

Seventy-second session
4-8 October 2021

Update on UNHCR’s operations in Europe

A. Situational overview

The COVID-19 pandemic continued to impact population movements within and to Europe, with States extending and adjusting containment measures, and adapting asylum processes in response to the public health situation. Vaccination campaigns progressed across the region, with persons of concern generally included in national vaccination campaigns, on par with the general population.

With the easing of pandemic travel restrictions, the number of new arrivals to southern Europe¹ through the Mediterranean and Canary Islands routes increased by 42 per cent between January and July 2021 when compared to the same period in 2020, from 38,900 to some 55,300 people. However, when compared to January to July 2019, prior to pandemic-related restrictions, arrivals in 2021 increased by only 18 per cent.

In 2021, notable increases were seen in Italy and Spain, where arrivals increased by 107 per cent (29,000 arrivals) and 47 per cent (16,400 arrivals) respectively; nearly half of the arrivals to Spain were recorded on the Canary Islands. Greece, however, saw a 60 per cent reduction in arrivals when compared to 2020. From January to June 2021, the main countries of origin of arrivals to Cyprus, Greece, Italy and Malta were Bangladesh (12 per cent), Tunisia (10 per cent) and the Syrian Arab Republic (8 per cent). The number of first-time asylum applications received in 31 European countries² in the first half of 2021 was 26 per cent lower than the number received during the same period in 2020 (149,500 compared to 203,000)³.

From January to July 2021, some 1,016 people were known to have lost their lives, or went missing, in the Mediterranean Sea. This figure represents a 99 per cent increase when compared to the same period in 2020, with the number of deaths in proportion to arrivals also increasing by 40 per cent. It is estimated that a further 203 people lost their lives, or went missing, along the Canary Islands route. The capacity of search-and-rescue operations in the Mediterranean remains under considerable stress, with COVID-19 quarantine requirements and politicization of refugee and migratory flows continuing to hamper efforts in achieving predictable, life-saving rescue-and-disembarkation arrangements.

Continued reports of expulsions and, often violent, pushbacks of refugees and asylum-seekers at Europe’s land and sea borders, remained a concern. UNHCR called for credible inquiries into alleged violations of international law and for legal obligations to be upheld. Furthermore, legislative developments in some countries and the possible externalization of asylum and protection obligations, which are counter to the letter and spirit of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the principles of solidarity and responsibility-sharing enshrined in the Global Compact on Refugees, were also cause for concern.

¹ Arrivals took place via Mediterranean routes to Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta and Spain (includes land arrivals to Greece and Spain and via the Canary Islands route).

² This included 27 European Union countries plus four European Free Trade Association countries (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland)

³ These figures come from the [EASO Latest Asylum Trends](#).

With respect to solutions, the pandemic continued to have a crippling impact on refugee resettlement to Europe, with only 11,150 departures recorded against the 29,500 admissions pledged in 2020. As of the end of June 2021, recorded resettlement departures to Europe stood at 7,161.

B. Progress and challenges in achieving the global strategic priorities

Ensuring an effective operational response

Across Europe, UNHCR worked closely with partners, including civil society, to advocate the inclusion of persons of concern in national vaccinations plans, public health responses and social protection schemes. To mitigate the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on the livelihoods of refugees and asylum-seekers, cash-based interventions were implemented in eastern Europe, South-East Europe and the southern Caucasus.

In Greece, further progress was made with respect to the transition of the “Emergency support to integration and accommodation” programme to the Government of Greece, with transition of the accommodation component successfully completed in June 2021. Full responsibility for the cash component will also be transferred to the Greek Government by 1 October 2021. Looking ahead, while UNHCR’s operational footprint in Greece will be reduced, the Office will refocus and strengthen efforts with respect to the integration of recognized refugees.

In Ukraine, conflict-affected populations were supported through the provision of legal assistance and cash transfers to help meet basic needs. In non-Government-controlled areas, community-based protection activities continued, while shelter programmes resumed – despite access-related challenges. UNHCR provided logistical support to humanitarian convoys into non-Government-controlled areas on behalf of the United Nations country team.

While there were tensions along the Armenia-Azerbaijan border, the 9 November 2020 ceasefire statement continued to be observed. Operational responses were strengthened in support of the humanitarian and protection needs of those impacted by the crisis, including material assistance and legal advice provided through national partners to several thousand people in both Armenia and Azerbaijan. Cash transfers were also introduced as a means to support affected populations.

Safeguarding asylum space and building effective protection systems, including in the context of mixed movements

Ensuring direct access to protection in Europe, in line with international obligations, remains of critical importance. However, while progress was made in the lifting of severe restrictions affecting access to territory and asylum procedures across the continent, widespread practices of pushbacks at the external borders of the European Union continued.

Where COVID-19 compounded existing challenges in the overall functioning of asylum systems, practical guidance was provided to States in implementing fair and fast asylum procedures in support of the effective management of mixed movements.

In South-East Europe, a revised regional strategy on mixed movements was developed with a view to supporting national authorities in offering both protection and solutions to third country nationals in need of international protection. In line with this strategy, the Office remained engaged in capacity development efforts, both directly and through various EU-funded projects, including the European Union Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance. The Quality Assurance Initiative for South-East Europe was extended, while coordination with the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) in the subregion was also reinforced.

UNHCR continued to facilitate the work of the Asylum Capacity Support Group (ACSG), including efforts to match requests for asylum capacity support with offers of technical, material and financial assistance. In late 2020, the Secretariat of the ACSG enabled the launch of state-to-state support mechanisms between Niger and France, and Chad and France. To date, several European States have indicated their interest in contributing to the ACSG, but confirmation of their support remains pending.

Reforming the Common European Asylum System and strengthening the collective European response

The Global Compact on Refugees reflects the commitment of the international community to strengthened cooperation and solidarity with refugees and host communities and recognizes the importance of addressing the root causes of displacement. With many of these principles reflected in the proposed new European Union Pact on Asylum and Migration, UNHCR continued to engage with the European Commission, the various Council Presidencies and European Union Member States to advance discussions on key elements of the Pact.

Provisions of the Pact which provide for the establishment of national independent border monitoring mechanisms would serve as an important first step in addressing problems in access to territory. The Office continued to contribute to discussions around the nature and parameters of such mechanisms.

The Office remains concerned about sub-standard reception conditions in several States, particularly long-standing challenges of inadequate and overcrowded accommodation, limited staff capacity, lack of basic services, and insufficient identification and response mechanisms for those with specific needs. In response, technical and operational support to bolster reception capacity and conditions, including material assistance, support to interpretation services and legal counselling, was provided. The Office strengthened its presence in the Canary Islands to support the authorities with the reception of increased numbers of new arrivals.

Since early 2021, some States in northern Europe have seen an increase in arrivals, testing reception- and asylum-processing capacities. UNHCR is closely monitoring the situation and coordinating with the European Commission, and its agencies, to support concerned States in line with European Union and international standards. UNHCR refers to its global call urging States to protect the rights of refugees and not to instrumentalize their plight. At the same time, UNHCR is pursuing dialogue with all concerned so that solutions are found, particularly for stranded groups.

Strengthening participatory and community-based approaches

As COVID-19 vaccination campaigns progress across Europe, communication with persons of concern was enhanced to ensure that they have access to updated, timely and accurate information. In Austria, a series of vaccination information webinars were initiated with refugees and refugee-led organizations, while in Ukraine, an action plan to address vaccine hesitancy among older persons and persons with disabilities was developed. In Bulgaria, the Refugee Advisory Board launched a community-led campaign to address online misinformation related to COVID-19 and vaccinations.

With respect to the prevention and response to sexual and gender-based violence, efforts were made across Europe to promote safe and appropriate access to national services, effective identification and referral, and coordination between asylum authorities and service providers. In Italy, UNHCR worked with a national service network to establish a system of data collection which will enable monitoring and analysis of trends relating to persons of concern seeking gender-based violence services at anti-violence centres throughout the country. Furthermore, to promote the rollout of UNHCR's Policy on the Prevention of, Risk Mitigation and Response to Gender-based Violence, the Bureau for Europe launched a call for expressions of interest for country offices in the region to develop projects up to a maximum of USD 10,000. Projects from Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Malta, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, and Switzerland were selected for support facilitating activities from safety assessments to engagement with women-led organisations and refugee women and capacity building.

In follow up to a mapping of refugee-led organizations in Europe conducted in 2020, work was undertaken to reinforce the efforts of more than 80 refugee-led organizations and initiatives across the region. In Italy, the PartecipAzione project, implemented by UNHCR and Intersos, provided support to 30 organizations, while in Ukraine, over 80 small-scale community-based organizations, including organizations led by internally displaced persons (IDPs), provided assistance, undertook advocacy and facilitated community mobilization. A Regional Conference on Refugee Leadership, Participation and Volunteerism in Europe will take place

in September 2021 to promote exchange, learning and networking between refugee volunteers and refugee-led organizations across the region.

To support local actors in designing and conducting impactful integration projects and facilitate their evaluation, a local integration toolkit has been developed and is currently being tested in Bulgaria, Finland, Greece, Italy, Malta, Poland and Serbia by local municipalities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), national educational services, businesses and refugee-led-organizations. The results will feed into the final toolkit, expected to be launched in November.

Securing solutions for refugees and internally displaced persons

The Office collaborated with partners across Europe to address challenges faced by asylum-seekers and refugees in accessing employment opportunities. In Serbia, a memorandum of understanding signed with the Government facilitated information sessions and capacity-building initiatives, as well as joint activities to promote the economic inclusion of refugees and asylum-seekers. Furthermore, with support of UNHCR, the IKEA Foundation expanded its “skills for employment” (S4E) initiative to include a further 10 countries in Europe, providing training to refugees and strengthening their socioeconomic inclusion. Training and employment of refugees in the information technology sector was also reinforced through the signature of a memorandum of understanding with [Powercoders](#), resulting in programmes in both Italy and Switzerland. A coding day was also organized in Spain to kick-start a pilot project. To further enhance capacities on livelihoods and economic inclusion, trainings were delivered to UNHCR operations and partners in 21 countries.

Much like host community children, children who are refugees, asylum-seekers and stateless continued to face challenges in accessing education as a result of the pandemic. In response, UNHCR stepped up its advocacy with educational authorities, while targeted support for distance-learning was also provided to refugee children during school closures in Europe. The efforts included the donation of laptops and initiatives to increase connectivity and training. Digital training tools were also developed to support teachers in their work with displaced learners, while an EU-funded programme facilitated the training of university staff in working with refugee students.

Resettlement and complementary pathways continued to be severely affected by the pandemic. Despite the impediments imposed by COVID-19, UNHCR, States and other partners have continued to work to maintain resettlement processing and admissions for those who are most at risk. Several European Union Member States have adjusted their adjudication mechanisms to keep resettlement case processing active. By ensuring that resettlement remains an accessible solution, these States have continued to demonstrate their solidarity with States hosting large numbers of refugees. Further to the extension of the resettlement programme of the European Commission to a two-year period (2020-2021), UNHCR welcomes the opportunity given to Member States to pledge additional places in 2021 to raise the number of refugees resettled to the European Union this year beyond the current target of 29,500 people.

Following the European Commission’s call on European Union member States to support the relocation of unaccompanied children living in precarious conditions on the Greek islands by December 2020, 16 countries pledged a total of 1,587 places for unaccompanied children and a further 3,288 place for other vulnerable persons. As of the end of July 2021, 875 unaccompanied children had been relocated to Belgium, Bulgaria, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal and Switzerland. In addition, Belgium, France, Germany, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway and Portugal received 3,245 vulnerable individuals. UNHCR has been closely coordinating the relocation exercise with the Greek Government, the European Asylum Support Office, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF).

In support of solutions for the internally displaced, in Georgia, UNHCR continued to support the ‘humanitarian corridor’. Established in October 2020, it allows vulnerable individuals residing in Abkhazia to access pensions, benefits and allowances, and to buy essential medicines through mobile services. The end of the armed hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh in November 2020, also provided an opportunity for solutions to be identified for individuals affected by the conflict, including IDPs.

Preventing and resolving situations of statelessness

This year, which marks the sixtieth anniversary of the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, saw important headway in addressing statelessness in Europe. Sustained efforts to deliver on the commitments made at the high-level segment on statelessness, which took place during the seventieth session of UNHCR's Executive Committee, and the Global Refugee Forum brought the number of fully implemented statelessness pledges to twenty per cent in Europe.

Good progress has been made towards closing the accession gap in Europe. With Iceland's accession to both of the United Nations statelessness instruments in January 2021, the number of States in Europe that are party to the 1954 and 1961 statelessness conventions rose to 40 and 34, respectively. Important strides were also made in ensuring universal birth registration to prevent statelessness, with the European Commission adopting in March 2021, the first comprehensive "European Union strategy on the rights of the child". The strategy explicitly recognizes the special needs of stateless children and urges European Union member States to ensure access to birth registration for all children.

Despite positive developments at the mid-point of UNHCR's #IBelong Campaign, further efforts are needed to fulfil the objectives of the "Global action plan to end statelessness", particularly in the areas of the identification and protection of stateless persons and in addressing childhood statelessness. Later this year, UNHCR, in close collaboration with the Council of Europe, will hold an International Conference on Statelessness to bolster regional efforts to address issues of statelessness. A webinar on sharing good practices on statelessness among participating States from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) will also be co-hosted by the OSCE and UNHCR.

Strengthening external engagement and advocacy, and mobilizing support

In the spirit of a whole-of-society approach, partnerships were strengthened with civil society organizations, including faith-based organizations, NGOs and refugee-led organizations across Europe. A new partnership with the European Football Association (UEFA) facilitated joint advocacy activities in stadiums during EURO 2020, while strengthened coordination and complementary advocacy was pursued through regional NGO dialogues jointly organized with the European Council on Refugees and Exiles, and the International Council of Voluntary Agencies.

At the regional level, the Office was actively engaged in interagency processes, co-chairing the Issue-based Coalition on Large Movements of People, Displacement and Resilience with IOM. This resulted in the development of key advocacy messages in support of the inclusion of refugees and migrants in vaccination campaigns across the continent.

Lastly, in support of the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development, and the reform of the United Nations Development System, UNHCR worked with Resident Coordinators and United Nations country teams in support of the development of high-quality United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks and Common Country Analyses in five countries in 2021.

C. Financial information

The budget for UNHCR's activities in Europe for 2021, as approved by the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme during its seventy-first session in October 2020, amounted to \$709.3 million.

By the end of July 2021, the budget had been revised to \$694.9 million, owing to a decrease in the budget for Greece to reflect the transition of the "Emergency support to integration and accommodation" programme to the Government as of the end of December 2020.

At the subregional level, 60 per cent of the overall budget is allocated to operations in eastern Europe, which includes Turkey and Ukraine. Five per cent is allocated to south-eastern

Europe, and 31 per cent to central, northern, southern and western Europe, which includes Greece. Four per cent of the budget is allocated to region-wide activities, comprising the Regional Bureau's budget.

Of the overall budget for the region, the Syria situation represents 44 per cent and the central Mediterranean situation 18 per cent.

As of July 2021, the financial needs for Europe of \$694.9 million were 47 per cent funded, when also considering the indicative allocation of unearmarked and softly earmarked contributions, leaving a funding gap of \$365 million.
