

Broadening the Ukraine refugee response: the EU and Member States must commit to the protection of all refugees and properly support civil society under pressure

Open letter to

- The European Commissioner for Home Affairs Ms Ylva Johansson
- The Czech Minister of Interior Mr Vít Rakušan

As organisations supporting and advocating for the rights of refugees and asylum seekers – many of us refugees ourselves -, we welcome the initial EU response to Ukraine, but demand equal treatment of all refugees and reinvigorated support for civil society doing the hard yards to welcome and include people seeking protection.

This year, more than one million people fleeing Ukraine crossed EU borders in one week alone. States, civil society and ordinary citizens stepped up with open arms, while the EU institutions triggered EU legislation to provide for their protection. The experience exposes both Europe's potential as a champion of refugee protection and the deep inequities that underpin European asylum policies. Many people in need of protection arriving at EU borders face pushbacks, detention, long queues for asylum procedures, and increasingly discriminatory and unfair laws governing their right to apply for asylum. International protection should be based on need - independent of origin, religion, ethnicity, orientation of the persons concerned – as it is laid down in international and EU legislation. We view the open arms and doors for Ukrainians as a future commitment for the hospitality we must show to all refugees, wherever they may come from.

The Ukraine response represents an opportunity not only to “raise the bar” for refugee protection in Europe, but also to recognise and support the critical work done at the grassroots to welcome refugees. The solidarity shown by civil societies and communities has been immense.

Yet, more than four months into the crisis, the organisations, groups, volunteers and even municipalities that have welcomed refugees are exhausted and coming up against practical and financial limitations that often make their hospitality untenable. As the cost of living crisis hits households, public opinion and attitudes to refugees risk turning negative.

To address these two challenges – of the inequity between asylum seekers and the growing unsustainability of the civil society-led response – immediate action is needed:

- States must **comply with existing international and EU law on asylum and reception** and uphold the human rights of all persons in need of protection, regardless of origin
- **Governments must invest in well-resourced reception and asylum systems** (as laid down in the relevant EU legislation) and take ultimate responsibility for reception conditions
- Must **adequately resource private hosts, civil society organisations and local governments** that play a critical role in refugee reception and inclusion
- The European Commission must **enable the disbursement of EU funds to on-the-ground actors**, instead of relying exclusively on national structures which often have only limited experience in refugee reception and integration
- The EU and member states must ensure **regular, transparent, and meaningful exchange with civil society actors** on the operational challenges of ensuring refugee reception and inclusion. This might involve the creation of new platforms, or the expansion of existing tools (e.g. the Solidarity Platform).

Through such steps, the response to refugees from Ukraine can be a success story for the EU's aspirations as a human-rights respecting and protecting union. If Europe hopes to respond with

resilience to future crises, those working at the coalface of refugee protection and inclusion but be listened to and supported.

SIGNATORIES:

Amnesty international EU office

Association for Legal Intervention Poland

AsyLex

CCME Churches Commission for Migrants in Europe

Child Circle

CIR Consiglio Italiano per i Rifugiati/Italian Council for Refugees

Convocation of Episcopal Churches in Europe

Danish Refugee Council (DRC)

Dutch Council for Refugees

European Network on statelessness

Federazione delle Chiese Evangeliche in Italia FCEI

Forum réfugiés, France

Greek Forum of Refugees

HIAS Europe

ILGA-Europe

Interkulturelles Entwicklungs-Zentrum (Intercultural Development Center) Austria

IRC International Rescue Committee

Kids in Need of Defense (KIND) Europe

Latvian Centre for Human Rights

Mosaico-azioni per i rifugiati Italy

Norwegian Refugee Council

PIC – Pravni center za varstvo človekovih pravic in okolja (Legal centre for the protection of human rights and the environment) Slovenia

Red Acoge Spain

Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen