

Update on UNHCR operations in Europe

A. Situational analysis, including new developments

One year since the start of the international armed conflict in Ukraine, nearly one third of the country’s population remains displaced, including almost 8 million people who fled across international borders in search of safety and protection. The European Union’s Temporary Protection Directive, and similar national protection schemes across the continent, continue to play an essential role in ensuring the protection of the nearly 5 million Ukrainians registered demonstrating Europe’s capacity to mobilize an effective, collective response to a sudden, mass movement of forcibly displaced people.

As of December 2022, almost 6 million people were internally displaced within Ukraine¹ and an estimated 17.6 million people were in urgent need of humanitarian assistance and protection. In recent months, severe winter conditions, together with the widespread targeting and destruction of civilian and energy infrastructure, often in densely populated urban areas, has disrupted the provision of basic services and worsened the humanitarian situation in many parts the country. Ongoing fighting, particularly in the southern and eastern areas, continues to pose a significant challenge to safe and predictable humanitarian access.

Although the number of arrivals from other parts of the world to Europe were lower than those from Ukraine, the past year saw a steady rise in arrivals of other nationalities putting additional pressure on national reception capacities. Between January and December 2022, some 159,400 asylum-seekers and migrants are estimated to have arrived in Europe via the Mediterranean Sea and the north-west African maritime routes, a 29 per cent increase compared to the estimated number in 2021 of 123,500.

A notable increase in arrivals was recorded in Greece, where numbers doubled to 18,800 persons as compared to 9,200 in 2021. Similarly, 4,000 persons arrived in Cyprus via the eastern Mediterranean route, an increase of 37 per cent compared to the previous year. An upward trend of arrivals was also recorded along the central Mediterranean route, with the numbers to Italy reaching some 104,500 compared to 67,500 in 2021. Conversely, just over 400 refugees and migrant arrived in Malta in 2022, 48 per cent less compared to 2021. A downward trend was also observed along the western Mediterranean and north-west African maritime routes, where arrivals decreased by 36 per cent in 2022 (31,800 arrivals) compared to 2021 (43,200 arrivals).

Reports of expulsions and often violent pushbacks of asylum-seekers along all major arrival routes into Europe continued. While recognizing the sovereign right of all States to manage their borders, UNHCR continues to call for credible inquiries into alleged violations of international law and for international human rights obligations to be upheld. Likewise, developments in some countries seeking to shift responsibility and externalize core asylum and protection obligations through the conclusion of bilateral treaties or the adoption of domestic legislation remain a serious concern.

¹ This figure is according to the International Organization for Migration

B. Progress and challenges in achieving the 2022 plan for the Europe region – by impact area

Ensuring an effective operational response

In response to the international armed conflict in Ukraine, UNHCR significantly scaled up operations both within the country and in neighbouring refugee-hosting States. In support of the Government-led responses, eight additional offices were established in Ukraine, while offices were also established in the Republic of Moldova and Slovakia, and those in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovenia were significantly strengthened. Twenty-three warehouses were established in areas bordering Ukraine to support operations to assist internally displaced persons and refugees.

As of the end of 2022, UNHCR and its partners provided protection and assistance to a total of 4.3 million people in Ukraine and in the refugee-hosting countries. This included emergency shelter and housing, essential relief items and cash assistance. Winterization activities in Ukraine ensured warm and dignified living conditions for nearly 1.5 million people benefiting from cash top-ups, winterized non-food items, the improvement of reception facilities, as well as repair of individual houses. By the end of the year, over 1.5 million people had received cash assistance with some \$450 million dispersed to meet needs both in Ukraine and in neighbouring countries.

In 2023, the Office's operational engagement in Ukraine will focus on the provision of humanitarian assistance, with an emphasis on frontline and newly accessible areas, while simultaneously laying the ground for early recovery and durable solutions as conditions allow. In the Republic of Moldova, UNHCR will continue to offer its strong support to refugees and host communities in support of government-led efforts. In other refugee-hosting countries, a more targeted approach will be adopted to support the inclusion of refugees from Ukraine in national social protection systems, while simultaneously identifying and supporting the most vulnerable through cash assistance. While maintaining emergency response capacity, some consolidation of the UNHCR presence in neighbouring host countries will take place in the course of 2023. Preparedness plans are already in place and will continue to be regularly updated.

Elsewhere in Europe, the regional refugee housing programme implemented in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia has now benefited over 10,000 of the 11,400 targeted families. The construction component of the programme was extended until June 2023 due to delays in implementation caused by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. Looking ahead, UNHCR will continue to engage with respect to beneficiary selection processes and with concerned governments to ensure sustainable solutions for persons of concern.

Renewed hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan caused new waves of displacement and restricted access through the Lachin corridor from mid-December 2022 onwards. To prepare for possible new displacement, UNHCR has updated its contingency and preparedness plans, and contributed to inter-agency plans. UNHCR remains committed to discharging its responsibilities with respect to returns, as stipulated under paragraph 7 of the trilateral statement, once mutually acceptable modalities for access are identified by all parties.

Safeguarding asylum space and building effective protection systems, including in the context of mixed movements (impact area 1: Protection – changes in the enjoyment of rights as a result of increasingly favourable protection conditions)

With continued arrivals to Europe, supporting governments in ensuring access to territory, implementing fair and efficient asylum procedures, and providing safe and dignified reception conditions remain key priorities for UNHCR. As such, UNHCR continued to engage with States and other counterparts, including the European Commission, to identify workable solutions in support of protection-sensitive border management. Solutions are possible if political will can be mobilized and sustained, as demonstrated by the solidarity of States across Europe with refugees from Ukraine. A range of innovative good practices put in place in response to the Ukraine crisis, including registration, documentation, and access to rights to services and to national asylum systems can be replicated and help streamline existing

processes for all refugees.

Towards the end of 2022, increased mixed movements of people were also observed in the South-East Europe, resulting in onward movements to some European Union Member States. With respect to arrivals in the subregion, Serbia saw the most significant increase in 2022. In response, UNHCR continued its support to affected States through its multi-stakeholder strategy for engagement in mixed movements in the region.

Reforming the Common European Asylum System and strengthening the collective European response (impact area 1: Protection – changes in the enjoyment of rights as a result of increasingly favourable protection conditions)

UNHCR continued to advocate the adoption of the European Commission’s proposed “New Pact on Asylum and Migration” as the best opportunity to create a common legal framework capable of ensuring access to fair and fast asylum procedures, as well as creating functioning solidarity and responsibility-sharing mechanisms. UNHCR issued recommendations to the Swedish and Spanish Presidencies of the Council of the European Union in January 2023, urging the Presidencies to encourage States to build on the emerging good practice of the Temporary Protection Directive to reform and streamline existing asylum procedures within the European Union. UNHCR also cautioned Member States to avoid proposals that risk downgrading asylum obligations, standards and practices, and that shrink protection space in Europe.

The situation of rescue and disembarkation in the central Mediterranean remained highly complex and challenging. UNHCR continued calls for predictable disembarkation arrangements, balanced with solidarity including through relocation. While negotiations continue on the Pact, which provides for enhanced search and rescue as well as predictability around disembarkation, immediate solutions are urgently needed. With this in mind, UNHCR welcomed the European Commission’s efforts to bring Member States together to find a common solution, including through the European Union action plan for the central Mediterranean with operational measures to address the immediate and ongoing challenges. UNHCR continues to engage with a diverse range of stakeholders, including the European Commission and States, on possible responses to the highly complex and challenging situation on rescue and disembarkation situation in the Central Mediterranean.

Strengthening participatory and community-based approaches (impact area 3: Empowerment – changes as a result of advancements in community mechanisms, gender equality and livelihoods)

Given the ongoing international armed conflict in Ukraine and limited possibilities for safe and sustainable returns for the displaced in the immediate future, socioeconomic inclusion in host countries is a priority in 2023. The situation represents an opportunity to strengthen the inclusion of refugees of all nationalities across Europe, demonstrating the value of an enabling legal framework, removing barriers and highlighting the contributions refugees themselves can make in their host communities.

In 2023, UNHCR will support local governments as front-line actors for refugee inclusion, building upon the effective inclusion toolkit for local actors to map successful practices and to develop and replicate pilot initiatives that support comprehensive socioeconomic inclusion. Access to decent work will be promoted through the establishment and expansion of refugee employment platforms, with the support of private sector networks.

Vulnerable refugees from Ukraine continue to face barriers in accessing social protection in some countries. Efforts to ensure effective inclusion in existing schemes, including through enhanced information-sharing, advocacy and monitoring mechanisms, are thus being prioritized. In the Republic of Moldova, a multi-stakeholder nexus project aims to strengthen the social protection system.

The “blue dots” initiative in States neighbouring Ukraine has helped with the identification and referral of persons with specific needs in 38 locations. In addition, more than 1.7 million people were reached through the “stay safe” campaign, with key messages on protection during flight and onward movements. UNHCR has established Help pages (<https://help.unhcr.org>) for all countries neighbouring Ukraine, which have received more than 2.5 million visits to date.

Telegram and WhatsApp chatbots were also established in Hungary and Ukraine, and a regional contact centre has been launched in Hungary, with expansion to other countries receiving refugees from Ukraine foreseen later in 2023.

Across Europe, UNHCR continued to advance community-based approaches to protection and refugee participation through refugee-led organizations. These initiatives included community mobilization against female genital mutilation in Malta, social integration and information sessions for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex refugees in France, and language training in Georgia. The first Refugee Advisory Board in Ireland was established in February 2022, building on similar initiatives in Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Georgia, Switzerland and Türkiye.

*Securing solutions for refugees (and internally displaced persons – if applicable)
(impact area 4: Solutions – changes in the enjoyment of durable and alternative pathways to solutions)*

Resettlement and complementary pathways received renewed attention in 2022. As of December 2022, some 23,860 resettlement submissions were made to European countries, with over 21,350 departures of which 16,700 were to twelve member states of the European Union. UNHCR recommended that the 27 European Union Member States maintain ambitious resettlement targets and resettle at least 40,000 refugees in 2023, in addition to 8,500 Afghan refugees, to keep pace with the five-year target of 42,500 resettlement departures. Work to further develop opportunities for complementary pathways in Europe will continue, building on efforts by European Union institutions, civil society and the private sector to welcome new refugee talent.

Over one third of the pledges made by European States at the high-level segment on statelessness, which took place during the seventieth plenary session of the UNHCR Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme, and at the Global Refugee Forum held in 2019 have now been implemented. These efforts have supported the improved identification of stateless persons and the greater enjoyment of rights and services, as well as access to facilitated naturalization for many stateless persons. UNHCR, in partnership with the European Network on Statelessness, will continue supporting these efforts as well as new commitments towards the eradication of statelessness in Europe ahead of the Global Refugee Forum to be held in 2023.

Strengthening external engagement and advocacy, and mobilizing support (impact areas 1 and 4: Protection and solutions)

During 2022, inter-agency refugee coordination forums, led by UNHCR and their members continued to support governments in responding to the needs of refugees arriving from Ukraine. The 2023 Regional Refugee Response Plan for Ukraine, to be launched together with the Humanitarian Response Plan for Ukraine in February 2023, brings together 243 partners across 10 countries, including some 148 national and 48 international non-governmental organizations, with combined requirements of nearly \$1.7 billion. Through this plan, partners seek to support a transition from emergency response to the inclusion of refugees in national systems.

Given the crucial role that civil society actors play across Europe, UNHCR continues to strengthen partnerships with non-governmental and faith-based organizations, as well as with refugee-led organizations. In partnership with the European Council on Refugees and Exiles and the International Council of Voluntary Agencies, UNHCR will convene regional consultations with non-governmental organisations in 2023. Complementing the whole-of-society approach, UNHCR has launched the European Academic Regional Inter-Disciplinary Network to promote research and teaching on forced displacement, and to expand academic opportunities for refugees. In 2023, the network will map research initiatives linked to the objectives of the Global Compact on Refugees.

To mobilize public support for refugees and counteract the instrumentalization of asylum in political debates, UNHCR will continue its strategic, evidence-based communications and advocacy activities.

C. Financial information

The budget for the activities of UNHCR in Europe for 2023, as approved by the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme during its seventy-third annual session in October 2022, amounted to \$1.29 billion.

In November 2022, UNHCR established a supplementary budget of \$250.0 million for the Ukraine situation to address the significant protection and humanitarian needs of people affected by the international armed conflict in Ukraine and in neighbouring countries.

As of January 2023, the budget for Europe stands at \$1.54 billion. At the country level, \$602.5 million (or 39 per cent) of the total budget for Europe is allocated to Ukraine, with over 6 million targeting internally displaced persons. A total of \$352.6 million (representing 23 per cent of the budget) is allocated to the 10 countries neighbouring Ukraine (Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the Republic of Moldova, Romania and Slovakia), together hosting over 3 million refugees from Ukraine. Overall, some \$1.12 billion is allocated to the Ukraine situation. Some \$348.5 million (or 23 per cent) is required for Türkiye, the world's largest refugee-hosting country, with some 4 million refugees.

The financial needs for Europe are currently 8.5 per cent funded, including an indicative allocation of unearmarked and softly earmarked contributions.

The two impact areas with the highest budget allocations are "protect: attaining favourable protection environments" with \$632.7 million (or 41 per cent) and "respond: realizing rights in safe environments" with \$634.2 million (or 41 per cent) reflecting both the significant protection and humanitarian needs of the forcibly displaced and stateless in Europe. The impact area "solve: securing solutions" has the third highest budget allocation with \$154.0 million (or 10 per cent) highlighting UNHCR's work on socio-economic inclusion and integration. The impact area "empower: empowering communities and achieving gender equality" amounts to \$122.5 million (or 8 per cent) and captures activities to strengthen community mechanisms and gender equality.