UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

PROTECTION FROM SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

Ukraine Emergency Response

Thematic update (March 2023)

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Contact us:
UNHCR Regional Bureau for Europe
Email: rbeext@unhcr.org

Safeguarding and protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) are key priorities for UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, in the Ukraine emergency response.

The Ukraine situation is one of the largest forced displacement crises in the world today, with more than 8 million refugees across Europe. The emergency is characterized by a number of heightened risk factors, such as a high incidence of family separation, and of women and children travelling alone, as well as a wide range of new actors involved in the response, many of whom have limited experience and capacity on PSEA.

Separated and unaccompanied children, persons with disabilities, LGBTIQ+ persons, and members of the Roma community are considered to be at particular risk of SEA.

In 2023, the risks of SEA are expected to increase due to the increasing socio-economic difficulties facing refugees in neighbouring countries and the dwindling support from host communities, and humanitarian actors. As the emergency enters into its second year, it is therefore essential to maintain collective efforts to safeguard refugees from sexual exploitation and abuse.

This note outlines the ongoing and planned efforts by UNHCR and partners to prevent, mitigate risk of, and to respond to, SEA in Ukraine and refugee hosting countries.

Key achievements in 2022

4,500
humanitarian workers trained on PSEA in Ukraine and neighbouring countries

1.7M
reached through the Stay Safe campaign on social media

46,000
refugees reached through community outreach on PSEA.

37
risk assessments conducted in Ukraine and neighbouring countries

5
Interagency Action Plans on PSEA developed

170
humanitarian organisations actively engaged in the PSEA Networks

PSEA
mainstreamed into the Regional Refugee Response Plan

Interagency coordination

In the countries neighbouring Ukraine, UNHCR has taken the lead in establishing and coordinating **National PSEA Networks**.

The PSEA Networks are co-chaired with VOICE in Hungary, Plan International, WHO and UNICEF in Moldova, Fundacja Dajemy Dzieciom Siłę and Plan International in Poland, Terre des Hommes in Romania, and the Slovak National Centre for Human Rights in Slovakia. A PSEA Network was also recently launched in Bulgaria, co-chaired by UNHCR and UNICEF.

These networks spearhead and maintain oversight of collective PSEA efforts, in line with **National PSEA Action Plans**, bringing together more than 170 members, such as UN agencies, national and international NGOs, refugee-led and community-based organisations, and, in some countries, government actors.

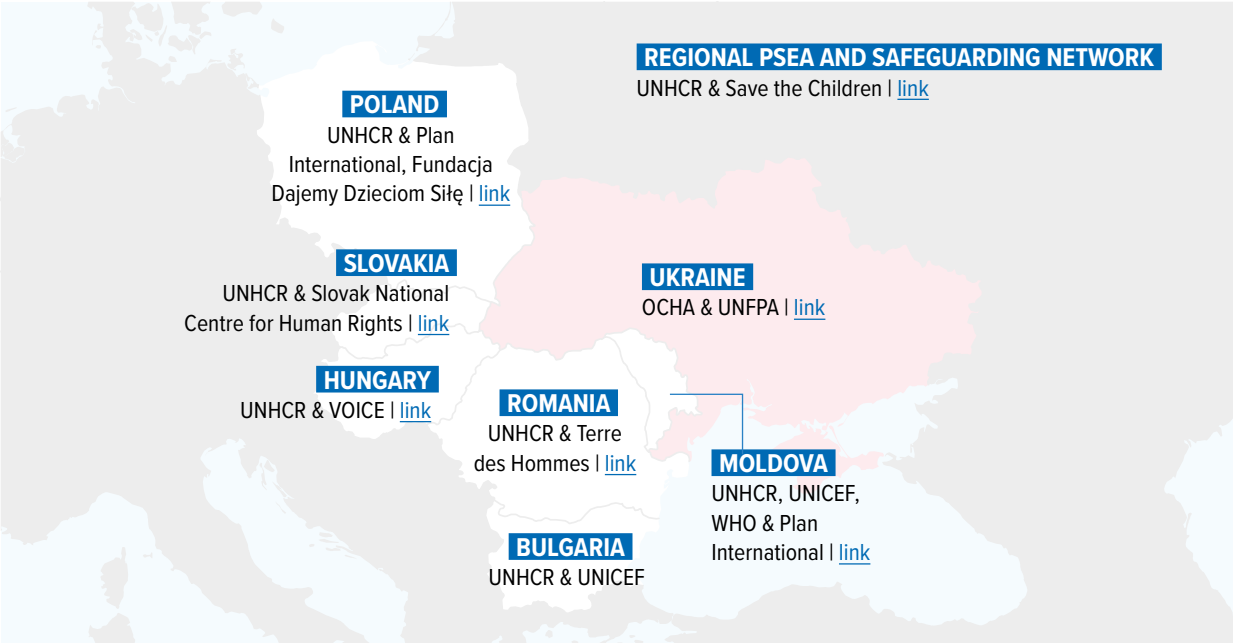
In 2022, the networks have contextualized, translated and rolled out the IASC Saying No to Sexual Misconduct learning package, coordinated partner capacity assessments and capacity strengthening plans, and advanced PSEA mainstreaming across all sectors of the response.

In addition, UNHCR co-leads a Regional PSEA and Safeguarding Network with Save the Children, which offers support to the National PSEA Networks, and ensures exchange and learning across country operations and organisations.

UNHCR PSEA specialists were deployed to neighbouring countries from the very onset of the emergency, later replaced by dedicated PSEA Coordinators (recruited by UNHCR) in the five main response countries, ensuring sustained PSEA technical capacity on the ground.

Inside Ukraine, UNHCR scaled up PSEA efforts through the creation of a Senior Protection Officer (PSEA) position, the establishment of an internal PSEA Working Group composed of 16 PSEA focal points, and an internal UNHCR PSEA Action Plan focusing on: (i) capacity building; (ii) awareness raising; (iii) risk assessment and (iv) interagency coordination.

PSEA NETWORK CO-CHAIRS AND WEBPAGES



SEA risk assessments

A number of risk assessments relevant to SEA were conducted by UNHCR and its partners in refugee hosting countries in 2022, including:

- **Initial SEA risk assessments** by the PSEA Networks in Romania and Poland (April and June 2022);
- **GBV Safety Audits** by UNHCR and its partners in 14 locations in Moldova (April 2022);
- Rapid Risk Assessment in Cash and Voucher Assistance by UNFPA and UNHCR (October 2022).

Inside Ukraine, efforts were also made to mainstream PSEA risk assessments within surveys, needs assessments and other data collection exercises conducted by UNHCR, clusters or interagency groups, including in the safety audits conducted by UNHCR and partners in 47 collective centres and in UNHCR's participatory assessment exercise. UNHCR also actively contributes to the PSEA Network, co-chaired by UNFPA and OCHA.

A more **comprehensive inter-agency SEA Risk Assessment** is underway in Moldova with the technical and financial support of IOM, Plan International, UNHCR, and WHO, which is expected to be finalized by June 2023.

Joint GBV/SEA risk assessments are also ongoing by UNHCR and its partners in Hungary and Poland to assess the risks to refugees living in collective accommodation and other types of housing.

Some of the **main findings** from risk assessments in different countries include:

- Difficult to know who to trust, what offers of support are genuine, and what information is accurate;
- Extensive reliance on (largely unregulated) online platforms to find housing and work;
- Security concerns at some border crossing points, train and bus stations;
- Lack of privacy and safety in some reception and accommodation sites;
- Fear among refugee communities related to pre-existing trafficking and other criminal networks;
- Concerns about the effectiveness and confidentiality when reporting sexual crimes to the police, including due to local legal frameworks and language barriers;
- Risks associated with volunteers and other actors with limited experience in humanitarian work;
- Rapid expansion and turnover of humanitarian staff, which could compromise basic safeguarding and training;
- Lack of accessible and culturally appropriate communication material, including for youth, persons with disabilities and minority groups.
- Lack of clarity on how and where to report concerns.

Risk assessments are used to inform the PSEA Action Plans and risk mitigation efforts at country level. (available online at Hungary, Moldova, Poland, Romania and Slovakia)

Awareness raising and information to communities

UNHCR and partners are maintaining a monitoring presence at UNHCR/UNICEF **Blue Dot Safe Space, Protection and Support Hubs**, border crossing points, accommodation centres, and other areas frequented by refugees from Ukraine. PSEA posters have been disseminated and leaflets are distributed to raise awareness on the risk of SEA and where to go for support.

As the majority of refugees from Ukraine seek information online and on digital platforms:

- A Stay Safe campaign was rolled out by UNHCR across the region to raise awareness about the various risks facing refugees, including of SEA, and the practical measures to mitigate these, reaching some 1.7 million people.
- PSEA messages were included on UNHCR Help pages, which have close to 10 million views since February 2022, and the Digital Blue Dot platform, managed jointly by UNHCR and UNICEF.
- A pilot project was launched in Hungary to enhance refugees' capacity to self-protect online (see text box on next page).

The Stay Safe campaign has also been contextualized and rolled-out at country level. For example:

- In Moldova, the Stay Safe messages were **adapted by refugees** and distributed to more than 1,400 refugees over ten days. The number of calls to the Moldova hotline increased by 100 calls per day the week after this campaign.
- In Romania, awareness-raising material is disseminated through the **UNHCR Telegram channel** and **audio-visual** Stay Safe-material is projected at the reception in RomExpo, a service hub receiving up to 600 individuals per day.
- In Hungary, **Stay Safe flyers are included in hygiene kits** distributed by UNHCR and refugee-led organizations, and signposting to online information on PSEA is included in all information material which is posted or distributed.
- In Poland, more than **500 PSEA awareness raising posters** were printed in Polish, Ukrainian and Russian and widely distributed to operational partners and members of the PSEA Network.
- In Ukraine, UNHCR and partners printed **2,200 posters and 5,000 leaflets** to raise awareness on feedback and reporting channels.
- Cards with key messages on PSEA are distributed together with **cash and non-food items** in several countries.

Mitigating online risks for refugees

Online platforms such as Facebook groups and Telegram channels have become primary connectors for refugees from Ukraine who are seeking assistance, accommodation, transportation, jobs, or sponsorships. Refugee children and their families are also turning to digital solutions more than ever to support children's learning, socialization and play.

While many online initiatives are well-meaning, accessible and in high demand, there are often limited features to ensure safeguarding, privacy, and vetting of individuals or organizations offering help. UNHCR's pilot project in Hungary aims at enhancing refugees' capacity and skills to self-protect in the online space, and to easier detect and flag malicious content and exploring strategies to strengthen safeguards adopted by online platforms when moderating posts and vetting content.

Training and capacity building

More than 4,500 frontline responders in Ukraine and the neighbouring countries, including government civil servants, border guards, police and volunteers, across the region have undergone training by UNHCR and partners on PSEA.

A few examples include:

- A series of online **workshops for local NGOs, refugee-led organisations and local authorities** in Slovakia, organized by the Human Rights League, IFRC, IOM, UNHCR, UNICEF and WHO to bring about a common understanding of PSEA in a context where the topic was largely unknown and culturally sensitive.
- A full-day training for 35 managers of **Refugee Accommodation Centres** in Moldova on PSEA, safeguarding and protection principles, coordinated by the PSEA Network together with the Child Protection and GBV Sub-Sectors, and the Protection Sector Working Group.
- Joint GBV-PSEA trainings targeting partners, local **NGOs and medical services providers in border areas** by IOM, UNHCR and WHO in Poland, coordinated under the umbrella of the PSEA Network.
- Contextualized training for **staff and volunteers at Help Points** near the border in Hungary.
- PSEA training by IOM, Plan International, UNFPA, UNHCR, and WHO to over 500 frontline staff in Moldova.
- Four **Trainings of Trainers** by UNHCR and UNICEF in Romania for 700 UN, government and NGO staff.
- UNHCR Ukraine provided in-person and online sessions of the IASC PSEA training package in both Ukrainian and English to 1,151 staff of more than 110 humanitarian partners.

At regional level, UNHCR trained over 70 UNHCR and partner staff from six countries on **investigating SEA allegations**, and made available a revised version of the self-paced **eLearning for UN partners** on SEA investigations.

The Emergency Inter-Agency Referrals Package in Moldova

The Gender-Based Violence and Child Protection Sub-Working Groups in Moldova have developed localized referral pathways for the Northern, Central, and Southern regions of the country. These pathways highlight local capacity by national NGOs and government authorities and provide specialized guidance to aid workers and organizations involved in the delivery of protection services and case management. The available services have been also integrated into the Services Advisor platform to enhance access to services for refugees. The Moldova PSEA Inter-Agency SOP integrate the inter-agency referral pathways for assisting survivors of SEA, providing clear guidance for aid workers on safely referring survivors to existing services and resources.

Victims' assistance

Service mappings and the establishment of **referral pathways for victim's assistance** have been undertaken in all neighbouring countries to ensure assistance is in line with a victim-centred approach. These efforts are conducted in close collaboration with GBV Sub Working Groups and/or GBV actors at national level, building on and reinforcing existing capacities of NGOs, women-led organisations and national service providers.

In Moldova, for example, an **Emergency Inter-Agency Referral Package on SEA** was developed, including a guidance note on protection response to ensure a consistent and victim centered approach, accompanied by a directory of service providers, and a standard inter-agency referral form. A workshop for all PSEA Network members was conducted in November 2022 on the new Standard Operating Procedures for PSEA which detail the roles and responsibilities of actors and timelines for actions responding to SEA allegations, including by providing assistance to victims and referring cases for investigations.

‘Sme Spolu’ Community Outreach and Communication Project

In 2022, the refugee-led organization ‘Sme Spolu’ (‘We are together’) in Slovakia developed culturally sensitive PSEA messages which were integrated into broader dialogues with refugees regarding safety and protection issues. Around 11,600 refugees and 124 staff and volunteers were reached through this project. After Sme Spolu presented their project at the PSEA Task Force, other organizations reached out to get their support for their own awareness raising activities.

The project was funded by the Interagency Community Outreach and Communication Fund managed by the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) and UNHCR.

Complaints and feedback mechanisms

Efforts are ongoing to enhance and expand the **range of feedback and complaints mechanisms available to refugees**, in line with their communication preferences and needs. A few examples of digital and online channels include:

- A feedback tool for mobile phones (accessed through a QR code) in Hungary, Poland and Romania;
- Telegram channels in Hungary, Romania and Slovakia;
- Online complaints forms, such as the Digital Blue Dot platform managed jointly by UNHCR and UNICEF.

SEA related concerns and incidents can also be reported in person or over the phone, for example through:

- The Helpline for Refugees managed by UNICEF and UNHCR in Slovakia;
- The **Refugee Response Green Line** managed by UNHCR in Moldova;
- The **24/7 Hotlines** managed by UNHCR in Romania and by UNHCR’s partner Donbas SOS in Ukraine;
- The **Regional Contact Centre** launched by UNHCR**,** currently operational in Hungary and Poland.

All hotline operators have been trained on how to provide information and ensure safe referral of victims to services, as well as reporting of allegations to UNHCR’s Inspector General’s Office.

Engagement with and support to affected people

PSEA efforts across the region are informed by the views, priorities and capacities of persons fleeing Ukraine. **Focus group discussions** have been conducted in all neighbouring countries, to determine the risks and recommendations from the perspective of the community, including on the preferred communication channels, and barriers to seeking support or reporting incidents. In Moldova, UNHCR and Internews have also conducted an Information Ecosystem Assessment which covered issues of access to complaint channels and attitude of services providers towards displaced populations.

Safeguarding, vetting and registration of volunteers

The Ukraine refugee response has seen an extraordinary outpouring of solidarity, with volunteers, private companies and local citizens stepping up to help refugees fleeing from Ukraine, including by offering free transportation, accommodation, interpretation services, or help in accessing services or finding work. Volunteers have been at the frontline of the emergency response, filling critical gaps and at times providing lifesaving support.

To ensure safeguarding and protection against SEA in this context, a Guidance on Vetting and Registration of Volunteers and Volunteer Organisations was issued under the umbrella of the Regional Protection Working Group, with concrete recommendations for hosting States and humanitarian actors. The recommendations include practical advice, such as the requirement of all volunteers to carry a visible ID and receive regular briefings and training, as well as the need for background checks, oversight and reporting mechanisms.

A **"Dos and Don'ts" leaflet for volunteers** has been disseminated and used for capacity building with volunteers, building on UNHCR's previous work with volunteers in other contexts, such as in Spain and Lebanon.

In Hungary, the PSEA Task Force developed and translated a **Volunteer Undertaking**, and **Code of Conduct** for volunteers to sign, as well as a leaflet with **11 Key Safeguarding Messages** which was translated and disseminated in various languages.

Key priorities for 2023

Recognizing the tremendous PSEA efforts since the beginning of the emergency, a number of challenges remain and will require dedicated efforts as the response enters into its second year.

Key priorities for UNHCR and its partners in 2023 will include:

- **Continued capacity building and training efforts** covering the full spectrum of actors involved in the response, including UN organisations, international and national NGOs, volunteers, and government authorities.
- **Reinforced awareness raising and engagement with displaced communities**, adapted to the changing operational context, and with additional child friendly messages and material adapted to persons with disabilities.
- **Enhanced support and capacity building for national actors and NGOs**, as well as refugee-led and community-based organisations, including on safe recruitment procedures, feedback and complaints mechanisms, the victim centred approach, and SEA investigations.
- **UNHCR will also facilitate regional learning, exchange and documentation of promising practices** across organisations and countries under the umbrella of the Regional PSEA and Safeguarding Network.

UNHCR Regional Bureau for Europe
rbeext@unhcr.org
www.unhcr.org/europe