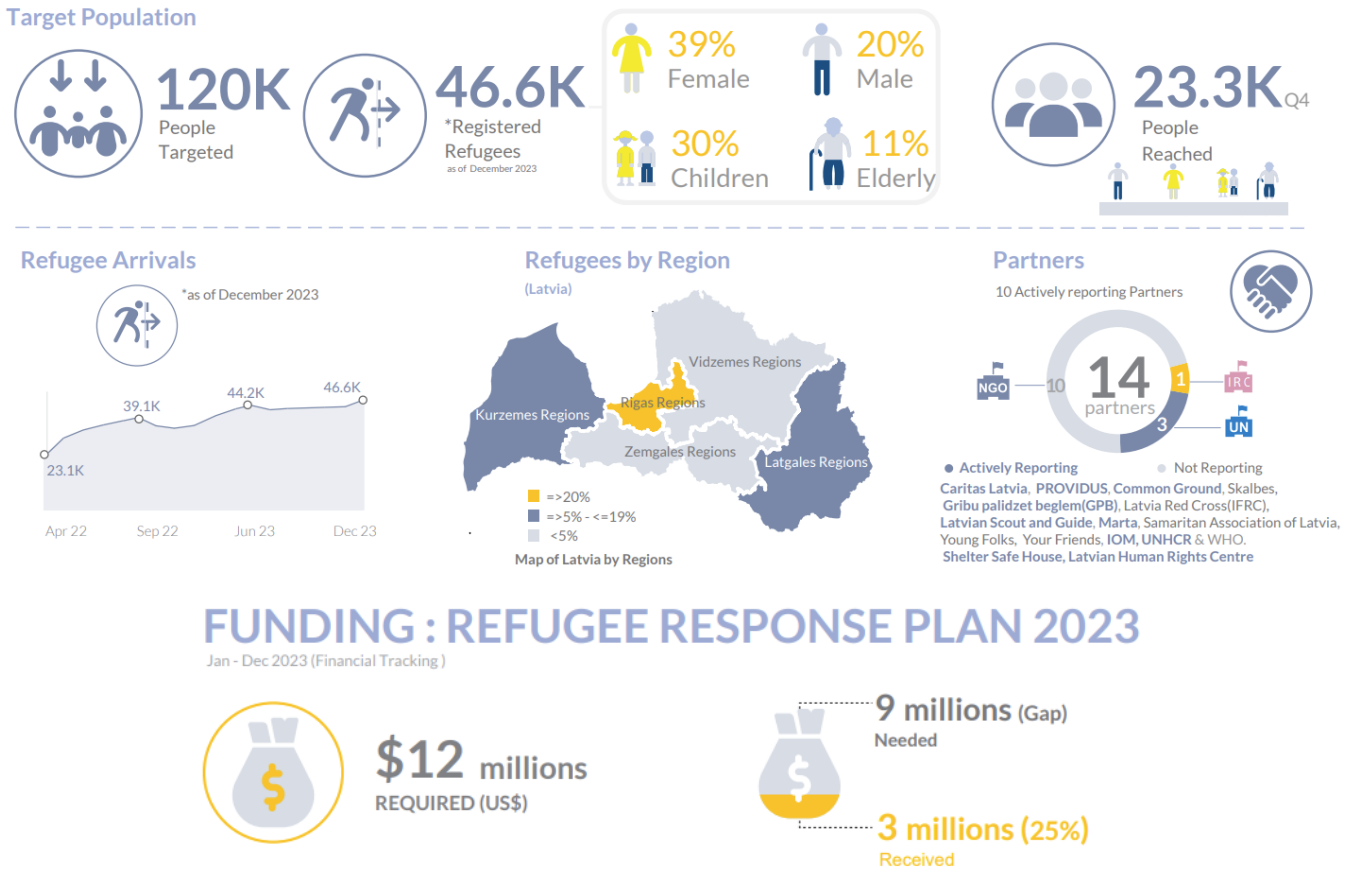
Latvia

Report of activities and achievements in 2023

From the onset of the war in Ukraine in February 2022, Latvia indicated its readiness to receive and support Ukrainians fleeing their country. Over the months that followed, Latvia saw the arrival of tens of thousands of refugees from Ukraine, including those who transited through the country and continued onwards to other countries. The Ukraine refugee situation resulted in Latvia facing the largest influx of refugees in its history.

The Refugee Response Plan (RRP) for Latvia aims to support the efforts of the national authorities in addressing the needs of refugees from Ukraine, with a focus on the most vulnerable. The plan is coordinated by UNHCR and brings together fourteen humanitarian organizations in Latvia. The RRP outlines the multi-partner and multi-sector response strategy and financial requirements of the partners helping refugees from Ukraine.

This year-end report provides an overview of RRP partner activities in 2023. The RRP, which provides all actors with a common plan and appeal aimed to address the needs of over 33,000 Ukrainians in Latvia who have applied protection in Latvia. While funding constraints did not allow all partners to fully implement their plans, at the year's end, some 23,000 individuals had received humanitarian assistance through UNHCR and its partners.



For further information, please see the **Operational Data Portal for the Ukraine Refugee Situation** for more details on refugee population figures and information resources. | See the **Ukraine Situation Regional Refugee Response Plan** for a breakdown of sectoral response priorities and requirements and the **Refugee Funding Tracker** for RRP funding information.

Refugee Response Plan in Latvia

Since 24 February 2022, more than 5.9 million people from Ukraine have sought refuge across Europe. At year's end 2023, Latvia had received 46,000 applications for temporary protection by Ukrainian citizens.

Today, organisations in Latvia helping refugees from Ukraine are part of the Regional Refugee Response Plan (RRP) for Ukraine. The RRP outlines the multi-partner and multi-sector response strategy and financial requirements of UNHCR and other partners responding to the needs of refugees from Ukraine, complementing the government-led response. It provides all actors with a common plan and budget in support of government-led coordination. Meetings between the RRP partners are held on a monthly basis.

The Inter-Agency team held two virtual training sessions on resource mobilization (with simultaneous interpretation in Russian for RLOs), conducted by UNHCR PSP Europe, on 23 and 28 November. Some 39 individuals joined the sessions to learn more about the fundraising cycle and donor management. Feedback from the training was very positive, with participants indicating interest for further training on fundraising case studies or project management.

Off the back of the launch of the 2023 Regional Refugee Response Plan (RRP), the first inter-agency coordination meeting between partners was held in February 2023. Through the inter-agency coordination platform, led by UNHCR, three UN agencies, two international NGOs and five NGOs, engaged on their funding situation and its impact on programming. The 2023 RRP required US$12 million for activities in Latvia, of which 25 per cent was funded by the year's end. Consequently, more than half of the appealing partners needed to adjust their programming due to funding gaps, with local NGOs in particular being severely affected. The sectors most affected were basic needs, protection and livelihood and economic inclusion.

Government response

Temporary protection status enables refugees to access healthcare, education, and the labour market. In Latvia, support to refugees from Ukraine is granted on the basis of the Law on Assistance to Ukrainian Civilians, which was first adopted in March 2022, and has been extended several times since. Recently, the Government of Latvia again decided to extend its support for refugees from Ukraine and prolonged the Law on Assistance to Ukrainian Civilians until the end of the year. The same level of assistance as in 2023 is expected in 2024.

The Government further adopted an Action Plan for 2023 that specified activities and responsible actors for the implementation of the services provided to refugees from Ukraine. The Government had allocated 102 million euros for the implementation of this Action Plan. In 2024, the allocation for the Action Plan is expected to decrease to 70 million euros

Donors have stepped up to help organisations in Latvia support the refugees from Ukraine. For example, the US Department of State allocated $1.24 million to six non-governmental organizations in Latvia for programmes to assist Ukrainian refugees. Activities focus on strengthening the capacities of refugees to acquire skills to improve their employment opportunities. Amongst organisations supported are the Riga Investment and Tourism Agency (in cooperation with the association 'Ukraine Study Centre') which will provide Latvian language, social integration courses and a mentoring programme for Ukrainians living in Riga. The NGO 'Baltic Security Fund' will provide English language training to Ukrainian refugees to promote their integration, improve their employment opportunities and attract refugees to the information space in English. NGO 'Creative Ideas' will provide professionally oriented Latvian and English language courses, business and entrepreneurship courses and cultural integration events for Ukrainian refugees. The NGO 'Your Friends'

plans to provide two mobile 'Help Desks' to disseminate information and provide critical services as well as renovate a day care centre for children. The NGO 'TEV' [For You], will create a support system for Ukrainian refugees and their children in Latvia, while 'Shelter Safe House' (SSH) is to provide psycho-emotional support to refugees.

Partners' response to the Ukraine refugee situation

Addressing immediate needs upon arrival

In 2023, Latvia consolidated its response to the influx of refugees from Ukraine. RRP partners were at the forefront of making sure that those arriving from Ukraine were met and given both information and access to services. Often this was facilitated at the border crossing points where the staff from the RRP partners were some of the first contacts.

At the start of the year and in close coordination with the relevant authorities, NGOs '**I Want to Help Refugees' (*Gribu palīdzēt bēgļiem* — GPB)** and **'Your Friends' (*Tavi draugi*)** set up support points at the border areas to help newly arrived refugees from Ukraine. Refugees in transit received support with their basic needs, were informed of their rights and available services, and provided with psychosocial first aid.

In January 2023, **IOM** began covering the cost of a mobile trailer at the Terehova border crossing point in cooperation with the NGO **'Your Friends'**. The trailer is used to help volunteers distribute hot water, meals and clothes, as well as provide consultations for refugees in transit.

A private donor provided a tent at Grebneva border crossing point, where up to 30 people could eat hot meals and get warm. Local Latvians came in their own vehicles from the nearby areas and continue to support the activities at the border by providing instant coffee, bread, sour cream, chocolate, warm socks and big pots of soup. Since the start of the project, thousands of refugees have been assisted with hot meals and drinks, a warm place to rest, information about temporary protection arrangements in Latvia and onwards transportation.

Partners provided support, information and legal counselling to those who had newly arrived, regarding asylum procedures, access to temporary protection, and access to rights and services, amongst other issues. In 2023, **GPB** assisted 5,541 refugees and asylum-seekers through its outreach activities in border areas and municipalities, as well as at its Information Centre at Riga. The main questions related to Latvian language courses, filling out documents, social support, transportation services, and medical assistance.

For those refugees who did not wish to apply for temporary protection in Latvia but chose to move on instead, **IOM** provided consultations on safe transport routes and means. Beneficiaries who contacted IOM via phone were provided with basic information on service availability in the border area or cities in Latvia. IOM Latvia provided transportation assistance to those Ukrainians who had crossed into Latvia from Russia and who had no means to continue their onwards trip. In 2023, transportation was provided to 1,909 registered beneficiaries.

Furthermore, **IOM** issued roundtrip bus tickets to Warsaw to those Ukrainian citizens who had an urgent need to renew their documents and wished to approach the Ukrainian Embassy in Poland. This assistance was provided to 132 people.

Finding accommodation can be a daunting task for those fleeing a conflict and with that in mind, partners have sought to assist as many people, especially the most vulnerable, as possible with accommodation. In 2023, **IOM** provided temporary accommodation for 2,536 vulnerable refugees in transit in the area near the Russian and Belarusian borders. IOM also provided emergency food assistance to 3,618 refugees at these temporary accommodation places.

Lastly, provision of information is invaluable, including warning of the dangers of trafficking and setting out clear information on safe pathways, where information can be obtained, and to that end **IOM** was able to provide information for all persons assisted at the border, advising them on safe travel options and relevant hotline numbers.

Protection services

Many refugees found themselves in need of counselling and legal advice, whether having decided either to remain in Latvia to seek temporary protection or to move on to another country. For those wanting to remain in Latvia, one important step was to ensure documentation and that they knew how to apply for Temporary Protection which allows refugees access to many of the services available to citizens of Latvia.

UNHCR partner **Latvian Centre for Human Rights (LCHR)** conducted legal counselling on various topics related to temporary protection (entry, travel documents, residence permit, etc.) and integration (access to accommodation, rental agreements, education, social benefits, employment). LCHR provided 89 persons with legal counselling in 2023.

In 2023, **UNHCR** partner **Shelter Safe House (SSH)** also provided legal counselling for 528 asylum-seekers and refugees, including 272 from Ukraine. Topics of counselling included access to the asylum procedure, enquiries regarding social benefits, registering an NGO, family law, and employment disputes. Many refugees further have need for psychosocial support, given that many are fleeing traumatic situations, and with that in mind, SSH in 2023 provided MHPSS services countrywide to 167 individuals, including to 24 Ukrainians.

In 2023, **UNHCR** partner **GPB** undertook 39 protection monitoring visits, often to multiple locations, that include borders, reception facilities in the east of the country (Latgale Region). In addition, strengthening the capacities of local integration actors was a priority, with GPB undertaking a total of 27 interventions, including training and capacity-building events.

UNHCR partner **GPB** organized an event for older Ukrainian refugees and older Latvian locals at a community garden in cooperation with Riga Active Seniors Alliance. In total 13 persons participated, including 10 refugees from Ukraine. Participants played games and listened to a lecture on the history of Riga that was given by a local guide.

Caritas has been providing social rehabilitation and social care services for children with disabilities and social and psychological support to the children's families, as well as distributing food and clothes to socially marginalized people. In addition, some 167 individuals received psychosocial support through **SSH** in the Riga area. NGO **Marta** provided psychological consultations, support groups and art therapy groups for women, as well as specialized child protection services to 15 Ukrainian children in Daugavpils municipality.

The Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) network in Latvia (UNHCR, IOM, MARTA and Skalbes) ensured clear information on PSEA which was shared with RRP partners, in accordance with the agreed action plan.

Protection Monitoring

UNHCR carried out a protection profiling and monitoring exercise, in which some 759 refugees from Ukraine (representing 1,789 householder members), were interviewed. Key findings include the fact that 92 per cent of respondents had applied for temporary protection, 94 per cent of whom had received a positive decision. Further, 57 per cent were employed including 50 per cent within Latvia, 21 per cent were unemployed, and 11 per cent retired. Some 70 per cent cited having at least one urgent need. The main needs in Latvia altered considerably from the summer months. While employment remained static at 35 per cent, with 30 per cent of the 21 per cent unemployed having cited language as the greatest barrier, the need for material assistance was recorded at 21 per cent (previously 56 per cent), food also at 21 per cent (previously 43 per cent), and healthcare at 31 per cent (previously 36 per cent). These findings suggest that the aid given has helped refugees from Ukraine to become more established in Latvia and more able to meet their own needs. Notably, 18 per cent of respondents reported that they have at least one family member with a serious disability or illness. Protection monitoring has shown that refugees with disabilities have difficulties accessing suitable

accommodation due to the lack of adapted living space. Further, because of delays with registration for disability status and limited state resources, support with health care and additional financial support from municipalities does not always reach disabled refugees in a timely manner, thus of creating a gap.

Cash assistance

In 2023, **IOM** provided multipurpose cash assistance to 870 vulnerable Ukrainian refugees not covered by other actors in Latvia. During the distribution of cash, IOM staff provided consultations and information to refugees, and referred them to services and support provided by the state, municipal institutions and NGOs. IOM also provided vouchers to 601 refugees for basic non-prescription medication on an as-needed basis. This included distributing vouchers for pharmacies and covering emergency medical costs for refugees.

Livelihoods

Finding employment can be a challenge for refugees, especially when they are in a country where language poses a barrier. This was reflected by some 30 per cent of refugees as noted in the protection profiling and monitoring exercise. In order to help facilitate Ukrainians' entry into local society, in February, the **Latvian Red Cross** launched language classes for Ukrainians to learn Latvian language, arranged into six groups, covering 90 people. Run by professional teachers, the Latvian Red Cross were holding language courses (120 hours) for adults, A1 level, in different regions across Latvia, including outside of Riga, for example, at Daugavpils, Rezekne, Salacgriva, Valmiera and in the city in Kurzeme. More than 500 persons participated, and it took an average of three to four months to pass the exam. Courses were organized also in collective accommodation centres (three in total – Adamova and Vecbebri).

Integration courses are an important support for refugees who have settled in a new home country. '**Shelter Safe House' (SSH)** ran courses, where people could receive up-to-date information on various issues. The issue of the labour market is very relevant. It is important to know how to search for a job, how to analyse vacancies on various portals, what you need to know about working hours, working hours, salary, job duties and rights. In such a way, SSH was able to assist 34 individuals in accessing employment, with a view to supporting their integration, while **Caritas** supported a total of 465 individuals in livelihoods and socio-economic inclusion services and development programmes in Riga city.

Education

With some 30 per cent of refugees being minors, the continuation of school studies was paramount. The total number of children from Ukraine in Latvia aged between 7 and 17 was estimated at 6,357 according to the Ministry of Education's October figures. While many children and parents elected to continue with Ukrainian institutions online, by the end of 2023, a total of 3,727 children were enrolled in Latvian educational institutions, including 2,462 aged 7 to 17 (the rest being preschoolers). For its part, RRP partner, **IOM**, between 9 January and 31 March 2023, provided 151 Ukrainian school children within Latvian schools with Latvian language assistance. The learning process was organized onsite and online.

In order to supplement more formal education, RRP partners ran activities aimed to further stimulate children. In 2023, the **Latvian Scout and Guide Central Organization** provided non-formal education activities. These included running the Youth centre in Riga in order to maintain a safe space and provide a sense of community for the Ukrainian youth and their families, as well as by providing them with new applicable knowledge and skills. Furthermore, they have organized various outdoor activities for youth and their families to join in, all of which would include an element of active learning and gaining practical skills. Local scout and guide units were involving Ukrainian children into camps and/or individual units. Latvian Language classes have been run for

Ukrainian youth. The LSGCO advocates for the need of children and youth to have access to education, as well as to quality leisure time activities.

Inclusion and social cohesion

With the help of volunteers, the **Common Ground** centre opened on 15 March 2022. In 2023, numerous people – children, parents, grandparents, students, other individuals – visited the centre, participating in different events, gatherings, dinners, concerts, lessons, and so on. The centre has a library, playrooms, co-working areas, kitchen, yoga, and rest rooms. In 2023, the aim was to continue offering a space where those who had fled the war and come to Latvia could have a place where they were always welcome; where they could meet others and get help. Ukrainian families received support through the provision of a safe space for gathering and organizing lectures, concerts and master classes, serving warm food. Other activities sought to bring both Ukrainians and non-Ukrainians together. The centre was mostly visited by women of differing ages, their children. The main employees of the centre are Ukrainians who also manage it, with the help of locals. Saturdays saw the greatest activity, with around 150-300 visitors. On weekdays, activities took the form of events – language classes or masterclasses – with up to 15-20 people. Concerts were held with around 200 people; likewise food-related activities garnered around 200 participants.

The last activity of the year was a celebration of 2023, (actually held on 4 January 2024). **Common Ground** organized a Ukrainian film and gifts for all the children. Publicly announced, all 566 seats were filled in a few hours and the event showed Ukrainians how welcome they are, giving them joy and emotional support at an important time of the year.

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LINKS

Regional data portal – Ukraine Situation RRP – Refugee Funding Tracker

RRP partners in Latvia

***Gribu palīdzēt bēgļiem* (I Want to Help Refugees).** *GPB is a registered association that aims to give practical, immediate, and voluntary help in integrating economically, socially, and culturally, based on the identified needs of refugees, asylum-seekers and individuals with alternative status.*

The International Organization for Migration (IOM). *The leading inter-governmental organization in the field of migration and is committed to the principle that humane and orderly migration that benefits migrants and society. In Latvia, activities include assistance with basic needs (transport, cash assistance, shelter, WASH), protection services.*

Biedrība 'Patvērums Drošā māja' (Society 'Shelter Safe House'). *The non-governmental society SSH was established on 6 August 2007 with the aim of developing support services to (1) victims of human trafficking, (2) legal migrants, including asylum-seekers, refugees and persons granted subsidiary protection status.*

Latvian Red Cross. *LRC is a non-governmental non-profit volunteer-led humanitarian organization. Its operations cover the whole territory of Latvia, with six regional branches. LRC has accumulated many years of experience in working with population groups at risk of social exclusion – individual clients, groups, families with children, third-country nationals, asylum-seekers, refugees, and persons with alternative status.*

The Latvian Scout and Guide Central Organization. *LSGCO educates and develops children and young people with the help of various non-formal education methods. The LSGCO has more than 20 units (in Latvia and abroad) and more than 800 members.*

Latvian Centre for Human Rights (LCHR). *LCHR is an independent non-governmental organization established in 1993 working with issues concerning integration, discrimination, hate crimes, asylum, migration and fundamental rights issues, as well as human rights in closed institutions.*

Caritas Latvia. *Caritas Latvia's mission is to help marginalized people, by fostering their human dignity through works of mercy and projects that improve their socioeconomic, psychological, and spiritual situation.*

Common Ground. *Common Ground runs a social initiative centre in Riga for persons forced to abandon their homes due to the war in Ukraine and those who want to support them. Common Ground is a space to create all the necessary conditions to communicate, to receive and share human warmth, support and cooperation.*

Association 'Marta Centre'. *MARTA works to support women and children that suffer from violence, or who are victim of trafficking and gender discrimination. MARTA provides rehabilitation, engages in advocacy, educating specialists and developing prevention programmes.*

Samaritan Association of Latvia. *LSA is one of the biggest NGOs in Latvia providing social, educational and medical services as well as carrying out various charity projects and initiatives.*

Centre for Public Policy PROVIDUS. *PROVIDUS has been Latvia's leading public policy think tank since 2002 with a mission to promote evidence-based policy and open society values.*

Crisis and Counselling Centre 'Skalbes'. *Skalbes provides professional help, support and information to people in crisis.*

Young Folks LV. *Young Folks LV is a non-profit youth organization that provides a safe and supportive environment in which youths discover and develop the cognitive and creative skills. They promote informal learning and meaningful communication, creating a welcoming, inspiring environment, and a friendly community.*

Organization 'Tavi draugi' ('Your friends'). *Tavi Draugi has been providing coordinated humanitarian aid to Ukrainian civilians in Latvia and Ukraine by organizing and coordinating the voluntary involvement of Latvian people, organizations and businesses in providing help.*