

Field Unit Kharkiv



Introduction

UNHCR established a Field Office (FO) in Kharkiv in **October 2014** due to the city's proximity to the conflict area and the large presence of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Kharkiv region. In June 2017, the office was split with some staff moving to Sloviansk to cover the northern area of Donetsk region (previously covered by FO Kharkiv). A smaller part of the team remained in Kharkiv as a Field Unit (FU) composed of three staff members and covering Kharkiv region. FU Kharkiv is working with three categories of persons of concern, namely asylum seekers/refugees, stateless persons/persons at risk of statelessness, and IDPs.

Kharkiv region has a high concentration of IDPs due to its close proximity to the line of contact. According to the Ministry of Social Policy, there are currently some **122,932 IDPs** registered as living within Kharkiv region. Most IDPs in Kharkiv arrived in three waves: first, from March to July 2014; second, from August to December 2014; and finally from January to February 2015. There are frequent movements of people to and from the non-government controlled areas for family, economic and property reasons; as a result, new arrivals are still registered both by the FU and the local Department of Social Protection.

Some IDPs whose homes remain intact are considering returning to their place of origin as they face difficulties finding employment and housing in places of displacement such as Kharkiv and are practically left with no means for survival. UNHCR partners report that the number of persons returning to their places of origin because they cannot afford to stay in safe areas is growing. Delays with the reinstatement of social payments and pensions, as well as the address verification procedure are ongoing concerns placing many IDPs at risk of destitution and harmful coping strategies. During the cold winter months, many IDPs are in urgent need of winterization assistance, including solid fuel, winter clothing, heaters and assistance with covering the cost of utilities. Kharkiv region is also a place where many asylum seekers and refugees reside. As the second largest city in Ukraine located close to the Russian border (40 km), with a sizeable population of international students, Kharkiv has a large presence of refugees and asylum seekers who often struggle for support, assistance, and durable solutions.

For asylum seekers, challenges are compounded by very low recognition rates, discrimination and no assistance from state institutions.

In addition to the above mentioned groups, Kharkiv region hosts groups of the Roma ethnic minority; many of them are stateless (or at risk of statelessness) and/or displaced from the conflict area. Many of them are having difficulty accessing civil documentation, particularly as this population group is extremely marginalized and has very limited access to resources, employment, and self-reliance opportunities.

Protection

UNHCR, together with key partners and local community-based organizations, works on a variety of essential protection interventions and initiatives. These encompass regular monitoring of protection practice and policies, community-based outreach, provision of support to community-based organizations and local civil society, local advocacy as well as coordination of other protection activities in Kharkiv region.

UNHCR's protection response includes **legal counseling and assistance, access to information and documentation**, provision of **social counseling and individual case management** for people with special needs, **gender-based violence prevention and response programmes**, support to **community-based initiatives** to boost social cohesion and forge peaceful coexistence. UNHCR conducts capacity-building work with local civil society organizations in Kharkiv. UNHCR supported the opening or enhancement of one-stop-shop IDP community centres in Kharkiv, Izyum, Kupyansk-Vuzlovyyi, Barvinkove, and Balakliya.

Currently, in its fourth year of presence in Kharkiv, the office has shifted its focus to building the capacity of local organizations and state institutions enabling them to assist IDPs living in vulnerable situations in the region. At the same time and in cooperation with its partners, UNHCR aims to reach out to the local State Migration Service (SMS), the State Border Guard Service (SBGS), and the judicial system in order to enhance their capacity and to improve the treatment and protection of rights of asylum seekers and refugees. Additionally, in 2018 UNHCR has started work to address statelessness and find solutions for populations lacking identity documents.

As per the new UNHCR 'Multi-Year, Multi-Partner Protection and Solutions Strategy', UNHCR Kharkiv FU is strengthening its work with Free Legal Aid Centres (FLAC) of the Ministry of Justice, so that they can provide the necessary legal assistance to IDPs, asylum seekers, refugees and stateless population in the future.

The Field Unit engages with universities to establish good working relationships and introduce refugee and international humanitarian law courses for law students. Current cooperation also includes roundtables, discussions, conferences, and movie clubs where UNHCR, partners, professors, students, state representatives, and the public can discuss the latest issues and challenges on the protection and rights of displaced persons.

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