Abstract

This Annual Report 2023 provides detailed information on initiatives that were implemented by the WHO Country Office in Romania from January to December 2023 under key programmatic pillars.

Keywords: ROMANIA | PRIMARY HEALTH CARE | UNIVERSAL HEALTH INSURANCE | HEALTH EQUITY | NONCOMMUNICABLE DISEASES
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The year 2023 was a period of recovery in Romania following COVID-19, but a weakened post-pandemic health system continued to carry the weight of responding to the Ukraine conflict since 2022. Ongoing emergencies around the world are a constant reminder that more work is needed to prepare and respond to health emergencies in a cross-sectoral and coordinated approach. During the year, the WHO Country Office in Romania together with the Ministry of Health collaborated in the humanitarian response and the long-term strengthening of the Romanian health system to build resilient and safe communities for all people of Romania.

Our work in Romania is directed by the European Programme of Work, 2020–2025 “United Action for Better Health in Europe” under three key pillars. The right to universal access to quality care without fear of financial hardship; effective protection against health emergencies; and thriving and healthy communities. At the national level, WHO Country Office in Romania shares a vision with the Ministry of Health under a biennial agreement setting out health priorities for 2022–2023.

In 2023, the WHO Country Office in Romania significantly scaled up its presence in the country. To accommodate a growing team, we opened a new city office in the heart of Bucharest, whilst maintaining our original premises at UN House. The scaling up also reflects the expanding health operations of the WHO in Romania to include flagship projects such as the European Union funded National Recovery and Resilience Plan in support of the Ministry of Health.

Our achievements are numerous and we are proud of our successes made possible by the collaboration with all stakeholders in the country. WHO Country Office in Romania has developed a great partnership with the Ministry of Health, the senior leadership of the Government of Romania and health partners, all of whom have been actively engaging in improving the health and well-being of all.

I would like to express my profound appreciation to our donors for their generous support and invaluable contributions. Thanks to their assistance, WHO has made significant strides in capacitating the health system and delivering health services to vulnerable populations impacted by the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine.

In 2023, WHO celebrated 75 years of service to the world, under the theme "Health for All". I am confident that the WHO Country Office in Romania is on the right path and aligned with our mandate to promote health, keep the world safe and serve the vulnerable – so everyone, everywhere can attain the highest level of health and well-being.

Dr. Caroline Clarinval, WHO Representative and Head of WHO Country Office in Romania
Abbreviations

ANES  National Agency for Equal Opportunities Between Women and Men
ANSVSA  National Sanitary, Veterinary and Food Safety Authority
AREPMF  Romanian Association for Pediatric Education in Family Medicine
CMR  Clinical Management of Rape
CSO  Civil Society Organizations
CVD  Cardiovascular Diseases
DDH  Data and Digital Health
DTRA  Defense Threat Reduction Agency
DSU  Department for Emergency Services
ECDC  European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control
EEA  European Economic Area
EPW  European Programme of Work
EU  European Union
FAO  Food and Agriculture Organization
GBV  Gender-Based Violence
GoR  Government of Romania
GP  General Practitioner
HIS  Health Information System
HPV  Human Papilloma Virus
HRH  Human Resources in Health
HSM  Health Services Management
HWF  Health Work Force
IASC  Interagency Standing Committee
IHR  International Health Regulations
IOM  International Organization for Migration
IPC  Infection Prevention and Control
LGBTQ  Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer
MDR-TB  Multi Drug-Resistant Tuberculosis
MHPSS  Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
MoH  Ministry of Health
MoU  Memorandum of Understanding
NCD  Noncommunicable Diseases
NGO  Nongovernmental Organizations
NHIF  National Health Insurance Fund
NIH  National Health Insurance House
NIHP  National Institute of Public Health
NIHMS  National Institute of Health Services Management
NRRP  National Recovery and Resilience Plan
PHC  Primary Health Care
PIAS  Health Insurance Information Platform
PHEIC  Public Health Emergency of International Concern
PSEAH  Protection from Sexual Exploitation
QoC  Quality of Care
RCCE  Risk Communication and Community Engagement
SAP  Sectoral Action Plans
SDG  Sustainable Development Goals
SRH  Sexual and Reproductive Health
SRP  Strategic Response Plan
SWG  Sub-Working Group
TB  Tuberculosis
UHC  Universal Health Coverage
UN  United Nations
UNDOS  United Nations Department of Operational Support
UNFPA  United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR  United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF  United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
WOAH  World Organization for Animal Health
Executive summary

The 2023 annual report provides detailed information on programmatic initiatives implemented by the WHO Country Office in Romania throughout the year.

WHO Country Office in Romania’s 2023 activities were planned and implemented under the overarching goals of the national health strategies of the Ministry of Health (MoH), the wider Government of Romania (GoR) approach in the context of the Ukraine refugee crisis and in coordination with UN partner agencies and other key stakeholders. The driving strategies of WHO Country Office in Romania during the year have been the Biennial Collaborative Agreement (BCA) 2022-2023; the European Programme of Work 2020-2025 “United Action for Better Health in Europe”¹, the WHO Global Programme of Work (GPW13)² and the strategic priorities of the EU’s National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) in Romania. During the year, WHO Country Office in Romania maintained an ongoing engagement with the MoH and other health partners to continuously ensure alignment with strategies, local needs and resources.

The Ukraine refugee response was a key pillar of the work of WHO Country Office in Romania. In 2023, the conflict had entered a second year and WHO Country Office in Romania’s priority was to ensure vulnerable populations continue to have access to essential health services, including Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS), Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH), Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and vaccination. Language barriers and access to information continued to be a major hurdle for Ukrainians wishing to access national health services. In response, WHO Country Office in Romania mobilized resources via primary health professionals, cultural mediators and county coordinators to increase awareness and ensure refugees’ health needs are met. WHO Country Office in Romania also worked in close coordination with various health sector working groups and the broader UN community to address refugee needs. The emergency also highlighted the need for better preparedness to tackle emerging health emergencies and WHO worked closely with counterparts in preparedness activities.

WHO Country Office in Romania’s work during the year aimed to strengthen public health and primary health care services, to ensure all people of Romania, regardless of status, enjoy good health and well-being. Initiatives throughout the year included activities around immunization and vaccine-preventable diseases (VPD), Tuberculosis (TB), MHPSS, SRH and Noncommunicable Diseases (NCDs) and the procurement of essential health equipment with a particular focus on vulnerable groups such as rural and underserved communities.

Throughout 2023, the implementation of the health-related components of the NRRP also commenced with project activities under four key pillars: Quality of Care; Health Service Management; Human Resources in Health; and Data and Digital Health. WHO Country Office in Romania provided support to the MoH by performing assessments, providing recommendations and guidance, capacity building, mobilizing international experts, developing national policies and introducing European models and best practices.

Going forward, WHO Country Office in Romania recognizes the need for ongoing collaboration to build a resilient and robust health system. Continuing its commitment to ensuring the highest attainable level of health for all, WHO Country Office in Romania supports Romania’s progress towards Universal Health Coverage (UHC) and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
Health system

Health spending in Romania, which totaled US$ 16.7 billion in 2021, falls well below the EU average both as a share of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and per person and is dominated by in-patient care at the expense of primary or preventative care.

Noticeable improvements have been achieved by Romania within its health and care workforce. The education system is very strong, generating one of the highest volumes of medical and nursing graduates in Europe. The Bucharest Declaration signed in March 2023 has established a national mandate to improve the working environment of health workers, enhance training opportunities and create a sustainable workforce. Nonetheless, challenges remain in the form of an ageing workforce which will likely exacerbate the already existing geographical disparity in healthcare workers density. The persisting emigration of health workers to western countries in search of higher salaries and improved working conditions constitute an additional concern.

The COVID-19 pandemic also provided an opportunity for innovation within the Romanian health sector, with initiatives such as telemedicine services and COVID-19 electronic surveillance systems being launched. Despite these developments, Romania’s drive towards digitalization has been slowed down by a lack of information exchange between various institutions, inadequate e-health governance and coordination, a complex legislative framework, and a high turnover of human resources (HR) due to limited renumeration compared to the private sector.

Health outcome and equity

Romania has experienced a strong improvement in health outcomes over the past two decades, including a consecutive four-year increase in life expectancy. However, preventable and treatable death rates in Romania remain well above regional averages with leading causes of mortality including cardiovascular disease, lung cancer, prostate and breast cancer, their incidence driven by key risk factors including poor diet, tobacco and alcohol consumption, air pollution and a lack of physical activity. A socioeconomic component within the populations’ health status is also apparent, with ethnicity, geography (rural vs. urban) and income acting as determinants to health insurance status, access to quality healthcare, overall lifestyle and uptake of harmful behaviours.
Emergency preparedness

The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and the subsequent Ukrainian refugee crisis has placed significant pressure on Romania’s health system. As of December 2023, over 5 million Ukrainians have crossed the border into Romania, with a considerable percentage having multifaceted and urgent health needs ranging from maternal care to psychological support.

Romania has shown a strong response capacity in the face of this mass population displacement, harnessing lessons learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic to rapidly mobilize emergency mechanisms to strengthen health system resilience and enhance preparedness for Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) emergencies.

Under the Temporary Protection Measures introduced by the GoR shortly after conflict onset, over 70,000 national health services have been delivered to Ukrainians, with the government also supporting in the establishment of a health clinic in RomExpo, a national multi-disciplinary hotline and several state-run accommodation centres.

In parallel, WHO has worked with partners to support the state response, directly providing primary healthcare services, mental health support, maternity care, facilitate access to the national health system for vulnerable beneficiaries and provide capacity building to national healthcare workers to better prepare them for future emergency situations.

Despite these successes, challenges persist in the refugee response, with refugee studies identifying several barriers to healthcare including information gaps and communication issues. WHO continues to work closely with national and international partners to address identified barriers and ensure equitable access to entitled healthcare for those displaced by the conflict.
WHO Country Office in Romania continues to work closely with all stakeholders in the national health system in Romania to build a robust, resilient and evidence-based health system.

The MoH holds the overall governance of the health system, while the National Health Insurance House (NHIH) administers and regulates the National Health Insurance Fund (NHIF). Both the MoH and the NHIH are locally represented through district public health authorities and district health insurance houses. WHO Country Office in Romania also collaborates with the National Institute of Public Health (NIPH) on public health programmes.

Health care services are provided by 41 counties as well as the capital Bucharest, in line with centrally determined rules. In the social health insurance system, district health insurance funds buy services from healthcare providers (family medicine doctors, specialist practices, laboratories, hospitals) at the local level. Health care providers are also paid by MoH under national health programmes. These programmes cover priority areas such as maternal and child health, infectious disease control, mental health and screening.

Romania currently spends 6% of its GDP on healthcare, with funding sourced through the NHIH and access to health services, medicines and medical devices being included in the basic service package. However, out-of-pocket payments remain high, especially for ambulatory services and outpatient medicines. Furthermore, approximately 11% of the population remains uninsured, having access to only the minimum package of services, with Roma and other vulnerable and marginalized communities disproportionately represented within this group.

The availability of primary healthcare (PHC) services for the most vulnerable is a litmus test for progress towards achieving UHC. Fulfilling WHO’s global targets on UHC requires ensuring that PHC services are comprehensive, community orientated and accessible to underserved communities or groups facing unique challenges including geographic isolation, socioeconomic stress or societal marginalization.

Romania’s “National Health Strategy 2022–2030” has set out a vision for PHC in the country. Emphasis has been placed upon reaching underserved populations, promoting the uptake of screening services and strengthening the healthcare workforce in rural areas to better serve the community. In 2023 WHO has continued to enact its mandate of promoting UHC in Romania through advocacy to ensure health equity and human rights are upheld, via policy guidance to address legislative barriers and through material support to strengthen existing PHC capacity to support more adequately the most vulnerable.
Key achievements in 2023

Health systems strengthening

- Ongoing engagement in policy dialogue and advocacy focused on strengthening existing systems for both Romanian and Ukrainian citizens rather than creating parallel new ones.
- Procured nearly US$1.5 million worth of medical items and supplies according to GoR requests and priorities.

Noncommunicable diseases

- Policy recommendations were developed for transitioning toward a more inclusive payment system for preventative services and improving governmental funding to strengthen health service provision at local level.
- Practical guidelines for General Practioners (GPs), community health workers and school health workers formulated to enhance the prevention and management of NCDs.
- Convened key government stakeholders for an event on cervical cancer, providing an opportunity for open dialogue regarding avenues to improve access to the Human Papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination and cervical screening for the Romanian population.

Sexual and reproductive healthcare

- Supported the development of a proposed order for regulating the provision of family planning and reproductive health.
- Numerous awareness campaigns to destigmatize GBV, promote community dialogue and support survivors to access care.

Communicable diseases

- Technical support for the development of national guidelines on Multi Drug-Resistant Tuberculosis (MDR-TB) and the national guidelines for TB screening and management.
- Cold chain vaccination equipment procured and distributed to all 43 counties in Romania.
- Funding and technical support for the NIPH Hepatitis B and C seroprevalence study published in 2023.

Antimicrobial resistance

- Awareness campaigns to reduce the prescription and consumption of antibiotics.
In alignment with national priorities for strengthening PHC in the country, the project “Strengthening the National Network of Primary Health Care Providers to Improve the Health Status of the Population, Children and Adults (including vulnerable population)” was implemented throughout 2023 and will end at the end of March 2024.

The initiative saw WHO Country Office in Romania supporting the NIPH, aimed to reduce social health inequality in healthcare access, particularly in rural areas in Romania, via strengthening primary healthcare services. Through a review of evidence-based health policies of comparable health systems throughout the European region, WHO Country Office in Romania provided an evaluation of new health interventions and examples of best practices. Through the development of new tools for primary care providers, evidence-based recommendations were formulated to better adapt PHC services to the needs of the population, with a focus on vulnerable and geographically isolated communities. Additional aspects of the project are summarised as follows:

**Fundings and payment models for PHC services**

Preventive care and community care are core components of PHC. Systemic issues within community care funding have however impacted quality service provision, especially in geographically isolated or underserved regions. In parallel, the common requirement for out-of-pocket costs for preventative care disincentivizes patients with a lower socioeconomic status from receiving such services, further contributing to the health divide.
Through comprehensive literature reviews and assessment of models of best practices in Spain, the United Kingdom, Estonia, France, Norway and Slovenia, WHO formulated comprehensive policy recommendations for transitioning toward a more inclusive payment system for preventative services and additionally developed guidance on improving governmental funding to improve coordination and health service provision at a local level with a focus on rural areas.

**Learning from models of best practice in Spain**

To further strengthen PHC provision in Romania, WHO organized a study tour for Romanian MoH and NIPH representatives to the Castelldefels Primary Care Health Providers (CASAP) in Spain. This centre is renowned for its innovative PHC approach which involves enhanced nurse roles, multidisciplinary primary care teams and integrated health information systems.

The two-day programme featured visits to primary care facilities and in-depth discussions with healthcare professionals working at the centre. The tour was greatly valued by participants, providing them with an opportunity to gain greater insights into the role of community health nurses in multidisciplinary teams, collaborative practices between doctors and nurses, the importance of health assistance in triage and the role of reward systems in prioritizing objectives. It is hoped that learnings from this study visit will be reflected within Romania’s PHC centres in the coming years.

**Incentivizing health screenings in underserved communities**

Accessible screening services have been shown to prevent manifestations of NCDs and/or secondary complications and to decrease overall disease mortality. Limited uptake of these services in vulnerable or marginalized communities, is therefore, another driver of health status inequality particularly in rural Romania. As part of the project on strengthening PHC, WHO conducted an in-depth review of best practices for incentivizing screening in at-risk and marginalized populations and developed practical pathways, including costings, for their implementation in Romania.

**Public health communications**

Public health communication is a critical component of primary health promotion, playing a key role in raising awareness, educating the public and encouraging healthy behaviours. In the context of PHC, effective communication strategies contribute to preventing diseases, promoting well-being and empowering individuals to make informed decisions about their health. During the year, WHO Country Office in Romania implemented communications campaigns related to various health topics:

- **Salt Awareness Week** – WHO Country Office in Romania published social media tiles including a quiz, aimed at informing the public about the risks of salt consumption.
- **National Psychologists Day** – WHO shared communication assets to mark National Psychologists Day in recognition of the vital role played by psychologists since their establishment as a medical profession in Romania in 2003.
- **“Let’s Talk PHC”** – WHO Country Office in Romania promoted the WHO/Europe talk show on access to medicine.
- **Communication campaign for monkeypox** – WHO Country Office in Romania adapted WHO/Europe monkeypox communication products, as part of the monkeypox elimination campaign.
Noncommunicable diseases

Romania has one of the highest avoidable mortality rates in the EU and effective public health interventions such as cancer and risk factor screening in primary care could substantially reduce the NCD burden in the country. From a health system perspective, fragmentation of care and inadequate access to outpatient services, primary and secondary prevention programmes and long-term care services, particularly in rural Romania, are among the main causes of the high morbidity and mortality rates. Under the WHO Global Action Plan for NCDs 2030, the WHO’s mandate is to reduce modifiable risk factors for NCDs and underlying social determinants through the creation of health-promoting environments.

In 2023, WHO Country Office in Romania conducted a situational analysis of selected behavioural risk factors and presented health promotional activities to counter some of the challenges. Based on the information in the report, the average life expectancy in Romania is 74.2 years. In Europe, Romania ranks third highest in preventable mortality and the highest in treatable mortality (2018). Ischemic heart disease (49 864 out of every 100 000 deaths) and stroke (42 569 out of every 100 000) represented the leading cause of death for both men and women. Studies have identified that almost half of all deaths in Romania could be attributed to behavioural risk factors such as poor diet (including low fruit and vegetable consumption and high salt intake), tobacco consumption, alcohol consumption and low physical activity.

In addition, the exclusive breastfeeding rates in Romania (12.6%) are amongst the lowest in Europe (25%), due to low maternal education and reduced human resource capacity among health professionals to encourage and support breastfeeding.

The data from rural Romania is particularly concerning regarding limited access to medical care. In 2021, rural areas accounted for just 39.5% of family medicine practices, 10.6% of mid-level health staff, 4.8% of specialized medical practices and 5% of laboratories. However, 46% of Romania’s population live in rural areas. As a result, health outcomes in rural Romania lag its urban average, with the discrepancy driven mainly by inequalities in health access as well as socioeconomic factors such as health education contributing to unhealthy behavioural factors.
In response to the health challenges identified by WHO situational analysis, the country office plans to implement some key interventions to combat NCDs:

- Health promotion communication campaigns via social media and print material. These products will be targeted at rural communities, children and adolescents as well as people with chronic NCDs and healthcare workers.
- Training of Romanian primary healthcare workers to implement the BRIEF intervention package to modify behavioural risk factors.
- Capacity building of the health workforce in primary care settings through the WHO HEARTS package to address key risk factors of cardiovascular disease.

**Cardiovascular diseases**

More than half of all deaths in Romania in 2020 were related to cardiovascular diseases (CVD), with ischaemic heart disease accounting for 19% and stroke for 14% of all deaths, the leading causes of death for both men and women. Behavioural risk factors, such as tobacco smoking, dietary risks, alcohol consumption and low physical activity account for many of these deaths.

WHO has played a key role in strengthening cardiovascular disease management and care in Romania through the development of strategic and evidence-based policy recommendations. In 2023 WHO supported the MoH in reaching targets set out by the EPW and the SDGs, to align Romania’s NCD care capacity with that of other European nations.

In the context of the project ‘Strengthening the National Network of Primary Healthcare Providers to Improve the Health Status of the Population, Children and Adults (including vulnerable populations)’, the NIPH, with the support of WHO, developed practice guidelines for GPs, community health nurses and school health workers to improve the prevention and management of NCDs including CVDs (hypertension, congestive heart failure, stroke). These guidelines were compiled in a handbook for community health nurses and distributed across the country.

In 2024, the goal is to support awareness raising on CVD risks. Actions will include supporting health authorities in advocating for physical activity, healthy nutrition and the fight against obesity.

**Diabetes**

The diabetes prevalence in Romania has risen in the past 10 years according to the NIPH mainly due to dietary factors, urbanization, smoking and lack of physical activity.

WHO Country Office in Romania focused its activities on prevention and health promotion, supporting the development of guides for primary healthcare professionals and community healthcare workers emphasizing risk factors and encouraging healthy behaviour. The guides are being shared with healthcare professionals to be used in primary care settings, especially in rural areas.

While diabetes treatment cannot be initiated in primary care settings in the Romanian healthcare system, WHO Country Office in Romania continues endorsing the National Health Strategy focused on prevention, to reduce the incidence of diabetes and thus additional costs and treatment delays related to referrals. Moreover, WHO supports capacity building of the healthcare workforce, contributing to improved access to quality essential health services.

**Cancer**

The burden of cancer is considerable in Romania, with over 100 000 cases registered in 2023. The main cancers affecting men were prostate (20%), lung (15%) and colorectal (15%) cancer and for women, breast cancer (28%), colorectal (12%) and cervical (8%) cancer.

Cancer is the second leading cause of death in Romania after cardiovascular diseases, representing 19% of all deaths. Cancer mortality is above the EU average in Romania and has increased for six cancer types in the last 20 years.

In 2023, the National Cancer Plan was developed in line with the European Commission’s initiative. It aims to address gaps in prevention, treatment and care, as well as integrated approaches for the patient pathway and data collection strategies.

WHO Country Office in Romania, together with the NIPH co-hosted an event marking Cervical Cancer Elimination Day in November 2023. Participants discussed ways to improve access to HPV vaccination and cervical screening for the Romanian population and refugees as well as best practices in developing cervical screening programmes and the Partnership to Contrast HPV (PERCH) initiative on HPV. WHO Country Office in Romania presented the WHO Regional Road Map to eliminate cervical cancer and the NGOs ReThink HPV vaccination and Centrul Filia on the importance of encouraging HPV vaccination and screening.

In 2024, WHO Country Office in Romania will support awareness-raising and communication campaigns on screening initiatives. Programme priorities will include the Training of Trainers (ToTs) for family doctors, nurses and midwives to promote screening; information campaigns to increase the confidence of the healthcare workforce and public in HPV vaccinations; support research to understand barriers and drivers to HPV vaccinations among healthcare workers, girls, parents and the public.
Maternal and newborn care

The high number of premature babies born annually in Romania is a significant public health challenge. Every year, an estimated 13.4 million babies are born before 37 weeks of pregnancy and over 20 million babies have a low birthweight of under 2.5 kg. Babies born prematurely require extensive, often long-term care and risks associated with prematurity include increased mortality and morbidity rates. Neonatal wards and intensive care units often lack sufficient equipment and staff.

Kangaroo Mother Care (KMC) is a proven, effective intervention which significantly improves survival and health outcomes for preterm and low birthweight babies. It can increase preterm survival rates by one-third, reduce infections, prevent hypothermia and improve feeding and growth.

In Romania, there is a need to continue advocacy and awareness-raising campaigns to provide support in the integration and implementation of KMC.

In November, WHO attended the launch of the “Implementation of Kangaroo Care Therapy in Maternity Hospitals and Premature and Vulnerable New-Born Guidelines for Monitoring and Early Intervention”. The event was organized by the Premature Baby Association under the Commission for Health and Family of the Chamber of Deputies. WHO presented the "WHO Position Paper on Kangaroo Care" in support of the implementation of this intervention for all low birth weight and premature babies'.
Sexual and reproductive health

Upholding sexual and reproductive health rights and access for the most vulnerable and marginalized is a litmus test for progress toward UHC. WHO continues to advocate that policy and legislative barriers are addressed and gender equality, equity and human rights are ensured.

In 2023, WHO Country Office in Romania contributed to the first draft of the proposed order for regulating the provision of family planning and reproductive health services together with representatives from the MoH, the Eastern European Institute of Reproductive Health (EEIRH), family doctors providing family planning services, family support agencies and the wider NGO community. The inputs have been included in the National Health Strategy 2022–2030 to expand and improve family planning and reproductive health services in Romania.

Health professionals such as nurses and midwives play an essential role. WHO Country Office in Romania together with WHO/Europe joined a regional conference by the Romanian Chamber of Nurses and Midwives on international perspectives and developments in nursing and midwifery care. The Bucharest Declaration recognizes the importance of the management and sustainable development of the health workforce and in line with this priority, WHO presented information on the role of nurses and midwives in promoting health, disease prevention and raising awareness on protecting and supporting the mental health of health workers.
Mental health

To mark World Suicide Prevention Day, WHO Country Office in Romania and the MHPSS sub-Working Group (sWG) partners conducted a data analysis of local and international NGO survey data on the organizations’ involvement in suicide prevention, their interface with national systems and the accessibility of suicide-related data. The analysis revealed that most NGOs do not offer direct suicide prevention services and none reported having access to suicide data in their regions. These findings underscore the urgency to fill these gaps. Additional challenges revealed by the survey include the absence of dedicated suicide prevention programmes, emphasizing the need for robust partnerships between NGOs, governmental bodies and mental health professionals.

The Mental Health Coalition

The holistic approach to health prioritizes mental health as much as physical health in Romania. Regardless of sociodemographic characteristics, mental health and psychosocial conditions and concerns are shared in various severity levels among both the Romanian community as well as refugees from Ukraine. These conditions not only affect the psychosocial well-being of the people but also pose further protection-related risks and challenges. Affected persons include those at risk of suicide and self-harm, persons living with mental, neurological and substance use conditions, children and adolescents with mental and behavioural disorders, older people with dementia as well as people with disabilities, survivors of gender-based and domestic violence and no or limited access to social services. Considering the multiplied presentation of vulnerabilities, stigma and prejudices towards the persons living with mental health conditions is a pressing problem in Romania.

WHO’s Mental Health Coalition is working on attitudes towards mental health by increasing awareness and raising knowledge about mental health and mental health-related conditions among the most vulnerable, frontline workers and health workforce. Furthermore, given the multi-sectorial nature of MHPSS related needs, the Coalition is also working on bringing an inter-sectorial understanding of MHPSS by touching on cross-cutting themes to be able to better support the development of mental health policies and to strengthen mental health service provision at the national level.
Communicable diseases

Despite observable reductions in communicable disease burden since 2000, Romania still faces challenges in controlling key infectious diseases including TB, influenza and measles. The threat of a VPD outbreak has been exacerbated due to decreased vaccine uptake by the Romanian population following the COVID-19 pandemic and the significant displacement of Ukraine refugees into Romania with similar or worse vaccination profiles. In line with this increased threat, Romania experienced a measles epidemic during the latter half of 2023, with COVID-19 and influenza cases also rising rapidly towards the end of the year.

Tuberculosis prevention and control

Romania has the highest TB burden in the European Union/European Economic Area (EU/EEA) with almost a quarter (23.4%) of all reported patients in the region (2017) and a TB notification rate six times higher than the EU/EEA average. The mass displacement of Ukrainian refugees into Romania has further exacerbated the situation given their low Bacillus Calmette–Guérin (BCG) vaccination coverage (71% compared to Romania’s 97%) and the rising rates of TB incidence due to unstable living conditions and the destruction of health facilities.

Despite significant improvements in TB management capacity over the past two decades, challenges remain for Romania in TB surveillance, diagnostics and treatment as well as the management of MDR-TB. In 2023, through close engagement with national counterparts including the MoH, NIPH and the National TB Institute, WHO provided technical support for the development of national guidelines on MDR-TB and the national guidelines for TB screening and management.

WHO Country Office in Romania additionally provided material support for enhancing TB and MDR diagnostic capacity in the country through the procurement of two GenExpert machines as well as 600 cartridges for TB and 250 cartridges for MDR-TB screening to the Marius Nasta National TB Institute. This equipment will facilitate patients’ access to rapid diagnostic testing and allow highly accurate diagnosis of TB cases within a few hours. The equipment also provides information on the resistance to the main anti-TB agents used in treatment and therefore allows the selection of an appropriate therapeutic regimen for cases of drug-resistant TB from the onset. The latter has a major impact on the patient’s prognosis, limits the transmission of strains difficult to treat and will hence reduce the incidence of MDR-TB.
HIV prevention and care

In 2023, WHO aimed to address shortcomings in both access to and the quality of SRH services including HIV prevention, treatment and care. There is a significant unmet need in Romania for SRH services, which was accentuated by the Ukrainian crisis. WHO/Europe estimates that 1 in 100 Ukrainian refugees are HIV-positive, 57% are on antiretroviral treatment and need to continue their antiretroviral therapy. WHO worked on developing a comprehensive SRH strategy and advocacy with national and international partners, ensuring that there is a dialogue regarding key issues faced by those seeking high-quality SRH services, best practices and coordination.

WHO Country Office in Romania also initiated a dialogue with WHO/Europe, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) and local stakeholders to discuss the WHO guidelines on HIV prevention, testing, treatment and care, including the new WHO/Europe action plan for HIV, as well as ways to operationalize global and regional HIV goals, targets and data availability. The meeting additionally provided WHO representatives with the opportunity to identify areas where the WHO could provide support to health authorities to realize their strategic HIV plans.

In 2024, WHO aims to provide support to the MoH in improving prevention, early diagnosis and adequate monitoring and treatment of people living with HIV, including people who fled from Ukraine. Additionally, there is a need to support the expansion of HIV testing through decentralization and differentiated service delivery via timely linkages to treatment and care.

WHO Country Office in Romania will provide technical support to national health authorities and work with national NGOs to address:

- Insufficient implementation of essential elements of HIV prevention programmes including HIV testing among pregnant women, procurement and distribution of condoms for HIV/STI prevention and identification of key vulnerable populations.
- HIV/STI-related stigma via educational interventions for healthcare workers; addressing standards of care and exploring testing and treatment in community settings.
- Lack of integration of services for HIV testing and screening of other communicable diseases such as TB and viral hepatitis and referral of patients with positive screening test results to the appropriate programme.

Vaccine-preventable diseases and Immunization

To strengthen the cold chain capacity of national and county public health authorities in Romania, WHO procured 100 vaccine refrigerators, 100 temperature monitoring equipment and 100 vaccine carriers to facilitate the storage and delivery of vaccinations nationwide. Each of the 42 Public Health Authorities in Romania received at least two items of each, with some counties receiving more units due to specific population needs.

A detailed account of WHO Country Office in Romania’s activities related to VPIs and immunization can be found under EPW-3, WHO Country Office in Romania Flagship Programmes.

Hepatitis

In June, the NIPH published the results of the WHO-funded Hepatitis B and C seroprevalence study. The study was conducted with the support of WHO/Europe and ECDC experts. WHO Country Office in Romania and WHO/Europe highlighted the findings of the study during the World Hepatitis Day webinar in July 2023 and prepared relevant communication materials for social media and the WHO website.

Polio

In October, WHO headquarters together with WHO/Europe and the ECDC participated in a polio surveillance mission in Romania. The programme encompassed bilateral meetings with the MoH and other stakeholders to discuss poliovirus containment in Romania and assist national authorities with technical expertise. The outcomes of the mission resulted in identifying several approaches based on the WHO Global Action Plan for Poliovirus Containment (GAPIV) as reflected in the report presented to the MoH and Ministry of Defence. Follow-up meetings are to take place in 2024.
One health and international health regulations (IHR)

International health regulations / One health, WHO closely collaborated with national and international partners and stakeholders to strengthen capacities in Romania. In 2023, WHO Country Office in Romania successfully obtained a grant from the United States to increase emergency preparedness and response capacities in Romania during 2024–2026.

Supporting national authorities with the integration of animal and human health and facilitating better collaboration and exchange of disease surveillance information is a key priority for WHO. As part of that objective, a Surveillance Information Sharing Operational Tool (SIS OT) was developed by WHO, World Organization for Animal Health (WOAH) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) which will be implemented by the MoH and National Sanitary, Veterinary and Food Safety Authority (ANSVSA).

WHO Country Office in Romania also supported laboratory capacities for better surveillance and diagnostics of animal and human diseases under the One Health approach. Aligned with WHO headquarters’ priorities of enhancing global collaboration under One Health, the National Bridging Workshop brings together key national stakeholders from the animal health and human health services from national, regional and local levels, as well as representatives of other relevant sectors (environment, wildlife, media, police).

The WHO IHR and WOAH Performance of Veterinary Services Pathway allows the sectors to strengthen their collaboration at the human-animal interface while improving their compliance with international standards and regulations. In 2024, WHO will organize workshops to enhance collaboration between civilian and military sectors for better emergency preparedness and response.
Infection prevention and control

Nosocomial infections remain a persistent challenge in Romania. Despite ongoing efforts to improve healthcare practices, it is evident that more targeted interventions are required. Nosocomial infections not only pose a threat to patient well-being but also strain healthcare resources.

WHO Country Office in Romania identified Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) as a priority for engagement and adapted and translated the Open-WHO IPC training materials to the Romanian context. The materials are aimed at enhancing the capacity of healthcare professionals, ensuring that healthcare practitioners have access to relevant resources and, by tailoring the training materials to the specific needs and nuances of the Romanian healthcare system, empowering frontline workers with the knowledge and skills to combat nosocomial infections.

In addition, WHO, in cooperation with the MoH, will focus on building long-term capacity within the Romanian healthcare system by investing in training programmes, supporting infrastructure and continuous monitoring and evaluation to ensure the sustained effectiveness of IPC practices.
Antimicrobial resistance

Romania was the country with the second-highest consumption of antibiotics for systemic use in Europe in 2023. Several factors have contributed to the present situation, however, the high consumption rate of antimicrobial agents in human medicine in general and the widespread use of last-line broad-spectrum antimicrobial agents are likely the main drivers.

To counter this trend, WHO Country Office in Romania in collaboration with the MoH, launched an awareness campaign aimed at the public and health professionals. Posters, highlighting the dangers posed by Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR) and high antibiotic use as well as information on recommended usage were displayed across various bus stations across Bucharest for 30 days, with an estimated reach of 9.7 million views. In parallel, WHO Country Office in Romania launched an e-mail newsletter campaign which shared the latest information, best practices and WHO resources for countering AMR with 22,808 health professionals including GPs, health care specialists and pharmacists.

In combating the increasing threat of AMR, WHO has additionally fostered close partnerships with key entities such as the MoH, NIPH, NIPH, ANSVSA, the Ministry of Agriculture and other relevant stakeholders. WHO’s alliance with the NIPH reflects a commitment to advancing scientific research and public health policies. WHO contributed to the development of evidence-based approaches in combating AMR, ensuring that interventions align with the latest research findings and best practices. Dialogues and joint initiatives additionally took place between WHO Country Office in Romania and the MoH who worked collaboratively to develop and implement comprehensive strategies that prioritize the responsible use of antimicrobials and promote effective surveillance and control measures.

WHO’s partnership with the ANSVSA has been crucial in addressing AMR within the agricultural sector. WHO Country Office in Romania collaborated closely with ANSVSA to promote responsible antimicrobial use in animal husbandry, safeguarding both animal and human health. This collaboration extends to regulatory frameworks and surveillance measures to prevent the emergence and spread of AMR in the food chain. In addition to these key collaborations, WHO actively engaged with the Ministry of Agriculture and other related authorities. This comprehensive approach recognizes the interconnected nature of AMR and its impact on human, animal and environmental health.

Sustainable Development Goals

The 2023 Sustainable Development Goals report reveals that halfway to the 2030 deadline, more than 50% of the world is lagging. The COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution, as well as Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, have led to increases in the prices of food and energy and created a global cost-of-living crisis, affecting billions of people.

In Romania, over 44% of SDG targets have been achieved or are on track, particularly with regards to SDG-1 / No Poverty and SDG-6 / Clean Water and Sanitation. For SDG-3, health data trends are moderately improving, however, significant challenges remain. Whilst maternal and neonatal as well as under 5 mortality rates and new HIV infections remain on track, progress is stagnant or increasing at less than 50% of the required rate with regards to achieving UHC.
On World Health Day, 7 April 2023, the World Health Organization celebrated its 75th anniversary. WHO was founded in 1948 to promote health so everyone, everywhere can attain the highest level of health and well-being.

To mark WHO75, the WHO Country Office in Romania organized a photo exhibition at the University Carol Davila in Bucharest, presenting Romania’s health sector over the past 190 years and WHO’s presence in Romania since 1990.

The event was attended by representatives of the Presidential Administration and MoH, including Health Minister Prof. Dr. Alexandru Rafila, as well as representatives from UN agencies, NGOs and local health partners. WHO Representative and the Minister of Health reiterated their commitment to collaboration on #HealthforAll during the event.
Planned activities in 2024

Public health and communicable diseases

— Health promotion activities such as improving Vitamin D status in Romanian women.
— Dental health initiatives.
— AMR initiatives including raising of awareness, trainings for HCWs and AMR national action plan implementation.
— Continue to support the national TB testing and screening capacity.

SRH

— Promotion of breastfeeding initiatives.
— Facilitation of dialogue on Kangaroo-Mother Care in Romania and pilot in selected hospitals.
— Advocate for the role of midwives in Romania.

Mental health

— Support the MoH with the drafting of a national mental health strategy for Romania.
— Building psychosocial skills and selfcare practices for Romanian healthcare workers suffering from stress and burnout.
— Improving mental health among vulnerable, underserved populations by contextualising and introducing the PM+ module in Romania.

IHR and emergency preparedness

— Strengthen Public Health Emergency Operations Centre.
— Strengthen biosafety and biosecurity laboratory capacity in Romania.
— Strengthen implementation of the SIS OT Action Plan in Romania.
EPW2: Health Emergencies
Key achievements in 2023

Leadership and coordination

- Maintained a close working relationship with national authorities, including the MoH, NHIH, NIPH and Department of Emergency Situations (DSU).
- Organized the first Convening of Strategic Partners Meeting in October 2023, bringing together key stakeholders in health from the government, international donor/diplomatic community and local stakeholders to strengthen relationships.
- Continued leadership and coordination for Health with UN partners and GoR including the Health Working Group (HWG), MHPPS, SRH sWG, as well as participation in the Information Management Working Group (IMWG) and Inter-Sector Working Group (ISWG).
- Supported health services at RomExpo, providing more than 1 500 consultations in 2023 for family medicine, MHPSS and SRH services.

Communicable diseases

- Donated over US$ 370 000 worth of TB diagnostic equipment for the benefit of both Ukrainian and local populations. The donated equipment will cover the tests for the entire pneumology network in Romania for more than one year.

Sexual and reproductive health

- Provided over 1 300 SRH consultations and supported SRH services at RomExpo.

Mental health and psychosocial support

- Coordinated MHPSS activities and led the MHPSS sWG.
- MHPSS service mapping and MHPSS interventions based on identified needs.
- Training of community workers and health staff on psychological first aid.

Health communication and community engagement

- Shared 263 posts on WHO operations and activities on various health topics reaching a following of over 136.1K on WHO Country Office in Romania's social media platforms.
- Provided health information materials in Ukrainian and Romanian on health promotion and risk management.
- Produced videos on topics such as mental health and immunization in Ukrainian and Romanian.
Responding to the Ukraine refugee crisis

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 resulted in a major global humanitarian crisis. At the end of 2023, the conflict had displaced over 6.3 million Ukrainian people and over 5.9 million have fled across the border into neighbouring countries such as Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Moldova, Romania and Slovakia.

In Romania, over 4 million border crossings to and from Ukraine have taken place since 24 February 2022. Romania welcomed Ukrainians to the country and allowed access to health benefits such as health insurance, without the requirement of health insurance contributions or tax payments.

Leadership and coordination

WHO Country Office in Romania response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis is guided by a clear management structure based on the Incident Management System and closely aligned with WHO’s Strategic Response Plan\(^{10}\), the GoR’s National Plan for the Romanian response and the UN Refugee Response Plan (UNRRP)\(^{11}\).

WHO emergency operations in Romania are conducted in close collaboration with national authorities and with international and national health partners.

To ensure close collaboration between health stakeholders, WHO chairs the Health Working and SRH Working Group and MHPSS sWG. These monthly meetings, overseen by WHO and routinely attended by up to 30-40 national and in-
international health partners, provide an opportunity for participants to present on relevant topics, discuss sector specific challenges and gaps they have faced and share opportunities, achievements and lessons learned throughout the response. They further provide a platform for promoting collaboration between stakeholders to further impact of partner interventions and ensure all stakeholders are aware of key priorities and challenges facing the refugee response.

WHO also participates in the ISWG and IMWG led by the UNHCR to exchange information on the Ukrainian refugee response.

Health information management

**Data management and reporting**

WHO Country Office in Romania collaborates with three key entities within the healthcare system to facilitate data management and reporting: the MoH, NHIH and the NIPH.

To strengthen coordination, WHO provides its service information to the ISWG through a monthly activity tracker data collection platform and a monthly newsletter showcasing the ISWG partner activities for refugees in Romania. The information from this report is also shared with wider government stakeholders each month.

In 2023, WHO Country Office in Romania developed an Access to Health Dashboard, utilizing refugee data sourced from NHIH, DSU and the MoH. The report provides a snapshot of the number of Ukrainians registered for temporary protection and accessing emergency / primary healthcare /specialist health services as well as demographic profiles of Ukrainian refugees.

**Surveillance**

WHO Country Office in Romania continues to monitor geopolitical and socioeconomic dynamics in Ukraine, Romania and neighbouring regions, to ensure WHO is prepared to respond to a possible exacerbation of the conflict. The surveillance also extends to public health threats such as polio and waterborne diseases, which pose an elevated threat in Romania due to events such as the Kakhovka dam breach in Ukraine. WHO sources include media information monitoring, exchanges with UN, international and national partners and close coordination with Romanian emergency management agencies and remains prepared to mobilize additional resources in the event of a rapidly developing emergency.

**In-person health working group**

WHO convened the first in-person health working group in June 2023 to facilitate the development of professional relationships and interorganization collaborations between partners. Several challenges within the refugee response were highlighted during the meeting including a shortage of family doctors, language barriers, funding gaps and limited budget allocation for SRH and MHPSS services. Action points included initiation of discussions with the NHIH regarding difficulties faced by GPs in registering Ukrainians, the feasibility of implementing phone translation services in Romania and advocacy and engagement with national authorities regarding greater flexibility and easier allocation of human and financial resources in times of crisis.
Planning, operations and technical expertise

WHO’s emergency response in Romania is aligned with Romania’s national strategies as well as the priorities of WHO/Europe and the wider UN family. Despite the commendable efforts by host countries to provide equal access to health services for Ukrainian refugees, various barriers persist, hindering their ability to access essential healthcare services. WHO’s emergency response during 2023 thus focused on addressing barriers to healthcare, to ensure equitable access to care for refugees and the strengthen the capacity of the national health system to respond to increased demands.

Family doctors

Family doctors are the entry point to the Romanian national health system, providing essential primary care and referrals to specialized health services such as prescriptions for chronic diseases including diabetes and hypertension, referrals to secondary care and other services including mental health and family planning. These are all key health needs and priorities for Ukraine refugees.

Improving access to primary healthcare

Despite Ukrainians’ entitlements to access national health services in Romania free of charge, the significant administrative burden of registering Ukrainians and low financial remuneration has disincentivized many family doctors to engage with the refugee response. This has represented a significant barrier to primary healthcare access for Ukrainian refugees.

To address this challenge, WHO contracted seven Romanian family doctors to provide refugee-inclusive primary healthcare in counties with a high number of refugees (Galati, Bucharest, Brasov and Suceava). The programme has been highly effective in facilitating refugee access to primary care, with over 4 300 consultations delivered in 2023.

To incentivize the registration of Ukrainian refugees, WHO provided funding for operational costs to seven selected family medicine clinics already identified as refugee inclusive. WHO also provided the clinics with basic medical equipment and supplies to cope with the additional needs associated with the refugee population in Brasov, Galati, Suceava and Bucharest totalling over US$ 35 000. WHO further provided these clinics with Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) kits including 22 000 medical masks and 6 040 bottles of hand sanitizer.
WHO midwives

Most of the Ukrainian refugees arriving in Romania are women, many of whom are pregnant or have young children. There has thus been a disproportional high need for maternity and SRH services. In alignment with WHO’s continued commitment to ensure equitable access to quality maternal and reproductive healthcare, WHO contracted two midwives in 2023, to provide SRH services in Galati and Constanta, counties with identified high demand for these services. WHO midwives provided essential support to refugees including family planning, antenatal and postnatal care, newborn care and assistance in cases of GBV.

WHO cultural mediators

WHO Country Office in Romania was the first among Ukraine neighbouring countries responding to the refugee crisis to deploy cultural mediators to support Ukrainian refugees. Six WHO cultural mediators were recruited and operated across Cluj, Tg Mures, Brasov, Constanta, and Bucharest throughout 2023. As Ukrainian nationals with a background in medicine or psychology, they provide refugees with psychological support and counselling in addition to much-needed guidance on sociocultural adaptation to life in Romania and navigating the Romanian healthcare system. Cultural mediators also provide an invaluable service by bridging language and cultural barriers in accessing care. During 2023, WHO cultural mediators provided over 3,500 counselling sessions, led psychosocial support sessions, cultural activities for children and mothers and delivered guidance and support to over 1,200 Ukrainian refugees both in person and online.

To mark the 2023 World Refugee Day, WHO Country Office in Romania produced a video "A Day in the Life of a Ukrainian Cultural Mediator" to showcase the important work undertaken. WHO cultural mediators will continue to serve as a critical link between WHO Country Office in Romania and the Ukrainian refugee population in 2024.

WHO county coordinators

WHO Country Office in Romania’s county coordinators strengthen coordination between local authorities, UN agencies and service providers in counties with high refugee populations, including Sibiu, Cluj, Baia Mare, Tg Mures, Galati, Brasov, Constanta, Iasi, and Suceava with the aim to decentralize WHO’s refugee response amid the protracted conflict. They advocate for improved health services and liaise with municipalities, NGOs and civil society organizations. Throughout 2023, they conducted regular meetings with subnational authorities and municipality representatives to identify potential challenges and mapped over 700 health services available to Ukrainian refugees, thereby enhancing access to healthcare services.

WHO RomExpo clinic

The RomExpo Centre in Bucharest was set up in 2022 at the height of the refugee arrival in Romania in collaboration between UNHCR, UNICEF, WHO and IOM. It operates as a “one-stop” hub catering to most of the Ukrainian refugees’ needs. Its services encompass financial aid and legal support to obtain temporary protection status in Romania.

WHO in partnership with the MoH, opened a health clinic at RomExpo to provide primary and reproductive health care and psychological support sessions. The clinic is staffed by WHO cultural mediators who facilitate access to healthcare professionals, including family physicians, nurses, gynecologists, midwives and psychotherapists.
Integrated refugee call centre

In collaboration with the MoH, UNHCR, IOM and UNICEF, WHO Country Office in Romania established a national call centre in March 2023 to provide Ukrainians with information regarding health access, education, housing and employment. The call centre is operated by ten Ukrainians recruited and trained by WHO and its partners. The team provides an important service as it allows callers to overcome language and cultural barriers. To ensure a high standard of service delivery, WHO developed technical guidance and standard operating practices for health-related calls.

By the end of 2023, the hotline had received 5,428 calls with 120 of them health-related. Whilst the health-related call volumes were relatively low, the personalized nature of the call centre provides a tangible and immediate impact on those seeking advice on healthcare access.
Using creativity to combat adversity

Oksana Liutak, a professional psychologist and former university lecturer from Ukraine, arrived in Romania in November 2022, leaving her son and parents behind. She was recruited as a WHO cultural mediator in 2022 and continued to support WHO’s refugee response throughout 2023.

As a refugee herself, she understood the social isolation, mental health difficulties and anxieties associated with fleeing Ukraine. To address these challenges and support refugees to acclimate to their new situation, Oksana organized weekly support groups, weekly individual and group counselling sessions and founded the "Peremoha-Victoria" choir and the theatre group "Favorite", providing refugees an opportunity to reconnect with their culture and traditions.

"Despite the hardships that people have faced over the last two years, there are incredible stories of how people have come together. We need more kindness, compassion and a sense of belonging and I am glad these programmes provide an opportunity for people to experience that."

Oksana Liutak

Viber chatbot

Accessing healthcare services has posed a significant challenge for Ukrainian refugees in Romania, with information and language barriers being key obstacles. To address this, WHO Country Office in Romania, with support from the WHO headquarters Digital team, developed a Viber chatbot. This innovative tool offers essential health-related information and support to Ukrainians and is available in Ukrainian, Russian and English for broader reach. The chatbot guides users on accessing primary healthcare services, including finding a family doctor, obtaining prescriptions, pregnancy care, hospital services and other health-related information, leveraging technology to bridge the gap in healthcare access for refugees. As of December 2023, the chatbot had over 5,000 users and 1,200 subscribers with a user satisfaction rate of 90%. 
Event marking one year since onset of Ukraine crisis

On 24 February 2023, the Government of Romania together with embassies, such as the Ukrainian Ambassador to Romania, the international community, NGOs and partner organizations responding to the Ukraine refugee crisis came together to mark the first year since the start of the war in Ukraine.

The event at RomExpo was also attended by former Prime Minister H.E. Mr. Nicolae Ciucă who, along with other key government stakeholders toured Romexpo and visited the centre operated by UN agencies. Delivering his keynote remark, the Prime Minister Expo affirmed Romania’s continued support for Ukrainian refugees and acknowledged the contribution of the UN agencies and humanitarian actors.

Ambassadors from the United States, Sweden, Japan and Ukraine also spoke during event and reaffirmed their support to the Ukrainian people. In a moving speech, a Ukrainian refugee spoke of her experience of having to leave her home, the emotional challenges and acknowledged the support she received at RomExpo.

Each of the UN agency representatives also addressed the audience, thanking the rapid response of the GoR to host Ukrainian refugees in a welcoming and dignified manner and called for lasting peace.
Mental health and psychosocial support

The prolonged conflict has resulted in rising mental health needs among the Ukrainian refugee population. Mental health services in Romania are however limited and many refugees struggle to access required care. By leveraging their background in psychology and social sciences, cultural mediators have been a cornerstone within the WHO’s response, providing mental health and emotional support to Ukrainian refugees as well as individual psychosocial support sessions.

WHO Country Office in Romania and partners from the MHPSS sWG also carried out a MHPSS service mapping during 2022-2023 to update information about active stakeholders, their geographic reach and services provided and to identify MHPSS referral pathways available to refugees. This information was shared with Ukrainians in Romania.

WHO Country Office in Romania, together with the MHPSS sWG, also conducted a large-scale capacity-building needs assessment. Some of the key findings include training needs of sWG members related to crisis prevention and intervention, particularly related to suicide; self-care and stress management; working with clients with substance abuse problems; and conducting group counselling, among others.

WHO Country Office in Romania has also strengthened national MHPSS capabilities. Through close collaboration with international and national stakeholders, WHO coordinated an agreement between the Romanian and Ukrainian governments on the mutual recognition of study documents, which when signed will allow Ukrainian psychologists to register with the Romanian Association of Psychologists and to provide services for refugees.

WHO Country Office in Romania conducted Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Guidelines training, attended by MHPSS sWG partners. The objectives of the workshops were to highlight the importance of IASC MHPSS guidelines, provide practical examples on how to implement the guidelines within the UNRRP and share experiences on using the guidelines in the field.
Responding to Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment

Marking Pride week in Bucharest in July 2023, WHO distributed sexual health leaflets to challenge myths and misconceptions around contraception and sexually transmitted infections. The activities under the "Tell Me for Real" campaign included both digital and print materials in Romanian, Ukrainian and English aimed at the LGBT youth community.

WHO Country Office in Romania also launched a sexual health social media campaign with the aim of promoting good health. The social media tiles were developed by the WHO Country Office in Romanian country office in Ukrainian, Romanian and English and made available to other NGOs for use in their campaigns.
Gender-based violence

Violence against women remains a persistent issue in the EU, with estimates suggesting that 1 in 3 women (or 61 out of 185 million) have experienced physical or sexual violence. A comparable situation can be observed for Romania with rape, domestic abuse and intimate partner violence (IPV) remaining relatively common.

The EU 2023 Gender Equality Index reports Romania ranking last and further studies by the European Institute for Gender Equality state the economic loss from GBV as €16 billion per year. Eliminating gender inequality could increase the country’s GDP by 8.7% by 2030, while improving the well-being of women and girls.

The World Bank’s 2023 Gender Assessment Report states that the full extent of GBV in Romania remains hidden due to the lack of key data. Over the years, the GoR has made efforts to reduce GBV but effective coordination and cooperation among stakeholders, including those within private and public sectors is crucial. Enhancing health provider capacity in Romania to support survivors of GBV has thus constituted an operational priority for WHO in 2023.

In 2023, WHO Country Office in Romania organized a five-day training on the Clinical Management of Rape (CMR) and IPV, in collaboration with UNFPA, EEIRH and ANES. The training was attended by 28 professionals, including forensic doctors, gynaecologists, psychologists, social workers and legal representatives.

WHO Country Office in Romania also delivered a two-day CMR training course in sexual violence centres in Bucharest, Constanta, Piatra Neamt, Satu Mare, Sibiu and Timisoara, in partnership with ANES and EEIRH. The overall objective was to refresh health care providers’ knowledge and skills on providing medical care to survivors of sexual violence.

In addition, WHO delivered three trainings on GBV and Preventing and Responding to Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment (PSEAH) in Bucharest and Sibiu. The sessions targeted different audiences including WHO Country Office in Romania team members, humanitarian actors and Romanian family doctors, psychologists and teachers.

In October, WHO Country Office in Romania and representatives from ANES and the EEIRH attended a WHO/Europe Training of Trainers on integrating GBV care into health.

Following this training, WHO supported two-day GBV/SRH trainings in Bucharest for health managers and family doctors, delivered by ANES and EEIRH in December 2023. Participants were introduced to concepts around core principles in responding to and preventing GBV. Training of Trainers are crucial to ensure sustainability and enhance in-country capacity to support survivors of GBV in the long term.

Persisting stigma around GBV acts as a barrier for many GBV survivors to seek care or report abuse, with implications for their current and future health and well-being. Throughout 2023, WHO has advocated for the destigmatization of GBV through enhanced awareness and community dialogue.

As part of the global awareness campaign "16 Days of Activism against GBV" (25 November – 10 December), WHO Representative Dr. Clarinval shared her experience of domestic abuse and the path she took to recovery.
Communicable diseases
Polio and waterborne diseases

The Ukrainian conflict has also raised the threat of polio and/or waterborne disease outbreaks as evidenced by the destruction of the Kakhovka dam in June 2023 which raised considerable concerns in Romania regarding the possible contamination of the national water supply in coastal areas. In response to the threat, WHO supported national and local authorities with assessing the situation via media monitoring and through the preparation for a rapid mobilization of resources if required. Whilst this event did not result in a detected contamination or a disease outbreak, WHO remains vigilant moving into 2024.

COVID-19

Despite considerable reductions in the COVID-19 burden for much of the year, Romania experienced nearly 15,000 new COVID-19 cases recorded on 24 September and a spike in the last quarter of 2023. In the context of the refugee crisis, as the Ukrainian refugee population includes many elderly individuals these findings are of particular concern. WHO Country Office in Romania, in cooperation with national authorities supported primary health centres through the procurement of essential equipment and disinfectants and the delivery of IPC trainings as well as awareness campaigns aimed at the public and Ukraine expat community.

Despite COVID-19 no longer being defined as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC), the pandemic underscored the importance of readiness and swift action, emphasizing the necessity for well-defined emergency response coordination frameworks and structures, particularly related to the human-animal-environment interface is continued.
Operations support

Logistics

WHO Country Office in Romania procured 75 major trauma kit backpacks and 75 Intraosseous Infusion Kit start packs at the value of US$ 136 515 funded by Denmark.

WHO Country Office in Romania and WHO/Europe also provided 395 KIT PPE chemical protection (level C) to the value of US$ 81 738. Both donations were made to DSU as part of the support for clinical management of CBRN events.

Other donations include 72 000 alcohol hand sanitizers to the value of US$ 37 440 to health partners, including seven GPs, one Blue Dot Refugee Centre and DSU with WHO cultural mediators distributing a further 6 040 alcohol hand sanitizers in the field.

WHO procured a fetoscope and related equipment to Filantropia Hospital in Bucharest, valued at US$ 56 840 and funded by the UN Department of Operational Support (UNDOS). The equipment is essential for the treatment of pregnancies with life-threatening complications such as twin-twin transfusions. Filantropia is the only public hospital in Romania performing this procedure and treats refugees from Ukraine as well as catering to the requirements of Romanian nationals.
Resource mobilization

During the year WHO developed concept notes and proposals for health systems strengthening outside Ukraine refugee projects, particularly related to NCDs, SRH, One Health and MHPSS.

WHO participated in the WHO/Europe organized Partners Forum in Istanbul in June 2023. The event brought together leading health contributors from Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia. Over one and a half days, more than 100 representatives gathered to enhance health sector partnerships through panel discussions and presentations on the significant health and well-being challenges in the WHO European Region. Capitalizing on the existing momentum for public health, the Partners Forum served as a platform for diverse expertise and perspectives. It facilitated discussions on genuine opportunities to achieve sustainable health funding throughout the region and strengthening new and established partnerships. Throughout the year, WHO Country Office in Romania strengthened its collaboration with the WHO/Europe resource mobilization team to facilitate funding support for Country Office operations.

Engaging of health stakeholders in Romania

WHO convened a meeting of strategic health partners in October 2023. Key participants included Dr. Diana Paun, Presidential Advisor; Mr. Andrei Iulian Del Cet, Counsellor for the Ministry of Health; Dr. Raed Arafat, Department of Emergency Situations; ambassadors and key civil society partners collaborating with the WHO Country Office in Romania.

WHO provided a brief on the WHO’s operations and achievements related to the BCA 2022–2023, the Ukraine emergency response and the NRRP. The event also provided an opportunity to discuss shared visions for health in Romania and strengthened the relationship and collaboration with key health stakeholders.
Planned activities in 2024

Public health

Continued support for Ukrainian refugees in Romania via health information booklet
— Making health and health access information widely available.
— Health promotion activities to promote healthy living, healthy nutrition and physical activity.

Strengthening refugee centre capacities
— Address significant shortages of essential medical consumables and equipment, such as blood pressure monitors, glucometers and pulsometers in refugee centers in Bucharest, Timisoara, Galati, Giurgiu, Rădăuți, and Marumers.

Addressing language barriers
— Contracting of a medical translation hotline available to all family doctors and hospitals in Romania and providing free and on-demand translation services to facilitate the delivery of care.

SRH
— SRH education and prevention trainings for working group partners.
— STI and contraception awareness campaign.
— Implementation of SEEK programme.

GBV
— Strengthen the capacity of healthcare providers and sWG partners to deliver and coordinate GBV services.

MHPSS
— Ensure integrated MHPSS response in livelihood and GBV programme via combined trainings.
— “Doing what Matters in Times of Stress” and mhGap trainings for sWG partners and Ukrainians.
EPW3: Flagship Programmes
VPD key achievements in 2023

— Strengthened the knowledge and awareness of family doctors and medical professionals on vaccination, organizing the first, dedicated workshop on vaccination coverage for Ukrainian refugees.

— Published and distributed over 15,000 printed copies and developed its e-book “Vaccination Guide for the Family Doctor’s Office” in Romanian and English.

Strengthening immunization coverage in Romania

Despite a reduction in communicable disease burden over the past two decades, several VPDs including TB, influenza and measles remain of public health concern in Romania. Negative trends in vaccination coverage for key infectious diseases, including MMRP, DTP and Hepatitis within the Romanian population have also been observed, significantly increasing the risk of a communicable disease outbreak.

The mass population displacement secondary to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the poor vaccination profiles of many Ukrainians has further enhanced this threat and additionally raised concerns of a prolonged measles and influenza outbreak in Romania. The issue has been further compounded by the presence of many elderly Ukrainians and Ukrainian infants who have now resided in Romania for over a year and hence most likely missed routine VPD vaccinations they would otherwise have received in Ukraine.

Low immunization coverage for key VPDs amongst the refugee population has serious implications for both the refugee and host population. In addition to the increased risk of an infectious disease outbreak, it is also likely to contribute to damaging perceptions of Ukrainian refugees by the host population.

Vaccinations in Romania are delivered in primary healthcare settings by family doctors. Under the temporary protection measures, Ukrainians are entitled to free routine vaccinations. Previous studies on the Ukrainian diaspora have highlighted immunization as a key health priority, however, vaccination among Ukrainians remains relatively low. The reasons for this are multifaceted and in part driven by Romanian family doctors’ limited understanding of Ukrainian health needs and entitlements. Marked differences between the Romanian and Ukrainian vaccination schedules and products have further impacted the capability and willingness of Romanian family doctors to provide vaccinations to Ukrainians.

Improving immunization coverage represented a key priority both for WHO, as outlined by the Immunization Agenda 2030 and for the GoR under their National Vaccination Strategy for 2023–2030. WHO Country Office in Romania has placed emphasis on promoting vaccine uptake within both host and refugee communities and ensuring equitable access to safe and effective vaccination services for all people in Romania.
Immunization promotion activities

Immunization coverage for key vaccine preventable diseases has significantly declined in Romania and Ukraine since the COVID-19 pandemic. Like many countries, this has in part been due to the spread of misinformation and a concomitant rise in vaccine hesitancy and vaccine fatigue. The measles outbreak in Romania, which spread to 34 counties during November and December 2023 is directly attributable to poor uptake of measles vaccination, with coverage in some communities as low as 52%.

Immunization promotion plays a crucial role in encouraging individuals and communities to get immunized against VPDs. WHO’s health promotion efforts in Romania have been focused upon increasing demand for vaccinations within both the Romanian and refugee by combatting misinformation, spreading awareness on the effectiveness of vaccinations and facilitating refugee access to national immunization services.

Measles awareness campaign

Following the Government of Romania’s official declaration of a measles outbreak in November 2023, WHO Country Office in Romania, in cooperation with UNICEF Romania, launched a social media campaign in Romanian and Ukrainian, highlighting the potential health risks and complications associated with contracting measles and the benefits of getting vaccinated.

Communication materials from both agencies were translated into Romanian and Ukrainian and shared across WHO’s and UNICEF’s social channels, reaching over 200,000 people.

In parallel, WHO Country Office in Romania, in cooperation with the MoH, launched a measles awareness campaign in Tg Mures, Brasov and Bucharest, the counties with the highest measles cases and large Ukrainian populations. Posters and digital visuals were displayed in high foot traffic areas, such as bus stations and shopping centres, with the campaign potentially reaching as many as 3 million individuals.

WHO Country Office in Romania has utilized several approaches to disseminate vaccination information, with several social media and street campaigns being launched, as well as in person vaccination events organized in counties with high refugee numbers. The latter involved the delivery of a short presentation to Ukrainian participants on core vaccination components and additionally included a Q&A session, allowing for direct dialogue with the participants.
Strengthening immunization access to refugees

Despite refugee entitlements, free vaccinations under their temporary protection status and a strong desire amongst many refugees to have their children vaccinated – as evidenced by WHO surveys in 2023 – the vaccination uptake among Ukrainians remains relatively low.

The reasons for this are multifaceted but in part driven by Romanian family doctors’ limited understanding of Ukrainian health needs and entitlements. Marked differences between the Romanian and Ukrainian vaccine schedules and products have further diminished the capability and willingness of family doctors to offer vaccinations to Ukrainians.

Considering these barriers to vaccination access, WHO Country Office in Romania, in collaboration with the MoH and the Romanian Association for Pediatric Education in Family Medicine (AREPMF), undertook three initiatives to improve vaccination delivery to Ukrainians:

— Workshop for family doctors on "Pathways for Strengthening Immunization Coverage for Ukrainian Refugees".
— Distribution of 15 000 books "Vaccination Guide for the Family Doctor’s Office".
— Development and distribution of the e-book "Vaccination Guide for the Family Doctor’s Office".

These initiatives were focused on supporting family doctors to immunize Ukrainian infants and children given their greater vulnerability to infections and poorer vaccination profile.

In line with WHO's commitment to promote vaccination delivery for Ukrainian children, 15 000 copies of the "Vaccination Guidance for Family Doctor's Office", were printed and distributed to family doctors across the nation, as well as nurses and university libraries. The book, authored by AREPMF, provided an in-depth review of the present Romanian infant vaccination schedule and established a framework by which Ukrainian children could be integrated into the Romanian vaccination system.

WHO Country Office in Romania county teams also held vaccination events in Târgu Mures and Baia Mare in November 2023. Both events included a short presentation as well as a Q&A session, which allowed for direct dialogue with mostly female participants. The information provided included insights into how vaccines were developed and how they worked, thus addressing one of the main misconceptions prevalent in the community. Other common topics such as side effects of vaccines and the necessity for two doses for certain vaccines were also addressed.

The personalized approach used during this campaign allowed for a direct interaction and open dialogue which enabled WHO to address individual concerns and queries. It is expected that the information gained from this event will be passed on by participants to their respective communities and hence have a wider reach as well as instigate behavioural change in the long term.
Vaccination workshop for romanian family doctors

WHO Country Office in Romania, in partnership with the Romanian Association for Pediatric Education in Family Medicine (AREPMF) and under the patronage of the MoH, hosted a hybrid workshop on “Pathways for Strengthening Immunization Coverage for Ukrainian Refugees” at the Palace of Parliament in Bucharest on 29 June.

The event aimed to enhance family doctors’ ability to integrate Ukrainian infants and children into the Romanian vaccination schedule, increase family doctors’ awareness of the vaccination needs of Ukrainian refugees and key obstacles they might be facing when trying to access (childhood) vaccinations, whilst also bolstering family doctors’ capacity to combat misinformation and address vaccination hesitancy within the Ukrainian refugee population.

The hybrid in-person and online workshop was attended by 248 participants, including family doctors from across the nation and representatives from the MoH, NIPH and NHIIH. The breadth of speakers and depth of discussion provided participants with a comprehensive and multidisciplinary insight into the field of vaccination.

Feedback following the event was highly positive, with a post-event survey indicating the workshop objectives had been met.

Planned activities in 2024

Immunization activities

— Trainings for community health workers, community nurses and cultural mediators on the technical aspect of vaccination and how to address vaccination hesitancy and fake news.
— Continue support for family doctors to enable them to provide vaccination services to Ukrainian children and adults.

— Health information and awareness campaigns on the benefits of vaccination, particularly with regards to childhood diseases, aimed at both the Romanian public and the Ukrainian refugees.
National Recovery and Resilience Project

The EU’s Recovery and Resilience Facility is at the heart of the project NextGenerationEU, the EU’s €800 billion temporary recovery instrument to support the economic recovery from the coronavirus pandemic and building a greener, more digital and resilient future. It presents an opportunity for Member States to create structural transformation and receive loans and grants to support the reform and investment packages put forward by the Member States in their National Recovery and Resilience Plans.

In Romania, WHO is offering technical assistance to the MoH for implementing the NRRP health care and digitalization components, as per the agreed Memorandum of Understanding. The agreement for the NRRP between the MoH and WHO was signed in June 2022 and covers four key work areas:

- Quality of Care (QoC)
- Health Services Management (HSM)
- Human Resources in Health (HRH)
- Data and Digital Health (DDH)

As a knowledge-based organization, WHO provides support to the MoH by performing assessments, providing recommendations and guidance for solutions design and developing national policies, as well as introducing European models and best practices that can be replicated in Romania. Through the NRRP, WHO experts are working with the government, national authorities and health partners on reforms that seek to improve access to high-quality health care services and patient outcomes for the Romanian population.

Key achievements in 2023

- Coordinated 58 health professionals from six hospitals across Romania, which took part in the Quality of Care Pilot Study to trial 25 indicators on a dedicated QoC platform.
- Held the WHO/Europe high-level regional meeting on health and care workforce: Time to act, where representatives from 50 countries from the European Region signed the Bucharest Declaration.
- Five HRH sectoral plans were developed to support and promote a sustainable and flexible workforce, capable of delivering accessible, fair and patient-centred high-quality care.
- Supported the development of beneficiary guides for the digitalization of 200 hospitals and 60 public health institutions subordinated to the MoH.
- Collaborated with over 44 representatives of key institutions and organizations to support the development of the National Digital Health Strategy for Romania.
- Over 120 health care professionals were trained via the HSM ToTs. Romanian stakeholders participated in over 10 regional and sub-regional events in WHO/Europe to gain experience on strengthening health systems.
- Over 260 technical and coordination missions and meetings took place in person and online with international experts and advisors to support the delivery of NRRP activities.
Quality of Care

Better quality of care means better patient health outcomes. For the implementation of the NRRP health component in QoC, WHO is assisting the MoH and national stakeholders in consolidating and evaluating data related to the quality of health care services. The collection of reliable, quality performance indicators, as well as patient-reported indicators are used to evaluate patient’s perspective on the quality of care provided. The work on the QoC pillar is supported by WHO Athens Office on Quality of Care and Patient Safety, who are providing technical expertise to the MoH.

Key activities in 2023

- Engaged with key stakeholders for the development of performance and quality indicators on QoC and patient safety.
- Offered technical assistance for the development of the relevant legislation to support the launch of a Pilot Study on QoC indicators.
- Implemented the Pilot Study to test the feasibility and potential impact of 25 QoC indicators in six hospitals selected by the MoH.
- Supported the development of a IT platform dedicated to data collection for the QoC Pilot Study.
- Organized a QoC technical workshop with designated staff from the six hospitals to discuss good practices on data collection and input.
Developing a set of Quality of Care indicators at the national level

The development of the quality of care indicators set, involved a multi-phase process that included a comprehensive situational analysis, continuous stakeholder engagement and policy dialogue to identify priority areas and the evidence-based definition of a core set of indicators.

Considering the relevance of assessing quality of care and patient safety to achieve this project’s goals and the current health priorities and needs of the Romanian health care system, the selected set of indicators covers four major areas:

- Patient safety, including prevention and control interventions for health care associated infections
- Patient experiences
- Health care workforce, including training
- Effectiveness, including progressing towards a more outpatient-focused healthcare system

The technical work was supported by on-the-field missions, initially aiming to map existing quality assurance and improvement mechanisms.

Following a two-month Pilot Study that involved six hospitals of different profiles, participating hospitals collected and submitted data for over 80% of the applicable indicators, with two hospitals reaching 100% coverage. Considering the needs and priorities of the Romanian health care system, participants rated the relevance of all four indicator categories as equally relevant.

The Pilot Study flagged the necessary adjustments and fine-tuning of the initially defined data collection, processing and controlling methods.

A guidebook was adapted to include these insights and WHO will support the roll-out of the health quality fund (HQF).

The HQF will assist Romanian hospitals towards a more patient-centred and effective health care system.
Health Services Management

Strong management skills lead to safe and accessible health care services. Therefore, health system administrators need adequate training, development opportunities, as well as clear career pathways. In 2023, the WHO aided the capacity building of the National Institute of Health Services Management (NIHSM), the national provider of training programmes and professional development modules for health services managers.

Key activities in 2023

— Provided technical assistance to identify models of international good practices in HSM. Developed the ToTs programme covering six areas including Ethics and Integrity, Public Health and Health Policies, Innovation and Digital Transformation, Designing and Delivering Health Care, Innovative Teaching Methodologies and Leadership and Change Management. Over 120 health care professionals completed the ToT programme for HSM who will disseminate information further.

— Supported the MoH in organizing the “Models of best practice in hospitals – the role of local authorities” event in Bistrita focused on sharing lessons learned and best practices in health services administration.

— Conducted a training needs assessment of health service managers across Romania.

— Supported the revision of the legislation for the strategic framework of the HSM reform.
Towards a more engaged and resilient health management in Romania

Building the capacity to understand the current dynamics of the health sector and strengthening the learning curricula for management is key to shape efficient health systems and to overcome challenges faced by the health workforce. Together with key academics from across Europe, WHO Country Office in Romania has contributed to strengthening the skills of Romanian health trainers and professionals in health services management.

“I found this course very interesting, because it presents the evolution of public health in parallel with the evolution of countries and medicine in history. The examples of Portugal are remarkably similar with the ones that we face here in Romania.”

Dr. Diana Fainarea,
Public Health Specialist
Human Resources in Health

In September 2022, WHO/Europe launched a landmark report "Health and Care Workforce in Europe: Time to Act" warning of a “ticking timebomb” as all 53 Member States currently face severe challenges related to their respective healthcare workforce.

Romania recognizes that their health workforce, including doctors, nurses, midwives and other health professionals, are vital in ensuring equitable health access for the entire population. The NRRP’s health component prioritizes health staff performance and development, as well as retention and recruitment as a key project pillar. WHO supported the MoH in developing Sectorial Action Plans (SAPs) to address the health workforce’s (HWF) gaps and needs within the Romanian health system.

Key activities in 2023

- Supported the revision of the legislation for the strategic framework of the HRH reform.
- Provided technical assistance for drafting the Romanian Strategy for Health Workforce Development 2022–2030, the strategic framework for the development of the Romanian health workforce.
- Organized two policy dialogues for the development of the HRH SAPs.
- Supported five human resources groups in developing health SAPs (Primary Care, Community Care, Public Health Care, Ambulatory Care and Hospital Care) - The SAPs effectively operationalize the strategic framework for the development of HRH.
- Assisted Romanian stakeholders’ participation in regional and sub-regional events in WHO European Region to gain experience in strategic capacity-building.
- Organized a study visit for the MoH to Denmark to facilitate the development of a HWF Registry for Romania.
- Supported the MoH with two Integrity and Anti-Corruption Practices events, which included stakeholders from the National Agency for Integrity, the National Agency for Public Procurement and the University of Bucharest.
- Conducted a HWF Assessment (WHO Health Labour Market Analysis).
Signing of the Bucharest Declaration

On 22-23 March 2023, representatives from 50 WHO/Europe Member States joined health workers, their unions and academics and experts, in adopting the Bucharest Declaration. It marked the commitment of governments, professional associations, research institutions, trade unions, civil society organisations and many others to take political action and work together to improve the retention and recruitment of healthcare workers and optimise their performance across Europe and Central Asia.

The Bucharest Declaration was signed during the regional meeting on Health and Care Workforce in Europe: Time to Act, organized by WHO/Europe with the support of WHO Country Office in Romania. Participants shared research findings, policy solutions and experiences relating to healthcare workforce challenges. Discussions covered a wide range of topics, including retention/recruitment, mobility/migration, required investments and innovations in training and education, improving working conditions and protecting mental well-being of healthcare workers.

WHO European Region currently faces severe challenges related to the healthcare workforce, as highlighted in the WHO European Regional report "Time to Act". Although the overall number of medical doctors, nurses and midwives in Europe increased between 2010 and 2020, COVID-19 had a devastating effect on the workforce. It was compounded by by the economic climate across Europe and its impact on pay, ageing staff and retention rates and the attractiveness of working in the healthcare sector.

The ambitions and aspirations in the Bucharest Declaration were adopted during the 73rd European Regional Committee meeting in October 2023 in Astana, Kazakhstan.
Data and Digital Health

Digital health is the intersection between technology and health care. Through the NRRP, WHO is supporting the digital transformation process of the Romanian health care system, seeking to optimize existing databases, facilitate patients’ access to health information and improve management of health services at national level.

Work on DDH for the NRRP project is focused on four areas:

— Resizing, Standardizing and Optimizing the Health Insurance Information Platform (PIAS).
— Digitizing 60 public health institutions.
— Digitizing 200 public hospitals.
— Building integrated telemedicine and mobile patient monitoring systems.
— Assessed the technical capacity of IT infrastructure and identified IT models from Europe that could be adapted in Romania.
— Consulted with regional stakeholders on different approaches to deliver telemedicine in Romania and aided building strategic frameworks for telemedicine and e-health systems for Romania’s National Digital Health Strategy.
— Provided technical expertise for the development of the beneficiary guides for the digitalization of 200 hospitals and 60 public health institutions.
— Organized a study tour to Porto, Portugal for the TWG members to participate in the Second WHO Digital Health Symposium and engaged with key stakeholders in DDH in Portugal to promote knowledge exchange.

Key activities in 2023
Paving the path for the new National Digital Health Strategy for Romania

For the digitalization component of the NRRP, WHO Country Office Romania, together with WHO/Europe colleagues aided the MoH to run a Technical Working Group responsible for drafting the National Digital Health Strategy for Romania 2024–2030. The TWG included 20 members and representatives of the main health and digitisation institutions in Romania. WHO organized over 10 workshops and events dedicated to TWG members and other key stakeholders in health and digital systems. They were invited to participate in discussions and contribute to the development of the National Digital Health Strategy, with WHO technical experts providing guidance based on their international expertise.

“It was an extremely engaging process, in which we made the most from the experience and expertise of many other institutions in the health system and beyond”

Cristina Belba, member of the DDH TWG and expert in the Authority for the Digitalization of Romania
NRRP events

The technical assistance offered by WHO to the Romanian MoH for the implementation of the NRRP encompasses support for major reforms to health policies and health system structures, leading to the improvement of health service accessibility, equity and efficiency.

To prompt the necessary changes at all levels of the health care system, by considering the key stakeholders’ valuable input and expertise, WHO Country Office in Romania co-led over 20 events with the MoH in 2023. These included conferences, workshops, roundtables, TWG meetings and regional meetings, covering participants ranging from government representatives, diplomats and managers of national agencies to hospital managers, academia and health care workers.

WHO supported the efforts of promoting the achievements and progress of the NRRP and ensured visibility of the project at national and regional level by producing visibility materials and supporting the media coverage of key activities.

Visibility materials included a series of videos aimed at highlighting the work of all stakeholders involved in the technical process of implementing the NRRP and capturing frontline perspectives of health care workers, national authorities or training participants.

Other communication support outputs included mass media outreach (press releases, press conferences, interviews), as well as digital outputs in the form social media coverage, digital video products and newsletters.

Since late 2023 and going forward, WHO is supporting the strengthening of the MoH’s communications capabilities on NRRP by providing specialist advice and technical assistance. This will contribute to a higher level of visibility and transparency for the NRRP projects, by navigating technical elements of the work areas and communicating the results to the public in a clear and structured manner.
NRRP – Celebrating 1.5 years of achievements

In December 2023, the MoH and WHO Country Office in Romania marked 1.5 years of collaboration on reforms for the Romanian health care system through the NRRP.

Early feedback from stakeholders have been positive with health professionals across the country saying that this is the first time they feel a meaningful change through the system. On 15 December 2023, over 180 participants representing the MoH, GoR, national stakeholders, health managers, local authorities, NGOs, journalists and WHO/Europe attended an event to mark the progress achieved against the NRRP reforms and investments.

On this occasion, WHO Country Office in Romania supported MoH’s efforts to take stock of the achievements in both reforms and investments in health and digitalization of the health sector. It was also an opportunity to turn the spotlight on the people who made contributions to the projects in the four pillars of the NRRP and reiterate the importance of coordination, mutual support and communications among all the key stakeholders that are advancing public health in Romania.
Financial overview

In 2023, WHO Country Office in Romania mobilized US$ 9.4 million to implement WHO operations in the country. This is unprecedented and has allowed WHO Country Office in Romania to provide essential medical supplies and services to people in need and to support the health system.

During 2023, there has been a noticeable decline in funding for the Ukraine emergency response, however, health remains a priority for partners. In the future, WHO’s health response will aim to ensure that health systems are strengthened, so all people in Romania, regardless of status have access to health services. Resource mobilization is vital for WHO Country Office in Romania to gather adequate finances to fulfil its goals for a sustained impact on the lives and health of the people. WHO Country Office in Romania works closely with the MoH and other health stakeholders to identify needs and aims to strengthen its collaboration with donors to increase investment into programmes.

WHO Country Office in Romania is grateful to our donors Denmark, Germany, Japan, Norway, Other (Assessed Contributions, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation), Romania and the USA for their financial assistance during the year, as well the MoH and all its partners for their support to WHO Country Office in Romania to implement its operations in 2023. Fig. 1 illustrates WHO Country Office in Romania’s implemented funding during the year. WHO is committed to strengthening these valuable partnerships to better respond to future healthcare challenges in the country.
WHO Country Office in Romania

Annual Report 2023

Total fund **US$ 9.4 million**

- **63%** Romania
- **13%** Japan
- **8%** Germany
- **7%** United Stated of America
- **6%** Norway
- **2%** Denmark
- **1%** Others

**Fig. 1. WHO Country Office in Romania Implemented Funding 2023**
References


The World Health Organization (WHO) is a specialized agency of the United Nations created in 1948 with the primary responsibility for international health matters and public health. The WHO Regional Office for Europe is one of six regional offices throughout the world, each with its own programme geared to the particular health conditions of the countries it serves.

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