



UKRAINE SITUATION

REGIONAL REFUGEE RESPONSE PLAN

2023 Mid-Year Report

Cover photo: Anna Sokur, a Ukrainian refugee living in the Moldovan capital, Chisinau, fled Odesa, Ukraine, with her daughter Sofia Holibenko, 20, after the war started. Anna now works with her daughter for local NGO Moldova For Peace, which with more than 4,000 volunteers provides food and non-food items to refugees from Ukraine.

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The war in Ukraine, which escalated following the full-scale invasion in February 2022, has resulted in a displacement and humanitarian crisis of epic proportions.

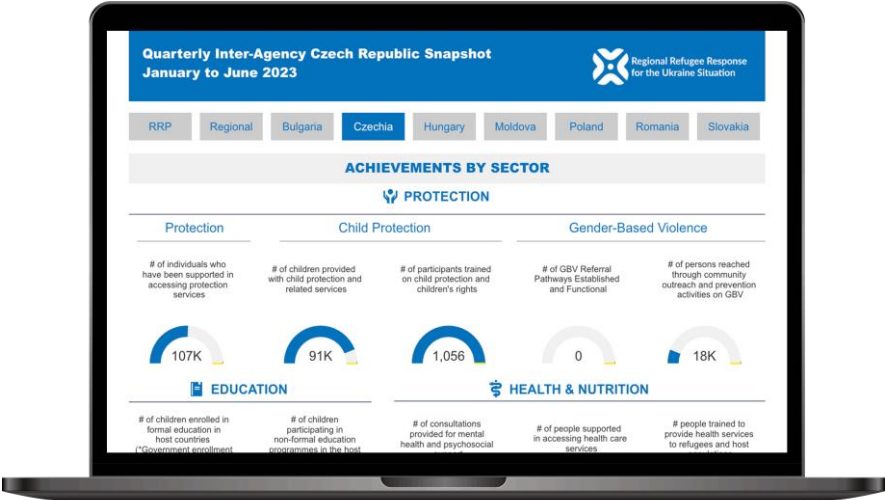
The 2023 Regional Refugee Response Plan (RRP) for the Ukraine Situation outlines the multi-sector response strategy of inter-agency partners supporting the host governments of Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Republic of Moldova, Poland, Romania and Slovakia in providing assistance and protection to refugees from Ukraine.

As in 2022, the 2023 RRP aims at ensuring refugees' access to protection and assistance on a non-discriminatory basis, including the rights associated with Temporary Protection or similar legal statuses in host countries. Special attention is given to those refugees who are already or risk becoming vulnerable, as humanitarian support is reduced and they are no longer able to draw on savings or rely on assistance from family and friends and may also face challenges finding work. In this regard, the identification of people with specific needs who require targeted assistance continued to be critical. In addition, whereas the RRP in 2022 focused primarily on the urgent provision of protection services and humanitarian assistance upon arrival, the plan for 2023 also places an emphasis on refugees' socio-economic inclusion, in recognition of the challenges faced by refugees as their displacement becomes more protracted.

This mid-year report aims to synthesize the progress made against the RRP strategic objectives across the region in the first half of the year and to identify gaps and priority areas to address going forward. Achievements and challenges are presented through the use of country-level examples that are also representative of the breadth and nature of the response in other RRP countries.

This narrative overview accompanies the Quarterly Inter-Agency Regional Snapshot which includes more quantitative details at the country level of the achievements made against the regional indicators and the funding status of the RRP.

Quarterly Inter-Agency Regional Snapshot



Strategic Objective 1



Ensure refugees' access to protection and assistance on a non-discriminatory basis, including the rights associated with Temporary Protection or similar legal statuses in host countries.

During the reporting period, partners across the region provided timely information and support on rights and access to **key protection services** through information campaigns, help desks and one-stop shops. These activities were largely conducted in partnership with local organizations, which are particularly well placed to reach the refugee community.

The European Commission's extension of the **Temporary Protection Directive** until 4 March 2024 was a welcome development, securing access to safety, legal status, rights and services for refugees from Ukraine in the RRP's EU countries for another year. Outside the EU, in Moldova, following a government Decision, the granting of Temporary Protection came into effect in March 2023.

Legal assistance, group and individual counseling and information on access to support and services were provided to refugees across all countries both in-person and through digital channels. For example, through the Blue Dots in Bulgaria, partners continued to provide key protection services, legal assistance and social support – and observed an increased number of inquiries by refugees related to longer-term solutions and inclusion, rather than humanitarian assistance and accommodation. In the Czech Republic, to complement government efforts, RRP partners prioritized outreach, enhancing information dissemination and protection counseling, including on accessing humanitarian assistance, benefits, public services, safeguarding against exploitation and abuse, and changes in the legal framework that would affect refugees. In Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, RRP partners provided legal counseling and support to refugees to facilitate inclusion and integration.

Partners also conducted **capacity-building, training and awareness-raising activities** aimed at refugees, service providers and local and national authorities on a variety of topics. In Slovakia, in coordination with local authorities, referral pathways were strengthened and others developed to ensure refugees have access to necessary services in accordance with their needs and preferences; these focused in particular on strengthening national support mechanisms for **gender-based violence (GBV)** survivors by overcoming the language and cultural barriers to accessing existing services. In Hungary, protection actors collaborated with various stakeholders, including government counterparts, to address the risk of human trafficking, developing referral pathways for both adult refugees and children in need of protection. In Moldova, the Anti-Trafficking Task Force focused on sensitizing refugees from Ukraine **on the risks of trafficking** and provided information on available hotlines and services, and training sessions were conducted for frontline staff and service providers on

safe disclosure, early identification and referrals. In Poland, partners implemented a pilot project aimed at strengthening the capacities of the authorities, in particular law enforcement officials, on the **prevention of and response to sexual exploitation and abuse** in the context of the refugee response. In Bulgaria, newly recruited law enforcement officials were provided with trainings on protection principles and ensuring access to territory for those seeking protection.

Technical support, coupled with **strategic advocacy**, as governments developed or implemented new policies, constituted an important component of partners' work during the reporting period. In Romania, partners advocated with the government to mitigate the impact of changes to the **national accommodation scheme** – the '50/20 Programme' – and worked to monitor implementation of the accommodation scheme that replaced the 50/20 programme through a newly established network with 21 municipalities. Similarly, in Slovakia, following successful advocacy, the government extended, until the end of 2023, the accommodation allowance allocated to those fleeing the war in Ukraine, as many cannot yet secure housing using their own resources. RRP partners also proposed a strategic approach to accommodation that entails including refugees in a national strategy for vulnerable people in line with the Sustainable Development Goals and advocated to establish a government-led coordination mechanism on refugee accommodation. In Poland, advocacy activities focused on the suspension of returns of evacuated children in institutions prior to the revocation of martial law in Ukraine, until safeguards and procedures for the protection each **child's best interests** are put in place. In Bulgaria, strategic advocacy by partners led to the reinstatement of the provision of food in government transit and temporary centers for newly arriving refugees. In Hungary, following the January 2023 implementation of tighter control by authorities on **third-country nationals** arriving directly from Ukraine or entering from the Romanian border, protection actors intensified advocacy efforts aimed at preventing refoulement and expanded the dissemination of relevant information to arriving individuals.

Despite the positive decision to extend the Temporary Protection Directive, obstacles related to **Temporary Protection registration** remain in the RRP countries, including difficulties providing proof of residence, addressing the needs of people with limited mobility, and withdrawal or deactivation of Temporary Protection status for refugees who temporarily leave a host country. In particular areas of the response, such as accommodation and health, there remained challenges given limited accommodation capacity and near-lack of any social housing system, as well as the overstretched resources and capacities of public health systems.

Strategic Objective 2



Pave the way toward solutions and expand access to social and economic opportunities to facilitate social inclusion of refugees through a whole-of-society approach and in line with the Global Compact on Refugees, recognizing in particular the critical role played by national and local actors, including government ministries, municipal authorities, NGOs and RLOs.

RRP partners across the region pursued the objective of promoting the social and economic inclusion of refugees from Ukraine, through a **whole-of-society approach** fostering coordination and collaboration between a diverse array of actors, including refugee-led organizations (RLOs).

To improve access to **work**, RRP partners in Romania reached thousands of refugees through language classes as well as vocational training support, entrepreneurship opportunities, and counseling and mentoring tailored to the Romanian labor market. In Poland, socio-economic inclusion activities included **job fairs**, Polish language classes, vocational trainings and the establishment of integration centers, as well as cooperation with Polish authorities on inclusion projects. Similarly, in Hungary, RRP partners have expanded the provision of employment-focused services, including professional and **skill training programs** while refugees were offered counseling and support to access employment opportunities, such as assistance with validating certificates, improving CVs, and preparing for interviews. Addressing a key identified challenge, some refugee parents were also provided with **childcare**, enabling them to work during the day and enhancing their access to employment opportunities in the country. In Moldova, support was also provided to local private companies, with a focus on enabling business expansion, increased production and job creation, including through opportunities for refugees. In Bulgaria, entrepreneurship training programs were developed to support refugees' socio-economic inclusion in the market, along with information sessions for local employers to support job opportunities for refugees. In Slovakia, partners organized and facilitated **language courses**, employment guidance sessions and skills trainings, including in areas where there are gaps in the local job market, such as ICT and other technical areas, ensuring a strong participation of refugee-led and community-based organizations. In addition to entrepreneurship programs to support refugee-led micro-businesses, partners in Estonia implemented a training scheme for a group of refugees from Ukraine through which they completed a 6-month work experience, on-the-job Estonian language study and job culture adaptation counseling; many of the

participants have found employment since the scheme. Effective **partnerships with line ministries and local municipalities** in the Czech Republic have been established to enhance refugees' socio-economic inclusion through initiatives on access to comprehensive services, sustainable accommodation solutions, language and upskilling courses, and awareness-raising campaigns on refugee employment ESG programs.

In the area of **education**, partners continued their efforts to facilitate the enrolment of Ukrainian children in school, through formal and non-formal education interventions and by supporting children who continued their education online. This support took various forms, including information dissemination to caregivers and training for schools on skills and **techniques for teaching the local language** as a foreign language. In Bulgaria, partners launched the first supplementary Bulgarian language children's textbook developed together with the Ministry of Education, which will be used by teachers teaching the Bulgarian language to refugee children. In Moldova, Tech Labs were established in schools across the country to provide a **safe learning environment** and social interaction for refugee children while continuing their **online education**. These labs are also used for Romanian bridging classes, digital skills training, catch-up classes, and mental health and **psychosocial support** sessions. Partners in the Czech Republic and Romania facilitated access to formal and non-formal education, including early learning, for a significant number of refugee children, provided material aid and strengthened the capacity of educators, teaching assistants, caregivers and other staff. Moreover, a mapping exercise of RLOs working on education activities led to increased engagement with RLO and Roma organizations in Hungary on **integrating out-of-school children** into formal education and access to socio-emotional support and skills development. In Slovakia, advocacy efforts on education were further strengthened by establishing a dedicated working group, with the aim to ensure an inclusive education environment for all refugee children and to introduce compulsory education for Temporary Protection beneficiaries.

Several inclusion challenges can be identified across the RRP countries. **Structural barriers to decent employment** persist, including limited access to childcare options (particularly affecting women and children), low wages and job opportunities that do not align with refugees' skills and experience. **Language barriers** hinder refugees' effective access to employment opportunities, particularly for skilled jobs, while the lack of affordable, longer-term housing options hinders successful socio-economic inclusion. In some countries, such as Romania, accessing the national social protection system can be challenging due to certain requirements, notably those related to proof of residence, while across the region, refugees have been struggling in fully meeting their basic needs.

Low enrolment rates of refugee children from Ukraine in European host country education systems persist due to various factors, such as the expectation of many refugees to return to Ukraine in the near future, language barriers, and the preference for the Ukrainian curriculum. School capacity limitations, infrastructure constraints, teacher shortages, and budget limitations also contribute to the low enrolment rates. Placing refugee children in appropriate grade levels is challenging due to curriculum disparities and language barriers. Additionally, parents are concerned about the recognition of foreign education upon return, although the Ukrainian government has assured that foreign education will be acknowledged.

Strategic Objective 3



Ensure that refugees with specific needs continue to have access to targeted support and assistance, while also engaging with and strengthening community-level protective mechanisms.

While many refugees have become increasingly self-reliant through their socio-economic inclusion in host communities, others have become increasingly vulnerable as humanitarian support is reduced and they have been unable to draw on savings, find work, or access social protection and services. In this context, and in light of limited resources, many RRP partners have focused their interventions on providing **targeted assistance to reach those most in need**, including women, children, people with disabilities, older refugees, Ukrainian Roma and LGBTIQ+ refugees.

To **address GBV**, partners in Moldova coordinated with local organizations to strengthen the response for people engaging in sex work in humanitarian settings, ensuring access to life-saving protection services. In Poland, empowerment activities, including language classes, career counseling and various workshops took place in major refugee-hosting areas, often contributing to priorities such as GBV prevention or **mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS)**. In Hungary, a cross-sectoral **safety audit exercise on GBV and sexual exploitation and abuse** was carried out, and technical guidance was developed and rolled out to service providers on non-discrimination, GBV, and trafficking prevention and response, with the latter focused particularly on the risks of labor exploitation. In Latvia, partners provided psychosocial support to refugee women through integration support groups.

With regard to **child protection**, partners continued to identify children-at-risk and referred them to specialized services. In Moldova, child-friendly activities were conducted in community centers to promote social cohesion among local and refugee children. Information dissemination on **summer camp opportunities** was provided to refugee children, many of whom benefited from reduced fees or free participation. In Estonia, partners held trainings, seminars and awareness-raising activities for child protection officers. In Lithuania, language and integration activities were provided to refugee children through day care and afterschool care centers. In Bulgaria, child protection actors continued to provide recreational activities and psychosocial support such as art therapy in child-friendly spaces. In Hungary, child protection actors collaborated with government counterparts to strengthen the support to vulnerable and at-risk children, developing **referral pathways** for unaccompanied and separated refugee children and children at risk of trafficking, and launching an information campaign. In the Czech Republic, child protection actors delivered specialized child protection and MHPSS services to refugee children and caregivers, to complement the government's efforts. The implementation of individual case management and capacity-

sharing initiatives on the rights of children and on best practices in safeguarding children's well-being and rights played an important role in addressing the unique needs of many vulnerable children, ensuring they received personalized care and attention.

Health and MHPSS constituted important areas of interventions. In Bulgaria, frontline staff were trained on MHPSS services, and partners continued to provide key community-level MHPSS support within the communities. Similar services were made available through stationary points, mobile teams in communities and Refugee Accommodation Centers across Moldova. In Poland, partners implemented capacity-building trainings on scalable MHPSS interventions to expand the reach of wide-ranging MHPSS services, alongside continued information campaigns in Russian and Ukrainian to ensure awareness on access to health services. Other partners provided emergency care and services, e.g. medical evacuation to those patients who needed specialized care at a critical time. In the Czech Republic, partners were instrumental in strengthening health care access and specialized care for refugees with medical conditions, including comprehensive support for Ukrainians living with HIV infection and strengthening health surveillance systems.

Targeted **cash-based interventions** constituted a key form of support and assistance for people with specific needs, to meet their basic needs and reduce reliance on negative coping strategies. Findings from post-distribution monitoring in Bulgaria showed that the multi-purpose cash and cash for protection assistance aimed at people with specific needs had a positive impact on alleviating financial burdens and improving living conditions. In Moldova, partners supported host communities as well as vulnerable refugees through cash-based interventions. A mapping exercise identified cash-based interventions that align with the priorities of the government and explored targeted approaches for specific populations. In Slovakia, partners provided key recommendations to the government and other stakeholders on the importance of ensuring inclusion and equal treatment of refugees with disabilities in national social protection programmes, complementing the cash assistance provided to this and other vulnerable groups of refugee individuals and families. In Romania, partners developed an inter-agency and cross-sectoral **vulnerability assessment** targeting methodology that is being piloted in a cash for protection programme before application more widely by other partners and interventions.

At the same time, partners have been strengthening **community-level protection mechanisms**. In Romania, RRP partners have been working on supporting local solutions to protection issues, including, for instance, the development of local GBV referral pathways in five counties, the deployment of county coordinators and cultural mediators to facilitate access to health care at a local level, and the creation of **local coordination networks** that bring together local NGOs, UN agencies and local authorities to discuss protection issues and find solutions. Similarly, in the Czech Republic, partners strengthened communication with refugee communities, supporting information provision and awareness-raising on their rights and access to services through trusted channels. In Hungary, in coordination with relevant government departments and organizations from the civil society, recommendations – encompassing community engagement initiatives, gender empowerment strategies, and data collection methodologies – were devised for partners working across multiple sectors to secure more meaningful inclusion of vulnerable categories of refugees, notably [refugees of](#)

[Roma background](#) and [refugees with disabilities](#). In [Estonia](#), RRP partners provided individual counselling for refugees living with disabilities on navigating the social welfare system and employment capacity issues.

In several RRP countries, **limited resources** for the identification and inclusion of refugees with disabilities, and **access to disability-related services** constituted a challenge, making it more difficult for this population to obtain the support they need. This includes finding **suitable accommodation** and employment and accessing health care. Many services similarly remain difficult to access for older people, either due to inaccessible infrastructure or because information on services is not sufficiently tailored to them. In some contexts, refugees with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity or ethnicity (e.g. ethnic Roma) faced stigmatization, rendering their specific needs less visible to service providers and sources of assistance. Common **barriers to access mental health services** also persist in several countries, namely cultural stigma surrounding mental illness, fear of judgment from their communities, and difficulties finding time for treatment due to caregiving responsibilities.

Strategic Objective 4



Advance social cohesion among refugee and host communities through targeted interventions.

The response to the refugee outflow from Ukraine continues to be characterized by support from the host society, but the resources of volunteers, local civil society and host communities are being increasingly strained. To buttress this welcoming environment, partners across the response are working to strengthen **social cohesion and peaceful coexistence** between the refugees and their communities and mitigate against misinformation and negative perceptions. This includes **recreational and cultural activities** which promote dialogue and facilitate understanding, enhance mutual respect, reduce xenophobia and increase awareness of refugee issues and rights, but also ones that present opportunities for personal growth, skills development, access to services such as MHPSS, and the building of support networks for both communities alike.

In Moldova, efforts have been directed towards **consolidating community spaces** such as schools, multifunctional centers, and cultural hubs, thereby facilitating interactions between refugees and host community members, ensuring equal access to quality services and fostering a sense of togetherness. Work is underway in Bulgaria on transitioning the Blue Dots to wider community centers inclusive of services for host communities. To bring together Bulgarian and refugee youth, partners organized awareness-raising and cultural events with local youth organizations and schools. In Estonia, refugee and Estonian youth have come together in shared activities such as virtual reality workshops and Ukrainian teachers have been supported to organize youth integration activities. In Latvia, refugee youth have participated in cultural integration activities with Latvian youth, such as excursions, outdoor activities and day hiking trips. In Poland, partners have facilitated a range of recreational activities and some Polish teachers have been trained on psychological first aid to contribute to addressing tensions and **fostering cohesion in schools**. In Lithuania, RRP partners have facilitated refugee family mentorship programs with Lithuanian artists and developed a communication campaign to celebrate positive inputs to Lithuanian society by refugees. In the Czech Republic, local NGOs and refugee-led organizations led social cohesion efforts through activities that involved schools, businesses, churches, community groups, local volunteers and the wider public. Similarly, in Hungary, collaborative volunteering projects, such as community clean-up drives or charity activities, brought people together in shared efforts to improve their surroundings and build a sense of unity; **youth and children from refugee and host communities** were particularly prioritized. To ensure localization, accountability and ownership, efforts were put in place to expand coordination to include more national civil society actors and to actively engage with Roma-led organizations, federations representing people with disabilities and the Ukraine diaspora.

In Romania, a key approach to fostering social cohesion has been to strengthen national systems for refugees and citizens alike, including through **material and technical support** as well as additional human resources to institutions, to improve absorption capacity and technical quality for all beneficiaries. This includes technical equipment provided to schools and the training of teachers on MHPSS and inclusive education, as well as supplies for and training on antenatal and postnatal care and clinical management of rape for health clinics.

The response has shown that dedicated social cohesion interventions are costly and require longer-term investments, for which funding is more limited – in particular for smaller grassroots civil society and refugee-led organizations that are often the best placed to implement such interventions. **Tackling misinformation** and misperceptions regarding the support that refugees receive is challenging and requires constant monitoring and concerted efforts, especially as some of the common services are currently under-resourced and as host populations are themselves facing difficult economic circumstances. There is also the risk of **waning support** and positive public attitudes among host communities as the situation becomes prolonged. In some countries there are particular challenges with regard to social cohesion between the **Roma community** and the host population, and addressing these issues is also key.

LOOKING FORWARD – STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

The priorities of the refugee response for the remainder of 2023 are in line with the strategic objectives set at the start of the year, and emphasize the areas where further action, advocacy and funding – by partners, governments and donors – need to be focused. They will also inform the 2024 RRP.

These areas of emphasis are:



Efforts to enable and promote **inclusion of refugees into national systems**, with a concerted focus on improving the enrolment rate of refugee children in schools and **addressing the structural barriers** that persist to accessing decent work and housing, particularly for at-risk and vulnerable groups



Increased localization of the response through strategic engagement with municipalities and further capacity-building, empowerment and financial resources for local and community-based organizations, also to ensure the sustainability of interventions into the longer term



Social cohesion measures that – cognizant of the wider political and economic context in the RRP countries – strive to address potential areas of tension while fostering social and economic opportunities for mutual acceptance and growth among host and displaced communities

More concretely, to ensure non-discriminatory assistance and protection is available and accessible to all those in need, partners will continue to consult communities across the country, collect and analyze feedback, and engage with relevant stakeholders, in particular government counterparts. Data and findings from multi-sector needs assessments and ongoing protection profiling and monitoring will be used to inform the planning and priorities of partners and authorities. In tandem, advocacy for marginalized groups will be

strengthened, particularly to amplify their voices in decision-making processes. Providing accurate and up-to-date information for refugees on their rights and entitlements linked to Temporary Protection and other legal statuses, as well as guidance on voluntary return for those who have expressed interest, will remain a critical focus area of the response.

In terms of inclusion, partners will continue to work towards facilitating self-reliance and economic empowerment through employment, entrepreneurship and financial inclusion measures, enabling refugees to contribute positively to their host communities. Additionally, partners are working to strengthen municipalities' engagement on, and awareness of, inclusion needs. The focus will also remain on ensuring refugees are able to access social services, like health and education. Back-to-school activities and enrolment campaigns, implemented with local authorities, will be a key priority in the coming months. Concerted efforts will be required to address the shortage of sustainable, affordable housing options and to scale up the availability and accessibility of language courses to mitigate language barriers which compound the other challenges to achieving effective inclusion. Partners will strive to enhance effective access to social protection, including by information provision and counselling, advocating for the necessary legislative changes to facilitate access to social protection systems and strengthening the shock-responsiveness of social protection systems in some countries.

Advocacy will continue to push for further progress in achieving inclusive government and humanitarian programmes that enable all refugees to access rights and services. This includes working across sectors and strengthening partnerships with relevant government departments and national service providers to ensure that marginalized and at-risk groups, including older refugees and those with disabilities, have access to health care, education and suitable employment. This also entails sustained information campaigns to raise awareness among refugees about available services and how to access them. This collaborative effort will be undertaken jointly by health, mental health, and protection actors, with the aim of mobilizing local and refugee-led organizations to strengthen their involvement and active participation in addressing the health needs, mental well-being, and protection concerns of refugees. Capacity-building in GBV response and risk mitigation will also remain a focus of interventions, including through enhanced GBV referral pathways and localization of the response by women-led organizations. Anti-trafficking partners will prioritize providing support to refugees at risk of exploitation and/or trafficking.

Nearly one and a half years into the refugee situation, the need for solidarity with displaced and host communities persists in order to prevent public attitudes hardening and negative narratives emerging. Partners will thus maintain their efforts in assessing, monitoring and discussing the state of social cohesion in host communities to identify potential tensions and proactively address them, through tackling misinformation, community activities and awareness-raising campaigns that sensitize the public about refugees, their challenges and their contributions to their host societies. Partners will also aim to strengthen the connection with civil society organizations and RLOs to leverage their expertise and grassroots knowledge to jointly design and implement contextually relevant and sustainable programs that cater to specific community needs. Underpinning this is the need to better link these community-led organizations and social cohesion initiatives with donor support.