



international
alert

The Ukraine conflict and Eurasia

SITUATION BRIEF

As a result of the Ukraine conflict, the wider Eurasia region is increasingly fragile, polarised and destabilised. Unless the international community acts quickly, the region could be pushed towards further instability and conflict.

This situation brief for the international community warns of five red flags of increased risk of violent conflict in the wider Eurasia region, triggered by the February 2022 Ukraine conflict.

Alert 1: Central Asia

Economic fallout in Central Asia increases the risk of conflict.

Threats to instability in the wake of the conflict in Ukraine are considerable and unavoidable. The economies of all Central Asian countries are highly dependent on the Russian economy. Credits and investments from Russia into Central Asia are likely to decline. There are millions of labour migrants from Central Asia in Russia (mostly from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan), whose remittances account for as much as 30% of the GDP of some countries in the region.¹ International sanctions have led to a crash in the Russian ruble and devaluation of the majority of Central Asian currencies,² in turn reducing the value of remittances and people's purchasing power.

Given limited economic opportunities at home, the expected return of significant numbers of Central Asian migrant workers from Russia will exacerbate existing socio-economic crises and fuel frustrations and anti-government sentiment.

In Tajikistan, the ongoing isolation of and government pressure on the Gorno-Badakhshan autonomous region could develop into violence with a large-scale return of young men. There are already concerns that struggles over resources in border areas, for example over land and water, will intensify in the coming months. Tensions between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan remain a potential flashpoint after last year's military escalation.

Alert 2: The South Caucasus

Violence could escalate in the Nagorny Karabakh context; civil society across the South Caucasus is challenged amid growing social and political polarisation; and peacebuilding in the region is becoming harder.

The conflict in Ukraine and international sanctions against Russia risk escalating old – and triggering new – conflicts in the South Caucasus. As in Central Asia, economies tied closely to Russia's have been hit by dependency on Russian imports/exports and by sanctions, resulting in large and rapid fluctuations in the Armenian dram, Azerbaijani manat and Georgian lari and increased food prices.³

Likely flashpoints include the Nagorny Karabakh conflict, where the status and mandate of the Russian peacekeeping force is increasingly questioned by some regional powers. After the recent gas pipeline incident and increasing ceasefire violations,⁴ near-term military action in the area is perceived to be a real possibility.

Across the South Caucasus, peacebuilding is especially sensitive and controversial in the current climate. With free

media and civil society under multiple pressures, finding new modalities to support peacebuilders is proving increasingly important.

Alert 3: Sexual and gender-based violence

Patterns of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) from the Ukraine conflict and during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic risk being replicated across the Eurasia region.

Women and girls in Ukraine face risks of SGBV living in a war zone. With men aged 18–60 not allowed to leave Ukraine in the current circumstances, women and girls fleeing violence have had to leave the men of the family behind. This has often left these women and girls without resources, alone in unfamiliar locations, and at risk of exploitation or trafficking. Where family groups remain – especially in western and central Ukraine – the expectations on men to fight and the current lack of opportunities are likely to be drivers of domestic violence. This pattern echoes the rise of violence reported during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns.⁵

The expected return of migrants from Russia to Central Asia following the crash in the Russian ruble risks a further surge in SGBV in the region. When labour migration and income opportunities were restricted during COVID-19, exponential rises were recorded in violence against women and girls.⁶ Given the ongoing socio-economic crises, poor economic and food security, and poor labour markets in Central Asian countries, there is a distinct possibility that similar dynamics will play out. It is therefore essential to step up work on masculinities and offer alternative pathways that will halt violence against women and girls and de-escalate tensions.

Alert 4: Humanitarian response in Ukraine

The remarkable humanitarian response in Ukraine could unwittingly harm prospects for breaking the long-term cycle of violence.

The influx of humanitarian assistance is a remarkable show of solidarity by the international community with Ukrainian

civilians. On 1 March, \$1.5 billion was pledged towards the UN's humanitarian response, in what the UN described as "among the fastest and most generous responses a humanitarian flash appeal has ever received".⁷ Across the board, donor governments have announced impressive new or reallocated tranches of funding to Ukraine and the region. Public donations too have soared: for example, in the Netherlands, the joint Giro555 appeal by 11 NGOs raised \$117 million,⁸ while in the UK the Disasters Emergency Committee appeal raised \$264 million in just its first two weeks.⁹

Yet, unless conflict sensitivity is hardwired into how both humanitarian and also other international and national actors operate, the response could exacerbate rather than solve community tensions. If aid is not distributed – or not seen to be distributed – fairly and based on need, it will fuel further resentment and long-term cycles of violence. Previous examples suggest significant surges in aid spending may also displace, skew or undermine local economies, including the value of goods and local services. Peacebuilding organisations and Ukrainian civil society organisations have significant experience in strengthening social cohesion across different groups and responding to crises, and should be central to any international support. All humanitarian funding spent in Ukraine and the wider region should include a strong conflict sensitivity lens and follow established good practice.

Alert 5: Moldova

Moldova is operating under a state of emergency and risks being further destabilised.

More than 331,000 refugees have entered the country (population: 2.6 million) since 24 February.¹⁰ An estimated 100,000 remain,¹¹ potentially adding to social tensions between minority groups. If Russian forces occupy Odesa, an additional influx of displaced people is expected.

Despite a comprehensive and effective refugee response so far, Moldova has potential conflict risks in the longer term. While there has been an outpouring of goodwill towards Ukrainian refugees so far, as the war becomes more protracted there is a strong possibility that there will be struggles over resources, which may begin to shape more negative attitudes towards Ukrainians. Additionally, Moldova is dependent on Russian gas and on imports from both

Ukraine and Russia, including through the port of Odesa, and could be at risk of economic hardship that in turn fuels further conflict.

Conflict-sensitive responses to refugee inflows – including ensuring additional support reaches host communities – will be essential in the coming weeks and months to avoid social tensions escalating in Moldova.

What can be done now to prevent conflict spreading across Eurasia?

Russia and Ukraine should:

- immediately sign and respect a ceasefire in Ukraine, backed up by meaningful peace talks, as the UN Secretary General has called for;
- open humanitarian corridors within and to/from Ukraine for aid and refugees; and
- avoid military action in Ukraine that could harm civilians.

The international community should:

- increase or at least maintain aid funding to Central Asia, the South Caucasus and the wider Eurasia region, rather than divert it;
- keep aid localised and conflict sensitive where possible – for example, by channelling spending through existing civil society networks and local responses and by requiring spending to meet and be implemented according to minimum conflict sensitivity criteria;
- pay close attention to understanding and managing the unintended impacts of sanctions against Russia on the region, especially on women, girls and vulnerable groups;
- adopt, through international and regional institutions,¹² the fiscal and macro-economic interventions that will halt economic collapse and support the long-term stability and peaceful recovery of the region – for example, debt suspension/cancellation, unconditional

grants and concessional loans, and new tax, trade and investment policies; and

- invest in civil society and peacebuilders, and protect and promote their space to operate, including funding and shows of solidarity as well as protection against defamation and legislative and cyber and physical attack.

Peacebuilders and civil society should:

- work with humanitarian actors to hardwire conflict sensitivity into the humanitarian response – for example, through establishing conflict sensitivity fora in countries neighbouring Ukraine, such as Moldova;
- work with humanitarian actors to commit publicly to conflict sensitivity in the regional response – for example, through signing a pledge or charter;
- establish platforms for experts, locally rooted civil society across the Eurasia region and the international community to jointly monitor conflict and its triggers, carry out independent analysis of regional conflict resolution mechanisms and use the analysis to inform the international community's policy and funding directions;
- step up proven programmes and effective interventions for addressing SGBV in the region;¹³ and
- step up proven programmes and effective interventions that build peace within societies facing significant flows of displaced refugees or returning migrants.

Endnotes

- 1 J. Lillis, Central Asia to suffer as remittances from Russia nosedive, Eurasianet, 11 March 2022; D. Ratha and E. Ju Kim, Russia-Ukraine conflict: Implications for remittance flows to Ukraine and Central Asia, World Bank Blogs, 4 March 2022
- 2 Central Asia currencies feeling heavy pressure from ruble's tumble, Eurasianet, 28 February 2022
- 3 M. Hess, The South Caucasus braces for Russia's hard landing, Eurasianet, 16 March 2022. For currency fluctuations, see also the XE.com one-month currency charts for Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia.
- 4 A. Mejlumyan, Karabakh accuses Azerbaijan of again cutting off gas supplies, Eurasianet, 22 March 2022
- 5 International Alert, Charitable Foundation Nasnaha and Gender Action for Peace and Security, Now and the future: Gender equality, peace and security in a COVID-19 world – Ukraine, London, 2021
- 6 How we challenged the 65% rise in domestic violence in Kyrgyzstan, International Alert, June 2021
- 7 Ukraine: \$1.7 billion appeal launched to help refugee exodus, host countries, UN News, 1 March 2022
- 8 Giro555 radio and tv fundraising campaign for Ukraine brings in €106 mn, DutchNews, 8 March 2022
- 9 Ukraine appeal reaches £200 million in two weeks, Disasters Emergency Committee, 17 March 2022
- 10 Refugee crisis strains Moldova's healthcare system, minister says, Reuters, 22 March 2022.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Such as the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, G7/G20, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Asian Development Bank and Eurasian Economic Union.
- 13 For example, the Zindagii Shoista (Living with Dignity) project in Tajikistan, part of the global UK government-funded "What Works to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls?" programme, reported at the endline that levels of violence against women and girls had dropped by 50%, and that relationship and gender equality indicators had improved. See the full evaluation at: <https://www.international-alert.org/publications/zindagii-shoista-living-dignity-impact-after-30-months/>.

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