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Saving Lives During War: How to Make Evacuation Messages More Effective

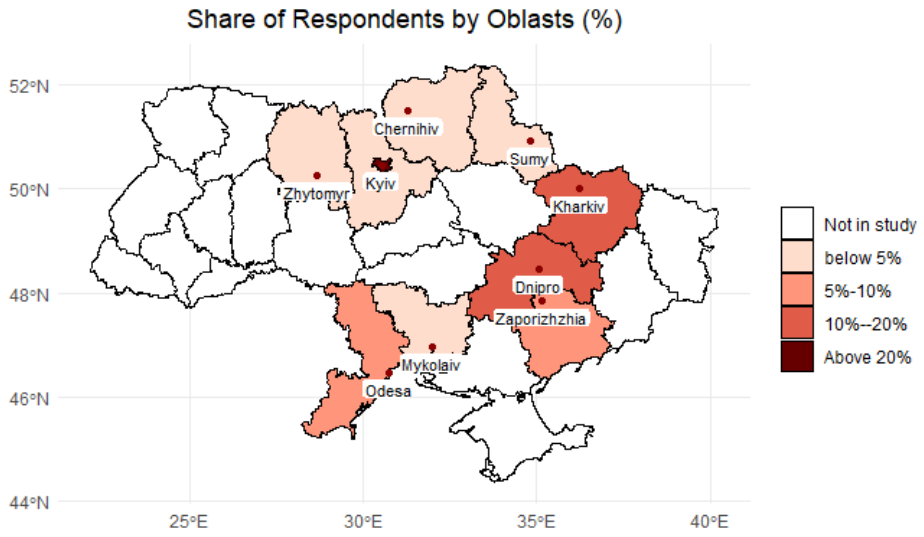
When war threatens civilian populations, effective evacuation messages can mean the difference between life and death. Drawing on a controlled survey experiment conducted with 2,006 Ukrainians during the 2022 Russian invasion, we find that providing clear evacuation plans dramatically improves a message's perceived effectiveness, while sophisticated message framing makes little difference. Our results indicate that people facing war are not naive about dangers—they need practical information on how to escape, not persuasion about why they should leave. This is especially true for those that do not have the means to evacuate autonomously. These findings offer guidance for authorities and humanitarian organizations: focus on providing concrete evacuation logistics rather than crafting perfect messaging.

The Life-or-Death Challenge of Wartime Evacuations

Each year, tens of thousands of civilians die in armed conflicts worldwide. Many of these deaths could be prevented through timely evacuations from danger zones. Yet despite imminent threats, many civilians hesitate to leave their homes. Understanding how to increase the effectiveness of evacuation messages has become a critical challenge for saving lives.

In July 2022, five months into Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, we conducted the first experimental study testing evacuation messages effectiveness during an active war. Working with 2,006 Ukrainians from regions directly affected by combat—focusing on areas that experienced occupation, shelling, and ground fighting—we tested two fundamental approaches to improving evacuation messaging.

Figure 1. Surveyed regions with the relative share of respondent.



Source: Martinez et al. (2025)

Testing What Works: Plans vs. Persuasion

Our experiment compared two strategies:

Strategy 1: Persuasive Nudges

We tested different message framings inspired by behavioral economics, emphasizing either the gains from evacuating (saving lives) or losses from staying (risking death), and highlighting either deteriorating living conditions or benefits to military effectiveness. These techniques have proven effective in other contexts, from increasing vaccination rates to promoting energy conservation.

Strategy 2: Practical Evacuation Plans

We tested whether adding concrete evacuation instructions improved message effectiveness. Half of our messages included specific details: free buses available at designated locations, phone numbers for reserving seats, and clear departure times.

Participants evaluated how effective each message would be in convincing residents of their city to evacuate, using a scale from 0 (completely ineffective) to 10 (very effective).

Key Finding: People Need Logistics, Not Persuasion

Our results deliver a clear message for policymakers and humanitarian organizations:

Providing evacuation plans works

Messages that included concrete evacuation plans were rated approximately 5% more effective than those without. This improvement is both statistically significant and practically meaningful—in Donetsk oblast alone, where 350,000 civilians remained in Ukrainian-controlled areas during our study, a 5% increase in evacuation rates could mean 17,500 additional lives moved to safety.

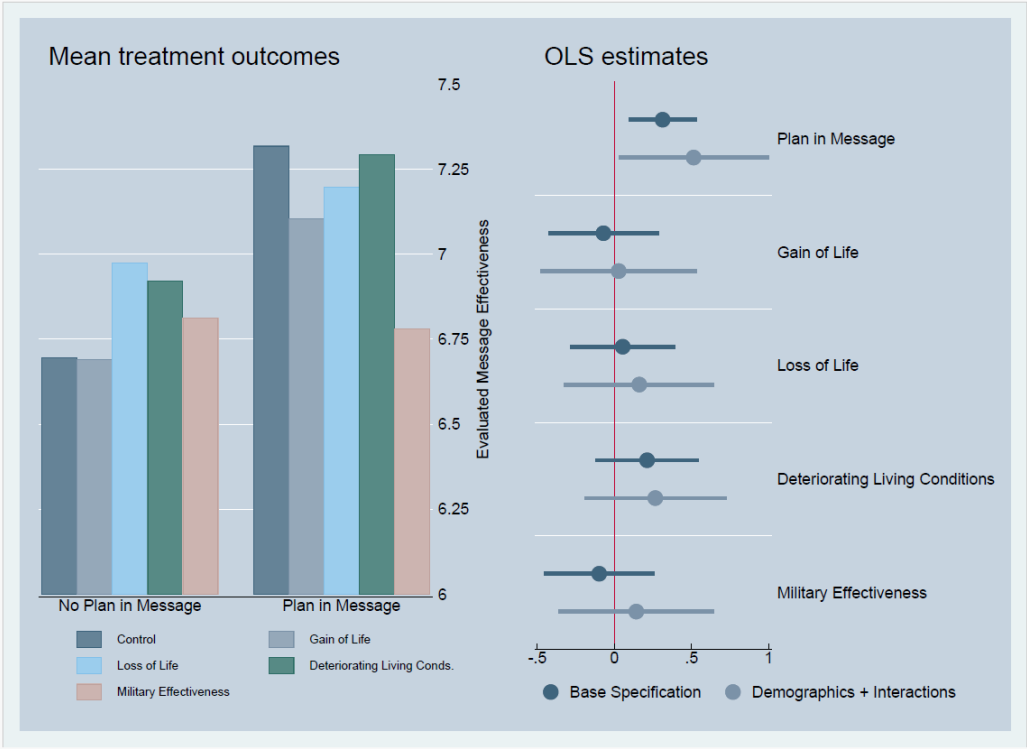
Message framing makes little difference

Surprisingly, none of our carefully crafted persuasive messages performed better than a simple, standard evacuation notice. Whether we emphasized gains or losses, living conditions or military benefits, the framing made no significant difference to perceived effectiveness.

Different groups respond differently

The evacuation plan effect was strongest among those who had not previously evacuated, which is exactly the population authorities most need to reach. This particular segment of the population is characterized by lower financial means and, therefore, a lower likelihood of owning a car which turned out to be a crucial factor when it comes to timely evacuations. Finally, women responded more strongly to evacuation plans than men.

Figure 2. Experimental Treatment Effects.



Source: Martinez et al. (2025)

Understanding the Psychology of War Zone Evacuations

Why do practical plans matter more than persuasive messaging? Our findings suggest that people experiencing war are far from naive about the dangers they face. Among our respondents:

• 82% perceived real risk of death or injury from missile strikes

• 40% had already evacuated at least once

• 50% of those who stayed had considered evacuating

Which seems to suggest that the barrier is not understanding risk—it is knowing how to act on it. Our correlational analysis supports this interpretation: those offered transportation during the early invasion were 12-18 percentage points more likely to evacuate, while simply receiving evacuation information showed weaker effects.

Policy Recommendations

Based on our findings, we recommend authorities and humanitarian organizations prioritize the following:

1. Focus resources on logistics, not messaging

Instead of investing in sophisticated communication strategies, dedicate resources to organizing concrete evacuation support: transportation, clear meeting points, advance booking systems, and designated evacuation routes.

2. Provide specific, actionable information

Every evacuation message should include: exact locations for transportation pickup, specific departure times, contact information for coordination, clear instructions for what evacuees can bring, and confirmation of free transportation.

3. Target messages strategically

Prioritize delivering evacuation plans to those who have not previously evacuated, women who show higher responsiveness to organized evacuations, and areas where residents lack personal evacuation plans, that is most likely in the lower socio-economic status neighborhoods.

4. Act on timing

Our research captured a relatively stable period in the conflict. During acute escalations, rapid deployment of evacuation logistics likely matters even more than message optimization.

Implications Beyond Ukraine

While our study focused on Ukraine, approximately 50 active conflicts worldwide threaten civilian populations. Our findings suggest a fundamental shift in how international organizations approach emergency evacuations: from persuasion to facilitation.

The lesson is sobering but actionable, people facing mortal danger do not need convincing that threats are real. They need practical help escaping them. This insight should reshape how humanitarian organizations allocate resources, how militaries plan for civilian protection, and how governments prepare for crisis scenarios.

Conclusion

Effective evacuation during war is not about finding the perfect words, it is about providing clear paths to safety. Our research suggests that even simple additions of logistical information can

meaningfully improve an evacuation message's perceived effectiveness. In contexts where every percentage point of improved evacuation rates translates to lives saved, focusing on practical evacuation support over persuasive messaging represents both an evidence-based and morally imperative policy choice. For the millions of civilians who may face evacuation decisions in current and future conflicts, the message from our research is clear: authorities must move beyond telling people to leave and start showing them exactly how.

References

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Her research focuses on behavioural and experimental economics, with particular interests in nudges and policy-based interventions. She has conducted online, field, and lab experiments on topics including gender effects, childhood traits, and corruption. Her publications include "Choosing Competition on Behalf of Others" published in Management Science.

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