

The devastating impact of Putin's war on the most vulnerable in Ukraine: UK statement to the OSCE

Thank you Mister Chair. This week I will focus on the disproportionate impact of the deteriorating humanitarian situation on the most excluded and vulnerable groups in Ukraine.

The need is immense: the latest analysis by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reports that 15.7 million people need humanitarian support within Ukraine, and over 32% of the population have been forced to flee their homes. We know, from too much experience, that war affects different groups of people in different ways. But at its core – vulnerable groups require proper and adequate access to health and social care, food and the financial means to survive, and protection against predators and those who wish them harm.

Women and children currently make up the vast majority of Ukrainian people seeking refuge. This group faces significant risk of gender-based violence, trafficking and sexual exploitation and abuse, and often lacks adequate access to paedological healthcare and sexual and reproductive health services.

We are horrified by the many reports of rape and sexual violence committed by Russian armed forces in Ukraine. Let me be clear: the perpetration of sexual violence in armed conflict is a war crime. The indifference with which these crimes are committed belies their profound and far-reaching consequences. Survivors, children born of rape and entire communities feel their impact. This is why these barbaric acts must be investigated and those responsible held to account. We have recently launched the [‘Murad Code’](#) which provides guidelines on how to conduct these investigations safely, ethically and effectively. The UK will support further through the £10 million civil society fund and financial and technical support to the International Criminal Court (ICC).

For some women and girls, the risk of sexual violence and exploitation is heightened by disability. Those with learning and psychosocial disabilities and those in institutions are particularly at risk.

Indeed, many people with disabilities have experienced the cruelty of President Putin's war. Many are unable to evacuate and have been excluded from humanitarian responses. We emphasise our particularly urgent concern for the safety of the 100,000 children confined to nearly 700 institutions across Ukraine, who cannot flee the Russian Armed Forces. And with every unlawful attack on civilian facilities, the Russian government feeds the problem: the number of Ukrainian people with disabilities grows, and their ability to obtain assistance diminishes.

Older people face the same, often compounded, risks of abandonment, violence

and lack of access to the most basic of services. As set out in the [April 2022 Moscow Mechanism report](#), fragile health and mobility difficulties make it challenging for them to flee from the horrifying war in their country. Moreover, since most of Ukraine's elderly population relies on old-age pensions, the disruption to social security infrastructure leaves them without means to live.

The April Moscow Mechanism report also described how violent acts motivated by homophobia are largely tolerated throughout areas under temporary Russian control. Indeed, the Russia Patriarch Kirill cited gay parades among the main, quote, "sins" necessitating the invasion. The UK condemns this in the strongest possible terms. Nobody should face violence or discrimination because of who they are or who they love. While humanitarian crises make everyone vulnerable, existing discrimination and violence against LGBT+ people can put them at heightened risk within conflict zones and while fleeing.

Moreover, the impact of the Russian government's war of choice on the defenceless extends beyond Ukraine. I have spoken to this Council before about the devastating effect of Russia's illegal war on global food security. I repeat: it is President Putin's responsibility to lift this blockade. The poorest and the most vulnerable should not starve because of one man's territorial ambition.

Mr Chair – we need to speak up for the most vulnerable in our societies. Those individuals are at their most vulnerable during a time of war. We need to speak up for them to ensure they have a voice. We need to speak up for them to ensure that they are not forgotten. The Russian government's unprovoked, illegal war has many brutal and horrific edges – but the impact it has on Ukrainian women and children and the most vulnerable in society is the most tragic and the cruellest. Russian diplomats and Russian military officials should look deep into their souls. You are enabling this. You can choose to disable it.

Finally, the situation of prisoners of war in Ukraine is gravely concerning. The [Geneva Conventions](#) are clear – all those serving with the Ukrainian Armed Forces should be treated as Prisoners of War. We condemn the reported sentencing of two British Nationals, who were serving with the Ukrainian Armed Forces, by the so-called DPR in eastern Ukraine. The judgement against them is an egregious breach of International Humanitarian Law.

Mr Chair, we reaffirm our full support for and solidarity with Ukraine and its people. They are standing tall and we stand with them. For as long as it takes.