

# US anti-abortion group targets Ukrainian refugees

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## Heartbeat International is appealing for money to fund its anti-abortion network in Ukraine and eastern Europe

US anti-abortion group Heartbeat International is taking advantage of Russia's war in Ukraine to fundraise for 'crisis pregnancy centres' targeting refugees, openDemocracy has learnt.

Reproductive health experts fear the group could use its centres in Ukraine, Poland, Hungary and Romania to gain access to vulnerable people and persuade them to continue with unwanted pregnancies.

Christian organisation Heartbeat International has been sending [fundraising messages](#) to its subscribers since 9 March requesting money for one of its affiliates, the [Kharkov Pregnancy Assistance Center](#) in Kharkiv, Ukraine. The centre was founded in 2003 as a "ministry for the protection of human life and family", according to the Heartbeat [webpage](#) dedicated to the group.

One message [reads](#): "Over a million refugees have fled Ukraine. Many are women and children. They're in dire need of help – especially those facing unexpected pregnancies." Clicking on a "help women in crisis" button, readers are directed to a [donation page](#) on Cornerstone, a US "Christian owned and operated" payment system.

Heartbeat International is [also raising money](#) for the Ukrainian National Crisis Pregnancy Aid Hotline, which defines itself as a "mobile" organisation in the city of Ivano-Frankivsk, western Ukraine.

Heartbeat's vice-president of communications, Andrea Trudden, did not deny that the group was seeking to influence people in and around Ukraine to keep unwanted pregnancies. "Aggressive, deadly military actions against a democratic state should never be a reason to fail to help pregnant women choose life," she said.

'Crisis pregnancy centre' is the name used for public-facing operations run by organisations whose primary goal is to dissuade people with an unplanned pregnancy from accessing abortion care. Typically, these centres attract clients by offering free pregnancy tests and scans, counselling and even financial support, alongside an anti-abortion message.

"It's the very worst time to force somebody to remain pregnant against their will"

"Heartbeat is never one to let a good crisis go to waste, so it's unsurprising they are fundraising off this war," Gillian Kane, senior policy adviser at the international organisation on reproductive justice, Ipas, told openDemocracy.

"Under international human rights law, states have an obligation to provide and fulfil sexual and

reproductive health and rights, including in situations of conflict or humanitarian emergencies. Heartbeat actively disrupts this right when they peddle their disinformation through their clinics.”

Irene Donadio, from the reproductive rights organisation International Planned Parenthood Federation, agreed: “Those fleeing Ukraine have seen their lives capsized by war. The least they should expect in the places where they seek refuge is access to essential healthcare.

“It’s the very worst time to force somebody to remain pregnant against their will.”

### **Inside Heartbeat International**

Based in Ohio, Heartbeat claims to have more than 3,000 ‘crisis pregnancy centre’ affiliates in [80 countries](#). An [openDemocracy investigation](#) in 18 countries found that many of these sites target vulnerable women with disinformation on health and emotional manipulation to dissuade them from having abortions.

The Heartbeat-allied Ukrainian National Crisis Pregnancy Aid Hotline is in an area where people displaced from occupied cities in the east escape to, including “pregnant women and women with newborn babies”.

The group describes the current situation as “heartache”: “We are losing Ukrainian children being murdered in occupied cities and the number of abortions increased and are being massively performed.”

Heartbeat’s [Ukraine campaign](#) also covers other ‘crisis pregnancy centres’ in Poland, Romania and Hungary, countries that have received hundreds of thousands of refugees since Russia invaded Ukraine at the end of February. These centres are listed on Heartbeat’s website as Kobietom Na Pomoc (Poland), Clinica Pro Vita and Centrul Alexandra (Romania) and Alpha Alliance (Hungary).

Heartbeat has also launched a specific fund for war-affected areas in eastern Europe called [HALO](#) (Helping Affiliated Life-affirming Organizations), arguing that: “Affected pregnancy help centers, maternity homes, non-profit adoption agencies, and abortion recovery programs will need prayer and financial support in the weeks and months to come.”

According to Heartbeat, these are real “help organisations” that “set the standard for true compassion and support for women,” unlike, it says, sexual and reproductive rights groups that provide contraception and abortion services.

### **War and sexual violence**

Heartbeat’s activities are particularly disturbing in the context of sexual violence taking place during the war. There have been [numerous reports](#) of rape by Russian troops in Ukraine. Rape is considered a war crime and a crime against humanity according to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. Sexual violence is the “[most hidden crime](#)” against the Ukrainian population, the UN security council heard earlier this month.

The [UN also warned](#) this month that reports of rape and sexual violence in Ukraine are “rising fast”, including “gang rape... and coercion of loved ones forced to watch an act of sexual violence against a partner or a child.”

Neil Datta, secretary of the European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights (EPF), said: “It’s obscene to see how cynically Heartbeat International is using the suffering of Ukrainians, specifically the many cases of sexual violence, as a fundraising opportunity to promote

its religious zealotry.”

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Melissa Upreti chairs the UN’s working group on discrimination against women and girls. “Women’s and girls’ need for timely access to a broad range of sexual and reproductive health services increases exponentially in times of crisis such as war and displacement,” she told openDemocracy.

Actors on the ground should ensure “access to services that are survivor-centred and driven by their informed and free choices... Denials and delays run afoul of these obligations and put women and girls in harm’s way,” Upreti added.

Abortion is legal on request in Ukraine, Hungary and Romania – although provision is [increasingly difficult](#) in the [latter two countries](#). Poland has recently imposed an [almost total ban](#) on terminations.

An estimated [3.5 million people](#) had fled to Poland from Ukraine by the end of May, according to the UN’s refugee agency. Many of them are women – who discovered that by crossing the border they had [lost their rights to abortion](#) and other sexual and reproductive services. More than 650,000 people have escaped to Hungary and more than 580,000 to Romania, while hundreds of thousands have also returned to Ukraine.

In her statement, Trudden, from Heartbeat, added: “Our pregnancy help organisations opened their doors to house families and provide them with pregnancy care at a time when they were forced out of their homes in Ukraine.”

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**P.S.**

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