

NGO Statement on Europe

Dear Chair,

This statement was drafted through a wide consultation with NGOs and reflects a diversity of views.

Last month marked one year since the escalation of the international armed conflict in Ukraine, an event which has had a profound and enduring impact on Europe and around the world. The humanitarian toll of this conflict has been grave, with more than [5.3 million people displaced from their homes](#) inside Ukraine and nearly [8 million refugees from Ukraine](#) recorded across Europe. These figures represent nearly one-third of the pre-conflict population being forcibly displaced, in addition to thousands of deaths and untold destruction of Ukraine's civilian infrastructure.

With the prospect of war at their borders, European States have simultaneously grappled with questions around security, energy, and economic implications, whilst quickly mobilising to address an unfolding humanitarian crisis. The resulting response has been effective and proactive, with UNHCR, Member States, and NGOs allocating capacity and resources to meet humanitarian needs.

We as NGOs commend UNHCR and States' swift and decisive actions at the onset of the conflict, both regarding the refugee response and the humanitarian scale-up inside Ukraine. Activating the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) for the first time was a historic step which allowed Ukrainian refugees access to status and rights in EU Member States. UNHCR and NGOs' advocacy with governments to facilitate safe passage for asylum seekers and offer immediate legal protections has also been an encouraging show of solidarity with displaced people. Additionally, negotiating the Black Sea Grain Initiative was an important diplomatic achievement for both States and UNHCR, in the face of a deepening global food security crisis.

Looking ahead, we propose four key recommendations to UNHCR and Member States aimed at extending the many good practices implemented for Ukraine to *all* people experiencing forced displacement or seeking international protection.

Recommendation 1: Ensure sustained support for people affected by the Ukraine conflict.

We encourage States and UNHCR to sustain their support to people displaced by the conflict as long as needs persist. This includes investing in integration opportunities and continued advocacy for protections and solutions where necessary, beyond the expiration of TPD next year. The "integration from day one" approach that TPD enabled now must evolve to ensure sustainable economic and social inclusion, with a particular focus on labour and housing market challenges. Responses must also address vulnerable host communities in neighbouring countries, where people are feeling the effects of the conflict too.

Appropriate resourcing of domestic refugee hosting costs must not come at the expense of the aid budget for other displacement crises.

The facilitation of UNHCR partnerships will continue to be critical to sustain this solidarity. Yet, these are not always accessible for NGOs, especially smaller organisations. The Ukraine response has yielded important lessons, affording an opportunity for UNHCR and NGOs to develop a more effective partnership framework. Several challenges have at times hindered NGOs' ability to operate efficiently, such as siloed approaches in Ukraine's neighbouring countries and cumbersome, top-down partnership requirements that have limited the ability for funds to reach partners, particularly local NGOs leading the first response. National and local organisations have also called for increased and systematic provision for multilingual communication, especially in coordination fora and funding processes, to support their meaningful engagement with the international response.

We recommend developing a leaner process for partnership in acute emergencies, one that aligns with partners' abilities to absorb risk and better support locally-led initiatives, and we welcome further dialogue with UNHCR and donors on how to operationalise this. This could be achieved through convening a taskforce where I/NGOs outline practical commitments donors should adopt to guarantee that partners are [adequately resourced with quality funding](#) to work safely and in a principled way – particularly resourcing to cover necessary institutional development and overhead costs.

Recommendation 2: Uphold human rights law for all refugees, migrants, stateless people, and asylum seekers seeking international protection in Europe.

Over the same period in which such great assistance was offered to Ukrainians, European States have not offered the same unconditional protections to people from elsewhere in the world. More than two years since the [New Pact on Migration and Asylum](#) was unveiled, negotiations remain ongoing as political will wavers. Meanwhile, people seeking protection in Europe continue facing an opaque and under-resourced asylum system, alongside violations of their rights through pushbacks, indeterminate detention, and abuse at border crossings. Even [non-Ukrainians](#) who were seeking refuge in Ukraine prior to the war have found themselves facing unequal treatment and [unable](#) to access status, documents or basic services in Europe.

In place of tangible progress, 2022 instead saw another [2,023 dead and missing](#) people from attempted Mediterranean crossings, whilst States at Europe's external borders imposed further measures against NGOs, effectively preventing humanitarians from saving lives. This includes the [Italian government's new legislation](#) aimed at curtailing search-and-rescue missions, forcing NGOs to choose between leaving people stranded at sea or risking hefty fines and impoundment of vessels. Likewise in Greece, recent attempts to put [humanitarian search-and-rescue workers on trial](#) is a concerning step towards criminalising lifesaving aid.

A humanitarian crisis continues at the Polish-Belarusian border; in 2022 NGOs providing lifesaving assistance received requests for help from 6,022 people, including at least 396 requests concerning children. Non-Ukrainian refugees and asylum seekers continue being pushed back to Belarus where they are at risk of torture, imprisonment, and sexual violence.

States continue seeking ways to externalise protection responsibilities by offshoring asylum procedures, relying on pushbacks and detention facilities in transit countries like Libya and Turkey, or using the 'safe third country' concept as a pretext to return people without appropriate safeguards. Outside the EU, the UK government's policy to outsource its asylum obligations to Rwanda – although [currently facing legal challenge](#) – also sets a dangerous precedent.

NGOs call on States to respect their obligations under the Refugee Convention and their commitments under the Global Compact on Refugees. Recalling our [core recommendations](#) to European governments made in the last Standing Committee, we reiterate:

1. Ensure fair access to territory and asylum for people seeking international protection, no matter the circumstances and without undue restrictions.
2. Ensure humane and effective reception systems in Europe, which respect people's dignity, end *de facto* detention, and address human rights violations at borders.
3. Take urgent action to address deaths and pushbacks in the Mediterranean and Eastern Europe. End restrictions, criminalisation, and punitive measures against NGO search-and-rescue operations.
4. Expand opportunities for safe pathways, including resettlement, family reunification, private sponsorship, work and study visas, and other complementary pathways to access protection in Europe. States should allocate more resources to ensure efficient asylum processing and access to rights and services for people while they await the outcome of their cases.
5. Invest in refugees' and stateless people's integration and inclusion.
6. Enact robust safeguards and human rights thresholds for third countries that partner with European states on asylum – whilst simultaneously aiming to minimise and ultimately end the externalisation of European states' protection responsibilities to third countries.

Recommendation 3: Demonstrate stronger humanitarian leadership in the world's most severe crises.

Needs are growing, both in scale and severity, in many crises around the world. In 2022, we saw forced displacement reaching unprecedented levels, multiple disease outbreaks including cholera and Ebola, and emergence of [“the largest global food crisis in modern history”](#). Beyond Europe's borders, people are grappling not only with material impacts of the Ukraine conflict such as food shortages and soaring prices, but also decreased attention and resources as conditions have worsened – for example famine projection in the Horn of Africa, as well as deteriorating conditions in Haiti, Central Sahel, and Afghanistan, to name only a few.

In light of these alarming trends, NGOs call for evidence-based prioritisation and allocation of humanitarian funding, to ensure adequate resourcing of responses according to level of need rather than where political will necessitates. We urge the EU and individual States, in their capacity as aid donors, to deliver lifesaving support to the world's most vulnerable people. People should not be forgotten simply because they are not in close proximity to donor countries.

Recommendation 4: Strengthen efforts to address statelessness.

There are estimated to be over half a million stateless people in Europe today, often living in the margins of society and denied access to their fundamental rights. NGOs are concerned by the absence of an adequate policy response by European States, most of whom lack dedicated procedures to enable the identification and protection of stateless people on their territory. Equally, some children born in Europe to migrant or refugee parents are currently exposed to a risk of statelessness due to a combination of narrow and constraining nationality laws, a lack of safeguards against childhood statelessness in said nationality laws, or a lack of birth registration or gaps in practice in their country of origin.

NGOs call on European States to implement their international obligations to ensure that all stateless children born on their territory acquire a nationality. This and next year offer a pivotal window to garner momentum towards meeting UNHCR's #IBelong campaign objectives to eradicate statelessness by 2024, including critically to implement the 40 statelessness-related pledges made by European states at the 2019 High-Level Segment on Statelessness, which were subsequently incorporated in the Global Refugee

Forum (GRF) outcome document and follow-up mechanisms. The upcoming GRF in December provides a timely opportunity to review the progress with the implementation of these pledges.

Conclusion

European action and leadership on refugee resettlement, protection, and integration, as well as fair and equitable humanitarian response, remains critical. As [noted by the High Commissioner](#), Ukraine has shown “Europe’s capacity for an organised and workable approach to asylum – one that benefits states and safeguards the rights of refugees.”

The solidarity Europe has shown to Ukrainians should now be the new benchmark of solidarity extended to everyone who needs lifesaving support. We urge States to:

1. Maintain urgent assistance to people forcibly displaced from Ukraine as long as needs are present,
2. Offer aid and legal support to all displaced and stateless people seeking protection in Europe,
3. Show leadership outside Europe’s borders in all crises where urgent needs exist,
4. Demonstrate greater urgency in addressing statelessness.

Thank you.