POLAND PROTECTION SECTOR MEETING

Meeting Minutes – 27 November 2025

Meeting subject:	Protection Sector Meeting
Time/ location:	27.11.2025, 2pm (Hybrid: online/conference room)
Chaired by:	UNHCR, Halina Nieć Legal Aid Centre (HNLAC)
Minutes prepared by:	UNHCR
Participants:	(23) ICRC, Plan International Poland, IRC, Association for Legal Intervention (SIP), Fundacja Zustricz, Fundacja Polskie Forum Migracyjne, Polskie Centrum Pomocy Międzynarodowej, IOM, UNICEF, WHO Poland, Fundacja DAR LOSU, , Caritas Polska, Młodzież z Misją Polska
Agenda:	Agenda 1. Introduction – Katarzyna Przybysławska (Halina Nieć Legal Aid Centre) and Miriam Aertker UNHCR (in English) 2. 2026 Protection Sector structure/Revision of TOR (in English) 3. Legal update (Older refugees) – Katarzyna Przybyslawska (in English) 4. Presentation from Caritas Polska (in Polish) 5. Presentation from Right to Protection (in Polish) 6. Presentation from NGO "Dar Losu" (in Polish) 7. Presentation from Polish Migration Forum (in Polish) 8. Discussion (in Polish) 9. Updates from sub sectors (GBV, Child Protection, Trafficking in Persons) (in English) 10. AOB (in English)
AGENDA POINT	

Agenda point 1,2	**Opening remarks:** Presentations and minutes of our last protection sector meeting are updated on the operational data portal: Working Group: Poland Protection Sector. UNHCR presented the Protection Sector structure and informed about the ongoing revision of TOR.
Agenda point 3	**Legal Update regarding the situation of older refugees – Katarzyna Przybyslawska** • Medical Assistance As access to certain types of medical assistance has recently been restricted, older refugees may experience distress about previously planned medical procedures or treatment. Many face serious health challenges, chronic diseases and serious health conditions requiring long-term assistance and have to set aside money for prescriptions. Medical rehabilitation equipment like walking frames are not available free of charge. In case of ending TPD and switching to other types of legal permits like CUKR - access to medical assistance will be conditional upon employment or insurance, which may exclude certain categories of older refugees. • Collective Accommodation Centers Currently, persons not entitled to receiving Polish pension may stay in collective centers free of charge, but those who receive it (even if this is only a symbolic amount) are obliged to pay 15 PLN per day. Many older refugees are anxious about their accommodation past March 2026, if the Special Act is not further prolonged. Smaller accommodation centers were closed down, and older refugees often find themselves lost and excluded in larger ones, where usually no catering service is organized, and it is not possible to cook inside rooms, only in communal areas. Sometimes technical challenges contribute to difficulties like lack of elevators etc. • Social Assistance Most of older refugees receive the typically low, Ukrainian pensions amounting on average to 300 PLN per month. They mostly rely on Polish social benefits like the permanent allowance. If these benefits are no longer available they will not be able to support themselves in Poland → risk of premature returns The waiting time for decision on Polish minimum pension is very long at the moment, and additional problems arose after 30 September 2025 - ZUS cannot identify or confirm legality of stay of some pensioners (the problems are likely related to technical changes in the databases) . There are cases of persons unjustifiably losing their pensions due to errors in the system. • Diia App and other technical issues Older refugees are less technically savvy and may experience difficulties using the with Diia app and the ePuap trusted profile. Awareness of these tools is very low in this group. If the PESEL CUKR application process is opened, the obligation to apply in a digital form may exclude some older refugees. In addition, the risk of abuses from fraudulent “lawyers” and “plenipotentiaries” charging exorbitant rates for their assistance is high, especially since continuity of free legal aid to refugees in Poland is uncertain (lack of funding).

	Q&A Q: Will PESEL CUKR card holder have access to social assistance, and which groups ? A: Further legal analysis is needed. Q: Will temporary guardians of children be registered with the CUKR card? Will pension-age guardians receive 800+? A: If the guardian has a Polish pension, they can receive 800+. The presentation is found here: Document - Poland: Protection Sector - Legal Update (27 November 2025).

Agenda point 4	**Presentation from Caritas Polska (in Polish)** 1. Demographics & General Context • Senior refugees are among the most vulnerable groups of foreigners. • Average age of senior beneficiaries at Caritas: 75 years. • Many receive very small pensions from Ukraine, which do not cover basic needs. • About 60% of senior refugees are currently employed—not by choice, but because they must pay rent. 2. Key Challenges Financial hardship • Financial support and food are the most urgent needs. • Despite referrals from Caritas, eligibility for food assistance from social assistance centers is inconsistent and subjectively decided, leaving some seniors without needed aid. Medication & Health • Many seniors struggle to purchase medications for chronic illnesses, especially after medication reimbursement programs ended. • Caritas seeks alternative solutions (referrals, private donors), but the situation remains difficult. • National medical system delays from the past two years continue to affect seniors—for example, long waiting times even for very serious diagnoses (e.g., cancer). Psychological & Social Issues • Seniors are no longer considered an “inactive group”— but require support that fosters their independence. • 70% receive psychological assistance focused on finding a path to self-sufficiency. • Caritas psychological support groups consist of 80% seniors. • Biedronka Foundation survey shows: ○ ~50% of seniors in Poland experience psychological difficulties, loneliness, and a lack of hope. • Caritas plans 20 support groups over the next 18 months. • A family assistant is viewed as a crucial tool for strengthening seniors’ independence.

	3. Legal & Social Navigation
	
	• Caritas provides counselling, as seniors are the most at risk and often cannot navigate complex systems on their own.
	  ○ Meetings with lawyers for working seniors (regular group consultations led by SIP)
	  ○ Career consultations for those still active in the labor market.
	
	Q&A
	Q: Are there any problems with purchasing medications (after the changes in the Special Act)?
	A: Problems are mostly linked to the discontinuation of NGO medication reimbursement programs. Caritas providing reimbursement program for three years. After it ended, finding reimbursements through social assistance centers or foundations became much harder.
	Q: Can beneficiaries be referred for legal assistance?
	A: SIP: Yes. They can be referred directly to SIP (Stowarzyszenie Interwencji Prawnej).
	Q: Has interest in relocating to other countries increased?
	A: Occasionally, yes—mostly to join family.
	Many seniors wish to return, but Caritas emphasizes giving them realistic information, as rules change frequently across countries.

Agenda point 6	**Presentation from Right to Protection (in Polish)** The organization is launching a pilot club project for senior citizens who have previously participated in local initiatives and have experience in social activism. The club's goal is to support their independence, expand their knowledge, and strengthen their psychological well-being. **Main program components:** • Information on legislative changes and legalization issues (residence status, documents). • Information on pension rights and entitlements and the possibilities of obtaining or confirming them, consultations regarding the recognition and recalculation of work experience earned abroad. • Psychological support and support groups for strengthening psycho-emotional well-being (working with themes of loneliness, stress, loss, the search for meaning, and reactivation, training in self-support strategies and building new social connections). Digital education (digital literacy using smartphones, apps, banking services, and government e-services, Internet safety and personal data protection). The organization is launching a pilot seniors' club for socially active older participants to support their independence, knowledge, and psychological well-being. The program includes legal and pension-related information, psychological support and peer groups, and digital education focused on everyday technologies, e-services, and online safety.

Agenda point 7	**Presentation from NGO "Dar Losu" (in Polish)** Approximately 145,700 Belarusian citizens live in Poland (not including those on visas). At least 10% of them are aged 50+, approximately 14,600, of whom over 1,000 are under international protection. Many Belarusians have fled to Poland due to persecution. Elderly people who are approaching or have already reached retirement age are in a particularly difficult situation. **ZUS pension transfer procedure** • To grant a pension to a person from Belarus, ZUS – in line with current practice – sends a request for their data to Belarusian institutions. This involves the transfer of personal data and the disclosure of their exact address in Poland. **What are the risks?** • For a person staying in Poland: possibility of surveillance, intimidation, tracking, threat of physical attacks. • For families remaining in Belarus: interrogations, administrative and criminal repression, risk of imprisonment • Consent to data transfer in such a situation is not voluntary – it is consent under economic duress ("I agree or I won't receive a pension"). This contradicts the very concept of international protection, the purpose of which is to ensure safety from repression by the country of origin. It is also in violation of GDPR provisions on data transfers to countries that do not guarantee an adequate level of protection. Additional context: Lukashenko's Decree No. 294 (July 3, 2023): The decree mandates the exchange of passports exclusively within the territory of Belarus. For protected individuals, this means effectively forcing them to enter into conditions of persecution – which is impossible and dangerous. Consequences of the decree: expiration of passport validity, inability to renew bank cards, cutting off from any benefits from Belarus. Even those who currently receive a symbolic Belarusian pension will likely lose it soon. **Alternative Procedure Proposal:** • For individuals already retired (with a pension certificate from Belarus) – recognition of pensions rights base on a certified translation of pension certificate, without contacting Belarusian authorities. • For individuals not yet retired – recognition of alternative supporting documentation such as employment record book (with a translation), employment contracts, certificates from places of employment (pay slips, bank statements, witness statements, other evidence of employment). The procedure would allow for the estimation of length of service and benefit amount without the risk of sharing data with the Belarusian regime. Many elderly Belarusians in Poland face risks from sharing personal data with Belarusian authorities to access pensions, as it can lead to surveillance and repression of themselves and their families. Proposed alternatives include recognizing pensions using certified translations or employment records, avoiding contact with the Belarusian regime and enhancing their safety. Document - Poland: Protection Sector - presentation by Fundacja DAR LOSU (27 November 2025)

Agenda point 8	**Presentation from Polish Migration Forum (in Polish)** Elderly people face the same challenges as other vulnerable groups, but their situation is exacerbated by age-related and social factors. Elderly refugees face health, digital, language, and social barriers, often compounded by caregiving responsibilities and limited access to information or specialized support. PMF addresses these challenges through social, legal, medical, and language assistance, as well as community-building and targeted guidance on navigating services: **Challenges specific to elderly refugees**: • Health limitations and chronic illnesses. • Digital exclusion: difficulties using apps, portals, and online registration. • Frequently acting as guardians for children or grandchildren. • Insufficient knowledge of the Polish language. • Lack of specialized financial assistance programs specifically targeted at elderly foreigners. **PMF support** • Recently, regular contact with ZUS has been established. ZUS organizes on-call shifts and meetings specifically for beneficiaries. • Provision of information how to confirm their disability and how to obtain the relevant documents. • Consultations with employment consultants • Assistance in stay legalization • Psychological support • integration workshops • "Senior's Club"—a social space for seniors • Polish language training • Creation of a local community and mutual support. **Main Challenges** • **Barriers in access to medical services**. Eg. Different clinics interpret the rules for providing free care to foreigners differently. Because of this, elderly beneficiaries are sometimes unable to receive even basic examinations. **Lack of knowledge about their rights.** Older people do not always understand which medical services they are entitled to, what benefits they can receive, how to complete the paperwork, where to go in case of violations. Systematic information support is needed. • Thus, older refugees face a range of health, social, and practical challenges, including chronic illnesses, digital isolation, language barriers, and caregiving responsibilities, often compounded by a lack of awareness of their rights and access to services. PMF provide targeted support through legal assistance and assistance with obtaining residence permits, health counseling, psychological support, Polish language

	training, social inclusion activities, and community development initiatives, helping older adults navigate complex systems and reduce isolation. **Comments/Q&A** Q (to all presenters): How do beneficiaries learn about assistance programs? A: Dar Losu - Belarusian elderly people often live isolated lives, not part of large communities. OPS (Ośrodek Pomocy Społecznej) sometimes refers people directly. PMF social workers work in OZZ collective sites for Ukrainians, and the multicultural center also accepts requests through online forms, Telegram, and referrals from other organizations.
Agenda point 9	**AOR** • In cooperation with Social Assistance Centers, IOM is distributing cards from the Biedronka supermarket. Please contact Joanna Krupadziorow: krupadziorow@iom.int. • **Next meeting of the Protection Sector: January 2026**. Topic - Statelessness.