimes caught in ethical dilemmas: whether to enforce documentation policies required by donors, or to circumvent them to serve people in complex situations.

The CCHN’s framing of these issues as negotiation domains – and not just as procedural burdens – has helped organisations develop more strategic approaches. Participants in the “peer circle” exchanges reported using

the “stakeholder mapping” negotiation tool to identify chokepoints, and logs to document decisions around unofficial payments, exemptions, or beneficiary verification.

The CCHN continues to support inter-agency coordination on administrative access, including through joint advocacy, targeted scenario development, and peer-led documentation of workarounds that preserve operational integrity and humanitarian principles.



## Conclusions and lessons learned

The work conducted by the CCHN in Ukraine from 2022 to 2025 has underscored the critical role of negotiation in enabling humanitarian access, upholding protection, and navigating the politicized and fragmented landscape of conflict response. Across peer exchanges, workshops, scenario exercises, and mission debriefs, several lessons have emerged that shape both how we support humanitarian negotiators and where we focus strategic efforts going forward.

### Key lessons learned

- **Negotiation challenges are everywhere.** From negotiating access to services in frontline towns to advocating for safe spaces for displaced groups, negotiation is not the domain of specialists alone. Communities, protection staff, logisticians, and experts – all negotiate daily, often with minimal support.
- **Local legitimacy is not guaranteed by affiliation.** Access is more often made possible through culturally embedded, community-grounded presence than through formal coordination. Supporting local actors with tailored tools and recognition is essential.
- **Administrative barriers are not just “background noise”,** but rather key negotiation domains. Visas, customs, and staffing restrictions are often the most persistent obstacles to aid delivery. They require sustained, collective negotiation with authorities.
- **Protection is a negotiation outcome, not just a technical sector.** Whether negotiating access to detention sites or ensuring safe evacuations, protection goals must be clearly articulated, well-supported, and treated as integral to broader operational strategies.
- **Humanitarian diplomacy must be grounded in field realities.** Diplomatic and high-level humanitarian engagement should be informed by the operational needs and dilemmas faced on the ground. In Ukraine, disconnects between national or international advocacy and field-level negotiation strategies can result in misaligned messaging, reduced credibility, or missed opportunities to support ongoing negotiations. Bridging this gap by involving field practitioners in messaging and ensuring two-way communication is essential to supporting effective and principled negotiations.

### Strategic recommendations

- **Invest in localisation and language inclusion.** Expand outreach to underrepresented local actors, particularly in hard-to-reach areas; scale Ukrainian- and Russian-language activities to support broader inclusion in the community of practice and further outreach to civil society organisations.
- **Sustain and diversify the facilitators’ network.** Build upon the existing cohort trained through Trainings of Facilitators while prioritising the integration of local facilitators and peer mentors into national activities.
- **Treat bureaucratic impediments as a core negotiation track.** Support humanitarians in framing administrative challenges as strategic negotiation domains. Advance thematic learning on protection negotiations. Deepen engagement on protection dilemmas, especially related to internally displaced people, persons in detention, and access to services for marginalised groups; integrate findings into updated case studies and learning curricula.
- **Create sustained community engagement structures.** Continue developing online spaces for exchanges and resource sharing.

- **Document and elevate field-driven practices.** Capture and share promising approaches through scenario-based tools and case studies that reflect the realities and innovations of frontline negotiators.
- **Establish strategic links between humanitarian frontline negotiators and diplomatic representatives.** Strengthen and regularise the communication and collaboration between frontline negotiators and diplomatic channels; this makes it easier for negotiators to access diplomatic representatives and share critical needs and operational challenges in real-time, and in turn ensure that high-level interventions can be mobilised when necessary.



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