



Operational update

LATVIA

1 July – 30 September 2024

UNHCR's partner GPB ran events that included refugees to mark Independence Day (25 August) in the Republic of Latvia.

Operational context

Since 24 February 2022, Latvia has received a high number of refugees from Ukraine. From the outset of the war in Ukraine, the Latvian Government and civil society have responded with steadfast solidarity towards refugees from Ukraine, including by facilitating access to rights and services on equal footing with Latvian citizens. Challenges facing refugees from Ukraine include access to long-term accommodation, health services and psychosocial assistance, as well as Latvian language barriers in employment and education.

Since 2023, Latvia is included in the Ukraine Regional Refugee Response Plan (RRP), complementing the government-led response. In 2024 a new RRP is being coordinated by UNHCR, developed by 17 humanitarian organizations in Latvia.

Following the increase in the number of refugees and migrants arriving via Belarus in Lithuania, Latvia and Poland in 2021, Latvia introduced a state of emergency, limiting access to asylum for those trying to reach Latvia irregularly through Belarus. In June 2023, Latvia adopted new legislation, formalizing this approach which UNHCR is concerned will effectively authorize pushbacks.

Working with partners

UNHCR works closely with partners to provide protection and support to refugees, asylum-seekers and stateless people in Latvia and to advocate for their inclusion.

KEY FIGURES

- 65,704 applications for temporary protection lodged by refugees from Ukraine since February 2022.* Currently 45,550 Ukrainians hold temporary protection in Latvia.
- 282 asylum applications lodged as of end of March 2024
- 180,614 stateless persons and “non-citizens” in Latvia as of January 2024.**

*Renewal of permits is ongoing and may result in changes of figures.

** With respect to persons under UNHCR's statelessness mandate, this figure includes persons of concern covered by two separate Latvian laws. 160 persons fall under the Republic of Latvia's Law on Stateless Persons on 17 February 2004. 187,404 of the persons fall under Latvia's 25 April 1995 Law on the Status of those Former USSR Citizens who are not Citizens of Latvia or Any Other State (“Non-citizens”). In the specific context of Latvia, the “Non-citizens” enjoy the right to reside in Latvia ex lege and a set of rights and obligations generally beyond the rights prescribed by the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons, including protection from removal, and as such the “Non-citizens” may currently be considered persons to



**Gribu Palīdzēt
Bēgļiem / I Want to
Help Refugees**



**Latvian Centre
for Human
Rights**



**Drošā Māja /
Shelter Safe House**

Highlights of UNHCR's and partners' activities



COUNSELLING SERVICES

- To date in 2024, UNHCR's partners Shelter Safe House (SSH) and Latvian Centre for Human Rights (LCHR) have provided counselling to 367 individuals, including 127 refugees from Ukraine. Other countries of origin include Afghanistan, Cameroon, Iran, Iraq, Somalia and Tajikistan. The refugee status determination process and decisions, employment issues, and family reunification remain the main topics for counselling.



MONITORING VISITS

- UNHCR's partner 'I Want To Help Refugees' (GPB) conducted ten monitoring visits to reception centres, municipalities, and detention centres, making 33 so far in 2024. In July, UNHCR and GPB visited Valmiera municipality to discuss the Ukraine situation response with local integration actors, visiting two accommodation sites and discussing key integration issues with refugees. Respondents raised the need for better Latvian language skills and support for refugee children in education, particularly high-school students. Following the visit, UNHCR and GPB discussed strategies to further strengthen engagement with municipalities as key actors in the Ukraine situation response.
- In September, UNHCR conducted a number of monitoring visits to accommodation centres for asylum-seekers in Mucenieki and Liepna. Some of the challenges encountered included registering of refugee children at geographically distant schools and the shortage of social mentors (for which UNHCR and Society Integration Foundation agreed on closer cooperation in building the latter's capacity). Access to employment, and a lack of Latvian language proficiency and courses, were identified as ongoing challenges. At Liepna limited social engagement possibilities for women were mentioned. UNHCR will continue to raise these issues in the course of its advocacy.
- In September, UNHCR visited schools in the municipalities of Balvi and Riga to learn about the inclusion of Ukrainian refugee children. About 55 per cent of the 1,577 Ukrainian children enrolled in schools in Latvia attend schools in Riga. The overall assessment of stakeholders on the integration of Ukrainian children into the Latvian school system is that in general schools have capacity to enroll Ukrainian children. However, more support and targeted assistance to ensure the effective inclusion and well-being of refugee children would help ensure that Ukrainian children thrive in Latvian schools.



COMMUNITY OUTREACH & SUPPORT INITIATIVES

- In the third quarter, SSH held a total of six group activities, which included mother support groups covering topics of emotional support in the context of overcoming apprehension over school inclusion and informal education for children. Activities were aimed at mothers and children being able to meet in such settings as museums, multifunctional centres, and at the seaside. Another event for asylum-seekers was about cuisine and how food affects the body; the event included a cooking class. Likewise, Ukrainian women attended a workshop, led by a Turkish woman, on the traditions of Turkish coffee and how to make it; interestingly the whole workshop was conducted in Latvian.
- UNHCR and partners (GPB and LHRC) carried out various advocacy and communication activities as part of their refugee response. GPB attended the LAMPA festival 2024, a democracy festival taking place in Cēsis in early July and facilitated discussions with refugees on their experience and community building in Latvia.
- In September, an integration event, 'Satikšanās', took place at the Lastādija gardens (Riga), attended by asylum-seekers and refugees from Mucenieki accommodation centre and from Riga, locals, and international students; altogether around 155 people participated. It was organized by GPB in collaboration with the Lastādija cultural quarter, and supported by various other organizations. During the event there were several parallel workshops, such as pin and patch making, bracelet making, T-shirts and tote bag printing, a

photobooth, and board games. Volunteers also led sports activities and ensured that children at the playground were entertained.

- In July, UNHCR organized a workshop on refugee law in Daugavpils for 23 border guards responsible for identification and registration of asylum-seekers in Latvia. The workshop covered the role of UNHCR, refugee protection standards, as well as an introduction to the so-called PEACE interview model, which in this context is adapted for the purpose of interviewing asylum-seekers. Additional training for staff working in detention facilities in Daugavpils and Mucenieki will be organized in the autumn.



COORDINATION

- The Inter-Agency team completed data collection for the Socio-Economic Insights Survey 'SEIS' (formerly Multi-Sector Needs Assessment - MSNA) in all three Baltic countries by the end of July, with over 600 interviews conducted in Latvia. A detailed analysis of the data is being prepared and the final report will be used to support planning processes for the 2025 Refugee Response Plan (RRP).
- In August, UNHCR conducted high level meetings with ministries and RRP partners. The purpose of the meetings was to provide updates to partners on the RRP for 2025 and 2026, as well as discuss partners' plans for 2025. The Ministry of Interior supports next year's RRP, and partners and ministries agreed to strengthen cooperation. Further, RRP partners discussed SEIS results, addressing highlighted challenges and agreed that as such, tailored activities would be necessary in 2025. UNHCR also conducted three Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with refugees. One of the FGDs covered the experience of refugee parents from Ukraine with the host-country education system. According to participants good practices in this regard included the individual approach and assistance to each refugee child, as well as the recruitment of Ukrainian teachers in Latvian schools to support refugee children. Ensuring several refugee children are together in one class was deemed important, as were extracurricular activities to help them learn Latvian language through interaction with their peers.