

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Standing Committee, March 2025, Update on Europe

Chair, Distinguished Delegates,

Thank you for the opportunity to brief you on key developments in Europe.

Three years into the international armed conflict between Ukraine and the Russian Federation, and as discussions in support of lasting peace intensify, we must anchor ourselves to the stark reality that millions of ordinary Ukrainians remain in desperate need of humanitarian aid. As part of the broader interagency response, UNHCR has reached more than 4 million people inside Ukraine to date, striving throughout for impact and efficiency. Our operational presence has been reoriented as close as possible to the frontline, local partnerships and procurement prioritized, and all efforts designed to strengthen national systems and services for Ukraine's broader recovery.

Beyond Ukraine's borders, the desire to return home continues to burn strong amongst most refugees, but the sheer scale of destruction, insecurity and lack of jobs continues to impede their path. As European states continue to 'step up' to protect and include Ukrainian refugees across the continent, UNHCR has responded by scaling back its operational presence and budgetary requirements, while working with governments, civil society and the private sector to support refugee inclusion. UNHCR's strong engagement with the Government of Ukraine, host governments and the European Union around solutions for Ukrainian refugees also continues, seeking to ensure that refugees, particularly the most vulnerable, have the information and support they require to plan their future. At the same time, UNHCR continues to bolster its operational readiness to support large-scale voluntary refugee returns should the security situation inside Ukraine evolve positively.

Recently concluded evaluations have attested to the quality and effectiveness of UNHCR's humanitarian response inside Ukraine and in neighboring countries, mirroring the positive conclusions of recent audits. I extend my appreciation to our dedicated partners and UNHCR staff who have worked tirelessly to deliver to high standards, often in the most difficult and dangerous conditions.

The current funding situation however threatens this response, in Ukraine, and across the region. In Ukraine, reduced funding is hampering the emergency response, leaving us unable to meet the immediate needs of **tens of thousands** of people in the aftermath of attacks. In Moldova, where 80% of refugees are women and children, UNHCR is reducing cash assistance to the most vulnerable – people living with disabilities, older people, single-parent households – by 25% as of April, as we simply cannot afford to maintain this vital assistance. I would like to convey my sincere thanks to the many states which have stepped up to support UNHCR, in Europe and beyond, with early and unearmarked contributions, including Denmark, Finland, Germany Norway, Spain and Sweden, as well as those which have increased their support this year, such as Croatia, Lithuania and the Netherlands.

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At the end of 2024, developments inside Syria sparked hope amongst refugees across Europe. However, after 14 years of conflict - amidst a fragile transition as highlighted by recent tragic events - Syrians abroad face difficult decisions when considering their return home. The continued protection of Syrian refugees across Europe, along with support to ensure that any returns are well-informed, and voluntary remains essential. Meanwhile, UNHCR is using its existing systems and networks to strengthen its support to Syrian refugees across Europe. Through community outreach and two-way communication, we are providing accurate and timely information, offering practical guidance and empowering Syrian refugees to make informed choices. The results of the ongoing intentions surveys targeting Syrian refugees across Europe will further hone our efforts.

Meanwhile, we continue to emphasize the important role that "go-and-see" visits play in the decisions of refugees to voluntarily return and call on states across Europe to support such visits - including, with clear guidance on how refugees can undertake these visits without jeopardizing their legal status. I take this opportunity to appreciate Türkiye – generous host over 2.8 million Syrians – which continues to provide vital protection to Syrian nationals, while permitting short-term visits to Syria in support of informed return decisions.

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As Europe continues to grapple with the challenges presented by irregular and mixed population movements, UNHCR's support to member states and the European Commission in preparing for the implementation of the Pact on Migration and Asylum continues. The Pact, if implemented effectively, offers a concrete opportunity to ensure access to asylum for those in need, while strengthening the management of mixed movements and the return of rejected asylum-seekers.

At the same time, more can be done to facilitate much needed, and mutually beneficial, labour mobility. Working with UN partners, notably IOM, opportunities exist for European countries to leverage the skills of people on the move to benefit economies facing labour shortages, while providing alternatives to dangerous journeys. These efforts, complemented by those seeking to include asylum-seekers and refugees where they are as foreseen by the Route-Based Approach, have the potential to improve the management of mixed movements.

As the European Union looks to the revision of its Return Framework, UNHCR emphasizes the important role that the prompt return of individuals found not to need international protection plays in preserving the credibility of asylum systems. However, voluntary return complemented by reintegration assistance should continue to be the preferred approach. Alternatives to pre-removal detention should be prioritized and vulnerable groups, particularly children, never detained.

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Important efforts continue across the region to prevent and reduce statelessness. Notably, the Slovenian Parliament's recent ratification of the 1961 Convention is a significant step forward in reducing statelessness. Furthermore, the growing momentum behind the Global Alliance, evidenced by the commitments from many states in Europe, alongside the crucial support of the Council of Europe, the OSCE, and civil society organizations, is a testament to the collective will to end statelessness in Europe.

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In closing, as humanitarian funding struggles to keep pace with the size and scale of the needs generated by rising levels of global forced displacement, our focus across Europe continues to be on maximizing the impact, efficiency and cost effectiveness of our work. Across Europe, in 2024 UNHCR reached 1.6 million people with services and support, while continuing to critically review operational and administrative costs to direct maximum resources to support for those we work with and for. These efforts will be expanded in 2025 and will include the analysis of UNHCR's field presence across the region.

Thank you for your attention.