

Update on UNHCR’s operations in Europe

A. Situational context

Some two years into the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak, States have continued to adjust and adapt containment measures in response to the public health situation. Within Europe, COVID-19 movement restrictions have remained broadly protection-sensitive and, with few exceptions, continued to allow people seeking international protection access to territory and procedures. However, the past year was also characterized by increasing reports of pushbacks at the European Union’s external borders, often violently, and continued challenges by several States to the principles of global solidarity and responsibility-sharing, which lie at the heart of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the Global Compact on Refugees.

The number of arrivals to Europe in 2021 returned to pre-pandemic levels as containment measures were eased and people adapted to life with COVID-19. While the numbers of arrivals to Europe remain manageable, new trends and routes have emerged during the year. The number of new arrivals in southern Europe through the Mediterranean and northwest African maritime routes increased by 39 per cent to 133,000 in 2021, compared to 96,000 the prior year and similar to 2019 (some 124,000). A notable increase was recorded in Italy, where arrivals went up by 98 per cent (some 67,000 in 2021 compared to approximately 34,000 in 2020). Arrivals remained stable in Spain (43,000 in 2021 versus 42,000 in 2020), but decreased by 43 per cent in Greece (some 9,000 in 2021 compared to 15,000 in 2020).

In 2021, the main countries of origin of arrivals in Cyprus, Greece, Italy and Malta were Tunisia (18 per cent), Egypt (10 per cent), Bangladesh (10 per cent), the Syrian Arab Republic (7 per cent) and the Islamic Republic of Iran (5 per cent). While Europe did not experience a major influx following the takeover of the Government of Afghanistan by the Taliban in August 2021, several countries in Europe have registered an increase in asylum claims from Afghan nationals. This is in part due to the evacuation of Afghans at risk, many of whom have been found to be in need of international protection. Overall, the number of first-time asylum applications received in 31 European countries from January to September 2021 was 12 per cent higher than in the same period in 2020 (357,000 compared to 319,000).

In 2021, some 2,000 people were known to have lost their lives or gone missing in the Mediterranean Sea, 41 per cent more than in 2020. It is estimated that a further 1,150 people lost their lives or went missing along the north-west African maritime route although the actual numbers are likely higher.

Reports of expulsions and often violent pushbacks of refugees and asylum-seekers at Europe’s land and sea borders have continued and remained of grave concern. While recognizing the sovereign right of all States to manage their respective borders, UNHCR continues to call for credible inquiries into alleged violations of international law and for legal obligations to be upheld. Although several instances of apparent instrumentalization of asylum-seekers and migrants by States occurred during the past year, they cannot serve as justification for the denial - often violently - of access to territory and procedures for those who may be in need of international protection. Likewise, concerns also remain over legislative developments in some countries related to the possible externalization of asylum and protection obligations, which may contravene the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the principles of solidarity and responsibility-sharing, also enshrined in the Global Compact on Refugees.

With respect to solutions, 21,018 people were resettled in all of Europe from January to November 2021, compared to 11,150 in 2020.

B. Progress and challenges in achieving the global strategic priorities

Ensuring an effective operational response

Across Europe, persons of concern have generally been included in national vaccination campaigns on par with the general population. Group vaccinations of people living in collective shelters have been carried out in several countries, benefitting asylum-seekers and refugees. States and local civil societies across Europe have demonstrated remarkable solidarity and ingenuity to include refugees and asylum-seekers in vaccination campaigns. UNHCR supports these efforts in a number of ways, including by working with partners to address administrative barriers to vaccination access; expanding communication with communities to address vaccine hesitancy and misinformation; providing cash and in-kind support to vulnerable persons of concern in specific countries; and advocating for the inclusion of persons of concern in social protection schemes.

In Greece, the emergency support to integration and accommodation programme, which includes a cash assistance component, was transferred to the Government of Greece on 1 October 2021, completing a phased transition. As a result, UNHCR's operational footprint in Greece will be reduced in 2022. The Office has refocused its plans on core protection activities and strengthened efforts to support the integration of recognized refugees, along with its core supervisory role, including in ensuring quality access to territory and asylum.

As part of the humanitarian response to the long-standing conflict in eastern Ukraine, UNHCR continued coordinating the protection and shelter sectors and remained operational in areas on both sides of the contact line. In the non-government-controlled areas, over 400 shelter repairs were undertaken, in-kind assistance was provided to households with specific protection risks and 26 community projects were implemented to improve access to basic services in isolated areas. UNHCR also provided logistical support to humanitarian convoys into non-government-controlled areas on behalf of the United Nations Humanitarian Country Team. Emergency shelter kits were distributed to hundreds of vulnerable households in these areas and emergency preparedness plans were maintained and updated as needed. To assist affected populations in government-controlled areas, UNHCR continued community support projects, cash assistance, legal aid and services for persons with specific needs based on findings from protection monitoring. In 2022, the Office will support the Government of Ukraine in implementing the integration strategy for internally displaced persons (IDPs), adopted in October 2021.

Although tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan continued, and a number of incidents were recorded, the ceasefire statement of 9 November 2020 was generally observed. UNHCR and its partners in Armenia and Azerbaijan continued to provide support to people affected by the conflict and initial field visits were undertaken to assess conditions to facilitate the eventual return of IDPs and refugees.

Significant tension between Belarus and bordering European Union countries characterized the second part of 2021, when thousands of migrants and refugees, originating mainly from the Middle East, entered Belarus with the intention to move onward to the European Union. Authorities in neighbouring European Union countries declared states of emergencies in border areas, constructed border barriers, and enacted legal amendments restraining access to territory, asylum procedures and protection. UNHCR strengthened its operational response to address the humanitarian and protection aspects of the situation at the borders. The response includes advocacy with authorities to ensure access to territory and asylum, identification of solutions based on individuals' personal situation and needs, counselling for persons of concern, and basic emergency assistance to help authorities and partners to meet the urgent needs of several thousand people stranded in precarious conditions along border areas. The situation began to de-escalate towards the end of the year, when many people returned to their countries of origin, but several hundred people in need of solutions still remain in Belarus. As a result, UNHCR has postponed the planned closure of its Representation Office in Minsk and extended its presence in Belarus throughout 2022.

The regional housing programme implemented in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia has been prolonged for another 12 months, until June 2023, in order to take into account the implementation delays related to COVID-19. By the end of 2021, some 8,800 families had been assisted, out of the 11,800 planned. In 2022, UNHCR will continue selecting the most vulnerable beneficiaries and will advocate with partner countries to ensure sustainability of solutions provided.

Safeguarding asylum space and building effective protection systems, including in the context of mixed movements

With the number of arrivals in Europe modestly increasing, ensuring access to territory, fair and efficient asylum procedures, and safe and dignified reception remain priorities. The current situation at many of the European Union's external borders underscores the urgency of the policy challenge, as well as the human consequences of inaction. Workable solutions are possible, and UNHCR will continue to engage with governments and other stakeholders in Europe to promote protection-sensitive border management, building on innovative good practices in registration, reception and differentiated procedures documented throughout the pandemic in several countries.

At the High-Level Officials Meeting in December, European States provided updates on the status of pledges of the Global Compact on Refugees, including renewed commitments to support the development of fair and efficient asylum systems in countries outside Europe. Some pledges made by European States, including to support the work of the Asylum Capacity Support Group (ACSG), will be facilitated by UNHCR in the coming year. The High-Level Officials Meeting was preceded by a global stocktaking event in October 2021, which provided an opportunity to review ongoing asylum support projects, notably those of France with Chad and Niger. Furthermore, Armenia, Austria and Moldova provided examples of good practice to the ACSG portal.

Tackling the phenomenon of onward movements within and towards Europe remains a critical policy challenge for destination and transit States. A revised version of the Strategy for UNHCR's engagement in mixed movements in the Western Balkans was issued in October 2021 to support the strengthening of asylum systems and identification of viable solutions for refugees and asylum-seekers. In line with the multi-stakeholder approach of the Global Compact on Refugees, UNHCR seeks to harness support, complementarity and joint action to implement the strategy. In this sense, the roll-out of the quality assurance initiative in the Western Balkans contributes to reinforcing areas in national asylum systems, notably with regard to refugee status processing (first and second instance), institutional set-up (availability of appropriate refugee status determination facilities) and support services such as legal aid and interpretation. UNHCR also supported the first refugee law course in Russian by the San Remo International Institute of Humanitarian Law, and the second session will take place in 2022.

Judicial engagement work continued, with regional and national courts proving increasingly important allies. UNHCR's court interventions were successful in five out of six cases (83 per cent), notably in the areas of pushbacks, detention and family reunification. Six new interventions were also submitted, including two before the European Union's top court, an institution increasingly called upon to safeguard the rule of law, the right to asylum and basic human rights of persons of concern in Europe.

Looking ahead, UNHCR will seek to expand its engagement with the new European Union Asylum Agency, including as a member of its management board. The agency has replaced the European Asylum Support Office and has an enhanced mandate to work on asylum capacity development within the European Union and beyond.

Reforming the Common European Asylum System and strengthening the collective European response

Despite challenges in achieving consensus among Member States, the European Commission's proposed Pact on Asylum and Migration continues to provide an opportunity to move away from ad hoc and crisis-driven responses towards a more predictable, well-managed and protection-sensitive common asylum system. UNHCR is engaging with the Presidencies of the Council of the European Union held by the Governments of France and Czechia as well as

Members States on key aspects of the Pact, notably the establishment of fair and efficient border procedures, ways of promoting solidarity and responsibility-sharing among Member States, and the return of those found not to be in need of protection.

Ensuring access to asylum in Europe, both in law and in practice, remains a priority, particularly in view of increasing reports of restrictions on access to territory and asylum in several Member States. The Pact proposes the establishment of independent border monitoring mechanisms, which offer an opportunity to strengthen accountability. UNHCR will provide technical advice and support to ongoing discussions on essential elements of the mechanisms, as it has done in Greece which resulted in the issuance of a [ten-point practical guide](#), or in Croatia, where the first meetings of the advisory board of the national monitoring mechanism were recently held.

Sub-standard reception conditions in several Member States remain a critical concern, as they directly impact the safety and rights of asylum-seekers and refugees. Overcrowded facilities, security issues and insufficient access to services are contributing to heightened protection risks, including gender-based violence, in particular for unaccompanied and separated children, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex or queer individuals, and victims of trafficking. In addition to advocating for improved protection environments, UNHCR conducted research on child-friendly and gender-sensitive asylum and reception systems and implemented projects addressing gender-based violence in 10 countries.

The need for quarantine and isolation space and other measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 continues to impact reception and asylum processing capacities in many countries, stretching them when the number of arrivals increases. In several countries, such as Austria, Italy, Lithuania and Serbia, UNHCR welcomed the commitment of States to address identified challenges in reception centres, including those for unaccompanied children. Interventions were in line with the European Union's and international standards and applied a multidisciplinary approach. Elsewhere, advocacy continues with States to improve conditions and access of service providers. In 2022, gender-based violence safety assessments in reception facilities in Europe will be rolled out to further mitigate the associated risks for asylum-seekers and refugees upon arrival, building on the 2021 pilot assessment.

Strengthening participatory and community-based approaches

UNHCR and the European Coalition of Migrants and Refugees organised [Refugee Re-Connect](#) in September 2021, a regional conference on refugee leadership, participation and volunteerism that brought together 175 refugee-led organizations, leaders and activists from 27 countries. Concrete recommendations on refugee leadership and participation, civic engagement and access to the labour market were addressed to local and national actors, civil society, donors and international organizations. The conference outcomes will significantly enhance the capacity of refugee-led and other community-based organizations in 2022.

As COVID-19 vaccination campaigns progress across Europe, strengthened communication with communities ensures that persons of concern have access to updated, timely and accurate health information. UNHCR and partners have delivered information sessions on COVID-19 preventive measures and vaccination in collective accommodations, for example in Armenia, Bulgaria and Romania, where UNHCR also runs hotlines for COVID-19-related questions.

Securing solutions for refugees

Resettlement and complementary pathways received increased attention in 2021. The European Commission reaffirmed its commitment to expand resettlement programmes and called for global leadership and solidarity by engaging non-European Union countries, such as Canada and the United States of America, in the first High-level Resettlement Forum (HLRF) in July and in a subsequent Forum dedicated to safe pathways for Afghans, held by the European Commission in October. UNHCR called upon the Member States of the European Union to resettle 36,000 individuals in 2022 and an additional 42,500 Afghans over the next five years. UNHCR actively engaged the European Parliament and States in a roundtable event in November for the swift adoption of the Union Resettlement Framework, which will ensure more predictable, sustainable and better funded programmes. Active engagement will continue by building on the HLRF's commitments, the Resettlement and Humanitarian Admission

Network, and the Expert Platform on Safe Pathways to Afghans at Risk, coordinated by the European Union Agency for Asylum.

Third-country resettlement was impacted by the pandemic in 2021, but UNHCR, States and partners worked together to adjust to the circumstances, adopting flexible processing modalities to ensure admissions of those most at risk. The number of admissions increased progressively, with field selection missions resuming, when feasible, during the year. As of the end of December, over 21,000 people were resettled in Europe, with more than 19,000 resettled within 15 European Union countries.

In line with the three-year strategy on resettlement and complementary pathways and based on two mapping exercises undertaken in 2021, UNHCR and various stakeholders will continue developing and monitoring complementary pathway programmes in Europe, building on efforts by European Union institutions, civil society, foundations and the private sector to welcome new refugee talent. In 2021, UNHCR facilitated the European Commission's participation to an event with the private sector on labour mobility, as well as to a meeting with private foundations on financing higher education for refugees.

Following the European Commission's call to support the relocation of unaccompanied children living in precarious conditions on the Greek islands, nearly 1,200 unaccompanied children were relocated to Belgium, Bulgaria, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal and Switzerland by the end of December 2021, just short of the total pledge of 1,587 places made by 16 countries. Furthermore, some 3,500 vulnerable asylum-seekers and international protection holders were relocated to Belgium, France, Germany, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway and Portugal, exceeding the 3,288 pledged places. UNHCR has been coordinating the relocation with the Government of Greece, the European Asylum Support Office, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations Children's Fund.

Despite some progress on several fronts, the inclusion of refugees and asylum-seekers in host communities remains a key policy challenge for many States in Europe. In 2021, the European Union's seven-year action plan for integration and inclusion highlighted employment, education, health and housing as main areas of focus and for pledges of dedicated funding and renewed collaboration with partners. In Europe, despite the limitations posed by COVID-19, UNHCR made progress on:

- Support for municipalities: UNHCR collaborated with the Migration Policy Group and integration stakeholders in seven countries to develop a toolkit for municipalities, *Effective inclusion of refugees - Participatory approaches for practitioners at the local level*, to support local actors in the design and implementation of integration and inclusion initiatives that fully engage refugees. It was field-tested in Bulgaria, Finland, Greece, Italy, Malta, Poland and Serbia, and the final version altered accordingly.
- Social protection: Advocacy continued in favour of inclusion in national social protection systems, particularly in light of the economic and social consequences of the pandemic. UNHCR published a [policy brief on social protection](#) in September 2021, which helped to identify practical and administrative barriers to inclusion and highlighted a range of promising practices by States in Europe.
- Financial inclusion: As a result of an inaugural financial inclusion workshop in Bulgaria, authorities and lenders agreed to allow refugees access to financial services, and UNHCR initiated a formal partnership with the Microfinance Centre to enhance refugees' access to finance in States across Europe.
- Education: Advocacy with education authorities for inclusion of children of concern was adapted in response to the pandemic to ensure that the special needs of refugee and asylum-seekers were taken into account. Targeted support for distance-learning during pandemic-related school closures was provided, through the provision of laptops and help with connectivity in reception facilities. *Teaching About Refugees* materials were further expanded with digital training tools for teachers of displaced learners, while the European Union-funded University Staff for Refugees programme trained university staff working with refugee students.

Preventing and resolving situations of statelessness

Together with civil society and regional organizations, efforts to prevent and reduce statelessness in Europe were undertaken within the framework of the #IBelong campaign. The international conference on statelessness organized by the Council of Europe and UNHCR in September 2021 offered an important impetus towards achieving the goals of the global action plan to end statelessness.

The global thematic stocktaking event on statelessness in the lead-up to the High-Level Officials Meeting in December 2021 highlighted the commitments made at the High-Level Segment on Statelessness held at the seventieth plenary session of the Executive Committee and the Global Refugee Forum in 2019. The number of fulfilled pledges in Europe stands at 27 per cent, which accounts for almost half of the global statelessness pledges implemented to date. Significant headways were made on statelessness determination procedures, with newly established procedures in Ukraine and legal developments in Albania paving the way for dedicated national statelessness determination procedures. Exchanges of best practices among experts fed into ongoing law reforms in Montenegro to strengthen existing procedures. UNHCR will continue to work with governments in 2022 in setting up and optimizing current procedures to adequately identify and protect stateless persons in a migratory context.

Capitalizing on renewed commitment by States in Europe, UNHCR will continue to work with regional actors, such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the European Network on Statelessness, to translate all the statelessness-related pledges into concrete actions. In South-Eastern Europe, UNHCR will further step up its efforts to support concerned authorities to fulfil their commitments made at the High-Level Segment on Statelessness in 2019.

Strengthening external engagement and advocacy, and mobilizing support

In the spirit of a whole-of-society approach, efforts continued to strengthen partnerships with civil society organizations, including faith-based and refugee-led organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) across Europe. In 2021, together with the European Council on Refugees and Exiles and the International Council of Voluntary Agencies, UNHCR organized two regional dialogues with NGOs in Europe, as well as two in-depth regional consultations on the proposed European Union Pact on Migration and Asylum and on inclusion and localization. Similar dialogues with NGOs are planned in 2022. The partnership with the Union of European Football Association established in 2020 will further engage national football associations in the social inclusion of refugees through enhanced access to sports in 2022.

UNHCR has strengthened its engagement with the private sector in the region and will continue the efforts in 2022, in the spirit of the Global Compact on Refugees and to support implementation of pledges made at the Global Refugee Forum. In partnership with IKEA/INGKA Holding B.V. a strategic toolkit was developed to support the integration of refugees in the labour market in some 20 countries with IKEA presence. The Office will continue its collaboration with IKEA/INGKA Holding B.V. to transform negative misconceptions about refugees by highlighting the value they can bring to businesses, host communities and society at large.

UNHCR advocacy and strategic communication will focus on major issues affecting access to territory and asylum, attempts to externalize asylum obligations and instrumentalization of refugee and migrant movements. The Office continues mobilizing public support for refugees, including through raising awareness among target groups and provision of evidence-based information to address misinformation and to counteract politicization and instrumentalization of asylum in political debates.

The European Union and UNHCR have maintained a strong strategic partnership both at headquarters and field levels. The European Union and UNHCR organized the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO)-UNHCR High Level Dialogue in June and the European Union-UNHCR Strategic Dialogue in December 2021. The latter was attended for the first time by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Climate Action and Directorate-General for the Environment. Their participation demonstrates the

wider outreach of UNHCR and its recognition as an important actor in these sectors by the European Union.

Inter-agency engagement remained central to advocacy efforts on behalf of refugees and asylum seekers. The Issue-based Coalition on Large Movements of People, Displacement and Resilience, which UNHCR co-chairs with IOM and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), embeds the regional United Nations Network on Migration. UNHCR strengthened its support to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the reform of United Nations Development System during the year by contributing to the work of various regional mechanisms. In this context, UNHCR worked with Resident Coordinators and United Nations Country Teams to develop nine high-quality United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks and Common Country Analyses in 2021 and will contribute to the development of such frameworks in four more countries in 2022.

C. Plans for 2022 and financial information

The budget for UNHCR's activities in Europe for 2022, as approved by the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme during its seventy-second session in October 2021, amounts to \$591.3 million.

At the sub-regional level, 68 per cent of the overall budget is allocated to operations in Eastern Europe, primarily Turkey, which continues to host the world's largest population of refugees in the world, and to a lesser extent, Ukraine. 5 per cent is allocated to south-eastern Europe, and 22 per cent to central, northern, southern and western Europe, which includes Greece. Another 5 per cent of the budget is allocated to region-wide activities, comprising the Regional Bureau's budget.

As of 25 January 2022, the financial needs for Europe of \$591.3 million were 8 per cent funded, including indicative allocation of unearmarked and softly earmarked contributions.

"Attaining favourable protection environments" is the impact area with the highest budget allocation in the region with \$224.6 million equivalent to 38 per cent of the budget for Europe, followed by the impact area of "Realizing basic rights in safe environments" with \$166.7 million (28 per cent of the budget), primarily attributable to the operations in Turkey and Ukraine, where humanitarian assistance needs are expected to persist in 2022. The impact area of "Empowering communities and achieving gender equality" has the third highest budget allocation with \$136.8 million (23 per cent of the budget) and captures activities to strengthen community mechanisms and gender equality. The impact area of "Securing solutions" includes \$63.1 million (11 per cent of the regional budget), and while it is one of the main priorities for all operations in the region, it requires less operational financial resources due to UNHCR's role as a facilitator and advocate. Further global and regional priorities, such as accountability to affected populations, are mainstreamed in other impact areas as well.
