

## Protection of asylum-seekers and refugees with specific needs

*Event co-organized jointly by  
UNHCR and the Council of Europe*

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Madrid, Spain

Good morning

- Thank you for the opportunity you gave me to say a few words at the opening of this event on the protection of asylum-seekers and refugees with special needs.
- In my capacity as Special Representative of the Secretary General for Migration and Refugees, this issue is at the core of my work.
- As part of my mandate, I am indeed coordinating the implementation of a five-year Programme of [Action on the Protection of Vulnerable Persons in the Context of Migration and Asylum](#). To this end, I work hand in hand with many Council of Europe sectors, which I am pleased to see represented in the programme of this event.
- People have always migrated to seek freedom from war and conflict, to escape hunger and poverty, to flee from religious intolerance or political repression. This is not going to stop. It is also predicted that climate change is likely to increase migration.
- Dangerous journeys, exposure to abuse, exploitation and trafficking also contribute to the vulnerability of those seeking protection. This is all the more the case when the asylum seeker is an unaccompanied child, a woman victim of sexual exploitation, an LGBTI person, a disabled person or an elderly and faces multiple vulnerabilities.

- People with special needs require special protection and assistance from Member States, as established by the European Court of Human Rights. You will hear more about this during this event.
- National authorities have the obligation to effectively identify the vulnerabilities of people entering their territory on a case-by-case basis and, where necessary, to provide the necessary referral, assistance, information and protection throughout the asylum and migration procedures. These issues will be addressed during your discussions today.
- My role as Special Representative is to support Member States in addressing the challenges they face, while respecting the European Convention on Human Rights and other standards set by the Council of Europe.
- I carry out fact-finding missions to gather information on the protection of the human rights of migrants and refugees and can provide if needed targeted expertise and support to Member States.
- Following Russia's aggression against Ukraine, I conducted [fact finding missions](#) to the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Moldova and Romania, countries affected by the large number of people fleeing Ukraine.
- I know that Spain also received a large number of persons coming from Ukraine.
- In my reports, I commended the great efforts made by countries in Ukraine's neighbourhood, which previously had never been faced with such an influx of people crossing their borders.
- The majority of those fleeing Ukraine were women, children, the elderly, sick or disabled, with significant needs.
- In every country I visited, there was a need to improve the identification and referral of vulnerable people. I promoted the many

CoE standards and tools designed to protect migrants and refugees in vulnerable situations - especially [unaccompanied and separated children](#), [migrant and refugee women and girls](#), persons who are victims of [sexual exploitation and abuse](#), of [trafficking](#), including for the purpose of [labour exploitation](#). You will hear more about these standards in today's exchange.

- [Spain](#) was also visited by one of my predecessors in 2018. The report underlined that women and children were at risk of violence and exploitation, mainly due to the continued overcrowding of temporary reception centres in Ceuta and Melilla. It also highlighted the need to improve the screening and identification of persons in need of international protection, and to strengthen the protection of unaccompanied children, including by preparing their transition to adulthood.
- Since then, Spain has taken some important steps to strengthen the protection of unaccompanied migrant children. The reform of the Regulation of the Immigration Law in October 2021, which aims to promote the integration of unaccompanied children and facilitate their transition to adulthood, is a very positive development.
- According to more recent information, I understand that there is still a need in Spain for a specific mechanism for the early identification of asylum seekers that are part of the most vulnerable people.
- The CoE stands ready to support relevant actors to further protect the rights of asylum-seekers and refugees with special needs.
- I wish you an excellent exchange today.