

# PROTECTION BRIEF III SLOVAKIA

July 2023 – March 2024

## Operational Context

During the period covered by this Protection Brief III (July 2023 – March 2024), there were 686,584 border crossings from Ukraine to Slovakia, bringing the total to nearly 2.2 million since the escalation of the armed conflict in February 2022. By 31 March 2024, 118,921 refugees<sup>1</sup> fleeing Ukraine held Temporary Protection status in Slovakia and 235 applied for asylum.<sup>2</sup>

The Government of Slovakia continued responding with generosity and solidarity to its largest-ever refugee influx. The situation between July 2023 and March 2024 was characterized by the increased importance and focus on the inclusion of refugees in the national and local public services and, more generally, their socioeconomic inclusion into the host community. At the same time, refugees in Slovakia, especially those most vulnerable and the newly arrived, also continued to face different urgent needs.<sup>3</sup>

Following up on the topics addressed in Protection Brief II<sup>4</sup> (access to healthcare, education, and employment), the Government of Slovakia worked on several important measures to advance refugee protection and inclusion:

- In September 2023, the Government extended healthcare coverage for adult Temporary Protection holders from "urgent and necessary" care to full care, building on a similar previous expansion for refugee children.<sup>5</sup> To practically implement this crucial measure taken by the Government, it is key to ensure practical admission of Temporary Protection holders by healthcare practitioners regardless of their "tolerated stay" type of residence that comes with their Temporary Protection status.<sup>6</sup> Also, it is important to strengthen the information flow to healthcare practitioners and the public health insurance company to ensure their awareness of refugees' healthcare entitlements.<sup>7</sup>
- Since early 2024, preparations were underway for introducing compulsory school attendance for refugee children with Temporary Protection, which is key for guaranteeing refugee children's right to education in Slovakia. Nevertheless, the legislative changes were not introduced ahead of the start of the new school year 2024/2025. Therefore, as of the school year 2024/2025,

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<sup>1</sup> The terms "refugee" and "Temporary Protection holder" are used interchangeably throughout this document.

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR (2024), [Operational Data Portal: Ukraine Refugee Situation – Slovakia](#).

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR (2023), [Regional Protection Profiling and Monitoring: Protection Risks and Needs of Refugees from Ukraine](#); UNHCR (2024), [Regional Protection Profiling and Monitoring: Protection Risks and Needs of Refugees from Ukraine](#); UNHCR, IOM, WHO, UNICEF (2023), [Multi-Sector Needs Assessment Slovakia](#).

<sup>4</sup> UNHCR (2023), [Protection Brief II Slovakia](#).

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Health of the Slovak Republic (2023), [Určenie rozsahu potrebnej zdravotnej starostlivosti](#). The full care does not cover a spa treatment.

<sup>6</sup> Temporary Protection holders are often not admitted by healthcare practitioners due to their "tolerated stay" type of residence (not being able to have temporary or permanent residence in Slovakia with Temporary Protection). UNHCR welcomes that after the period covered by this Protection Brief (July 2023 – March 2024), in June 2024, the Slovak Parliament adopted a legislative change establishing that healthcare practitioners cannot refuse to admit refugees based on capacity constraints, just as they cannot refuse to admit permanent or temporary residents in the practitioner's locality. National Council of the Slovak Republic (2024), [Vládny návrh zákona, ktorým sa mení a dopĺňa zákon č. 480/2002 Z. z. o azyle a o zmene a doplnení niektorých zákonov v znení neskorších predpisov a ktorým sa menia a dopĺňajú niektoré zákony](#).

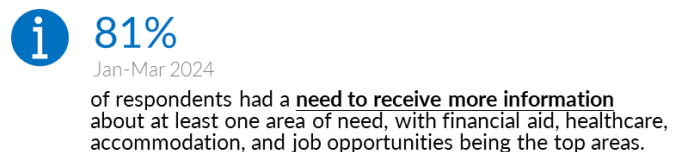
<sup>7</sup> Healthcare practitioners are often not aware of Temporary Protection holders' full healthcare entitlements, resulting in e. g. unjustified financial charges for procedures which should be free of charge.

- Slovakia will become the only country in the Ukraine Situation Regional Refugee Response Plan<sup>8</sup> in which education is not explicitly compulsory for refugee children with Temporary Protection.
- In March 2024, the Government approved a legislative amendment proposal that allows self-employment of Temporary Protection holders, aligning with the European Union (EU) Temporary Protection Directive and practices in various EU countries.<sup>9</sup>

These are important updates in key areas. UNHCR continues to collaborate closely with the Government of Slovakia to address the challenges and further enhance refugee protection and inclusion in the country.

UNHCR actively monitored and assessed the situation and needs of refugees in Slovakia through Protection Profiling and Monitoring,<sup>10</sup> focus group discussions, Multi-Sector Needs Assessment (MSNA) in collaboration with IOM, WHO, and UNICEF,<sup>11</sup> and Site Mapping and Monitoring in collaboration with IOM.<sup>12,13</sup> This Protection Brief III consolidates and analyzes relevant findings related to 1) accommodation, 2) inclusion in the social protection system, and 3) access to reliable information, complemented by other data sources. It also details the response of UNHCR and its partners<sup>14</sup> in supporting the Government of Slovakia and local authorities to address challenges and bridge gaps. Finally, it offers a set of recommendations aimed at strengthening the protection and inclusion of refugees.

## Key Trends & Figures<sup>15</sup>



## Analysis

### Accommodation

In response to the refugee situation arising from the conflict in Ukraine, the Government of Slovakia promptly implemented a robust, humanitarian-oriented accommodation support system for Temporary Protection holders status. This robust support system, in place until June 2024, included two primary components: 1) a subsidy from the Ministry of Interior for private property owners who offered their

<sup>8</sup> Regional Refugee Response for the Ukraine Situation (2024), [Ukraine Situation: Regional Refugee Response Plan - January-December 2024](#).

<sup>9</sup> Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic (2024), [Vláda schválila zmeny v zákone o pobyte cudzincov](#). After the period covered by this Protection Brief III, in June 2024, the legislative amendment was also approved by the Slovak Parliament. National Council of the Slovak Republic (2024), [Vládny návrh zákona, ktorým sa mení a dopĺňa zákon č. 404/2011 Z. z. o pobyte cudzincov a o zmene a doplnení niektorých zákonov v znení neskorších predpisov a ktorým sa menia a dopĺňajú niektoré zákony](#).

<sup>10</sup> UNHCR (2023), [Regional Protection Profiling and Monitoring: Protection Risks and Needs of Refugees from Ukraine](#); UNHCR (2024), [Regional Protection Profiling and Monitoring: Protection Risks and Needs of Refugees from Ukraine](#); 3,859 Protection Profiling and Monitoring interviews (covering 2,744 household members) were conducted between July 2023 and March 2024. Due to methodological limitations, the results cannot necessarily be extrapolated to the whole population of refugees from Ukraine in Slovakia and are only indicative of their situation.

<sup>11</sup> UNHCR, IOM, WHO, UNICEF (2023), [Multi-Sector Needs Assessment Slovakia](#).

<sup>12</sup> UNHCR, IOM (2024), Site Mapping and Monitoring [Manuscript in preparation].

<sup>13</sup> UNHCR Slovakia is grateful for the extensive collaboration with its partners –the Slovak Humanitarian Council, People in Peril, Human Rights League, and Mareena— on various data collection exercises.

<sup>14</sup> To strengthen the protection and inclusion of refugees in Slovakia, UNHCR works with its funded partners across the country, namely the Slovak Humanitarian Council, People in Peril, Human Rights League, Mareena, Sme Spolu, League for Mental Health, Platform of Families with Children with Disabilities, and Centre for the Research of Ethnicity and Culture.

<sup>15</sup> UNHCR (2023), [Regional Protection Profiling and Monitoring: Protection Risks and Needs of Refugees from Ukraine](#); UNHCR (2024), [Regional Protection Profiling and Monitoring: Protection Risks and Needs of Refugees from Ukraine](#).

apartments and houses to refugees at no charge, as well as for owners of non-commercial collective accommodation sites,<sup>16</sup> and 2) a subsidy from the Ministry of Transport for commercial accommodation providers (hotels, hostels, private dormitories, etc.), which allowed for the possibility of additional charges to refugees.<sup>17</sup> According to the official data, more than 46,000 refugees benefited from these subsidies in December 2023.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the Government of Slovakia provided various asylum facilities and the largest collective accommodation center in Gabčíkovo, managed by the Migration Office of the Ministry of Interior, for accommodation of predominantly vulnerable Temporary Protection holders. Finally, it repurposed publicly owned accommodation sites intended for educational or recreational use to support accommodation needs of refugees. Together, these measures supported the compliance with the European Union Temporary Protection Directive and safeguarded refugees' right to accommodation. In focus group discussions with UNHCR, refugees repeatedly expressed strong gratitude for this support, recognizing the help of the Government, local communities, and landlords.

Data from Protection Profiling and Monitoring and the MSNA showed that most refugees in Slovakia lived in private accommodation (i.e. apartments or houses). At the same time, considerable number of refugees also resided in collective accommodation sites.<sup>19</sup> Specifically, the MSNA data indicated that 47% of respondents have their own accommodation, 18% were in shared accommodation, 22% in collective sites, and 10% in hotels or hostels. A vast majority of those surveyed through Protection Profiling and Monitoring (97% between January and March 2024) reported having a rental contract, and 84% of the MSNA respondents indicated no issues with living conditions in their accommodation. At the same time, 15% of respondents experienced difficulties, primarily with insufficient privacy (34%). As noted by an accommodation expert in the MSNA analysis:

*"An important revelation from the data is the overcrowded living arrangements, with a figure of 0.8 rooms per person for refugee households. If refugee households were assigned a distinct category in the EU Commission comparison, refugee households in Slovakia would emerge as the least favorable in terms of average rooms per person, highlighting a critical concern in housing conditions for this demographic."<sup>20</sup>*

Other challenges reported by refugees included being unable to cook and/or store food properly (26%), lack of separate showers and/or toilets (25%), being unable to keep warm or cool (11%), and the space not being sufficiently clean (10%). 6% also faced inadequate heating, insulation, or hot water availability, complicating winter preparations.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, all refugees benefiting from the accommodation subsidies were required to appear in person before the municipal authorities once a month, a requirement that can be particularly challenging for persons with disabilities or serious medical condition.<sup>22</sup>

The Site Mapping and Monitoring revealed that the accommodation conditions were especially challenging for the most vulnerable. A large portion of the surveyed collective sites reported accommodating persons with different specific needs, including older persons (61%), single parents or caregivers (24%), persons with disabilities (20%), or persons with serious medical condition (12%). Nevertheless, the majority of the sites (68 of the 83 surveyed) reported having no equipment to address the needs of older persons and persons with disabilities, 36% of the surveyed sites reported not being accessible for persons with disabilities, 35% did not have barrier-free showers, and 59% did not have barrier-free toilets.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic (2024), [Informácie k príspevku za ubytovanie cudzinca podľa zákona o azyle](#).

<sup>17</sup> Ministry of Transport of the Slovak Republic (2024), [Lex Ukrajina](#). After the period covered by this Protection Brief III, as of July 2024, the commercial accommodation providers are no longer entitled to receive subsidies for accommodating Temporary Protection holders.

<sup>18</sup> Government Office of the Slovak Republic (2024), [Systémové riešenie poskytovania a financovania dodatočných výdavkov súvisiacich s odídencami z Ukrajiny](#).

<sup>19</sup> UNHCR (2023), [Regional Protection Profiling and Monitoring: Protection Risks and Needs of Refugees from Ukraine](#); UNHCR (2024), [Regional Protection Profiling and Monitoring: Protection Risks and Needs of Refugees from Ukraine](#); UNHCR, IOM, WHO, UNICEF (2023), [Multi-Sector Needs Assessment Slovakia](#).

<sup>20</sup> UNHCR, IOM, WHO, UNICEF (2023), [Multi-Sector Needs Assessment Slovakia](#), p. 23.

<sup>21</sup> UNHCR, IOM, WHO, UNICEF (2023), [Multi-Sector Needs Assessment Slovakia](#).

<sup>22</sup> With the introduction of the new accommodation support system as of July 2024, as explained further in the document, the frequency of required appearances before the municipal authorities was increased from once to twice a month, posing additional challenges in particular for refugees with disabilities or serious medical condition.

<sup>23</sup> UNHCR, IOM (2024), Site Mapping and Monitoring [Manuscript in preparation].

The Government of Slovakia consistently ensured necessary extensions of accommodation subsidies.<sup>24</sup> However, the timing of these extensions – sometimes days before the previous program expired – created uncertainty and anxiety among some refugees. They feared potential eviction, homelessness, or induced return to Ukraine, and were not able to sign new rental contracts. As the expiration of the program was approaching, refugees living in a collective accommodation center explained to UNHCR they were regularly checking whether their belongings were still in their rooms. Those from the most heavily conflict-affected areas of Ukraine also shared they have no home left in Ukraine, and did not know what to do if the accommodation assistance was to cease. In this regard, 32% of collective accommodation sites surveyed through Site Mapping and Monitoring indeed declared not being sure whether accommodation will continue to be provided if the subsidy was fully discontinued, and 22% declared it will not continue.<sup>25</sup>

From July to December 2023, 44% of Protection Profiling and Monitoring respondents reported being able to stay in their accommodation without a specific time limit. This figure dropped to 36% between January and March 2024. Some refugees (16% between July and December 2023, and 15% between January and March 2024) reported being able to stay in their current accommodation for 1-3 months only. The proportion of refugees able to stay for less than one month increased from 3% between July and December 2023 to 12% between January and March 2024. These numbers were consistent with the uncertainty regarding the future of the accommodation subsidies in the first half of 2024. Among those being able to stay in their accommodation for less than 3 months, the main reason for having to leave was the end of the accommodation subsidy program (70% between January and March 2024).<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, Site Mapping and Monitoring also showed that 46% of collective accommodation sites give refugees a short notice period of two weeks or less before having to leave.<sup>27</sup>

Since February 2024, the Government of Slovakia halved the accommodation subsidies.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, refugees informed of numerous instances where homeowners, in contravention of the law, requested refugees to pay the difference, including when the total amounts received by the homeowners exceeded market prices. This practice was also observed in some collective accommodation centers, where, albeit legally, the commercial owners demanded excessive extra payments considering the living conditions in shared hostel or dormitory rooms. The Site Mapping and Monitoring showed that with the adjusted accommodation subsidies, refugees will need to financially contribute to running costs at 69% of the surveyed collective accommodation sites.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, focus group discussions confirmed that vulnerable groups who cannot take up employment in Slovakia are truly unable to cover these extra accommodation costs. This concerns mainly older persons receiving low pensions from Ukraine, single mothers who take care of their children, persons with disabilities or serious medical condition, or newly arrived refugees who could not yet find jobs.

In response to the complex accommodation situation, UNHCR supported the Government of Slovakia and the local authorities through its partner organizations, including at Blue Dots, providing counselling and helping vulnerable refugees to find accommodation. In this regard, the strong operational presence of UNHCR's partners across Slovakia and the extensive mobile outreach to remote locations proved to be essential. The demand spiked in early 2024 when subsidy adjustments took place and continuation of the subsidies was uncertain.

In March 2024, the Government of Slovakia adopted a roadmap document tasking different ministries to devise a new sustainable accommodation support system.<sup>30</sup> Following the period covered by this Protection Brief III, the new system has become effective as of July 2024.<sup>31</sup> Under this system, commercial accommodation providers (hotels, hostels, private dormitories, etc.) are no longer eligible for

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<sup>24</sup> Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic (2024), [Vláda schválila zmeny v poskytovaní príspevku za ubytovanie odídencom z Ukrajiny](#); Ministry of Transport of the Slovak Republic (2024), [Ubytovanie odídencom v období apríl 2024 - jún 2024](#).

<sup>25</sup> UNHCR, IOM (2024), Site Mapping and Monitoring [Manuscript in preparation].

<sup>26</sup> UNHCR (2023), [Regional Protection Profiling and Monitoring: Protection Risks and Needs of Refugees from Ukraine](#); UNHCR (2024), [Regional Protection Profiling and Monitoring: Protection Risks and Needs of Refugees from Ukraine](#).

<sup>27</sup> UNHCR, IOM (2024), Site Mapping and Monitoring [Manuscript in preparation].

<sup>28</sup> Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic (2024), [Kabinet rozhodol o predĺžení poskytovania dočasného útočiska aj o zmenách pri poskytovaní príspevku za ubytovanie](#); Ministry of Transport of the Slovak Republic (2024), [Ministerstvo dopravy upravuje príspevok za ubytovanie odídencom](#).

<sup>29</sup> UNHCR, IOM (2024), Site Mapping and Monitoring [Manuscript in preparation].

<sup>30</sup> Government Office of the Slovak Republic (2024), [Systémové riešenie poskytovania a financovania dodatočných výdavkov súvisiacich s odídencami z Ukrajiny](#).

<sup>31</sup> National Council of the Slovak Republic (2024), [Vládny návrh zákona, ktorým sa mení a dopĺňa zákon č. 480/2002 Z. z. o azyle a o zmene a doplnení niektorých zákonov v znení neskorších predpisov a ktorým sa menia a dopĺňajú niektoré zákony](#).

subsidies, and only newly arrived refugees and those with certain vulnerabilities are targeted by the support.<sup>32</sup>

## Inclusion in the Social Protection System

The Government of Slovakia has enabled Temporary Protection holders to access significant portions of the public social protection system on par with Slovak nationals. Notably, refugees can avail themselves of numerous State-provided social protection benefits, primarily channeled through the Offices of Labour, Social Affairs and Family. A key instrument is the Material Need Assistance,<sup>33</sup> designed for individuals whose household income falls below the national subsistence minimum threshold.<sup>34</sup> This assistance is particularly relevant for older persons, single mothers with children, persons with disabilities or serious medical condition, or newly arrived refugees. According to official data, more than 12,000 refugees received the Material Need Assistance in January 2024.<sup>35</sup> Another vital social protection instrument is the Disability Allowance for Refugees,<sup>36</sup> available to refugees with two different degrees of severe disability. The Offices of Labour, Social Affairs and Family conduct individual assessments to determine eligibility and the amount of the assistance. According to official data, more than 1,400 refugees received the Disability Allowance for Refugees in September 2023.<sup>37</sup> Other important instruments available to Temporary Protection holders include the Childcare Allowance,<sup>38</sup> Subsidy to Support Child's Nutrition Habits,<sup>39</sup> Subsidy to Support Child's Education,<sup>40</sup> and the Substitute Care Allowance.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, the State-supported accommodation system for refugees complements all the above benefits.

Importantly, as also noted by the Slovak Office of the Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities, the Government of Slovakia enabled Temporary Protection holders access to the public social services system, including nursing care or retirement homes, and some refugee professionals with relevant background were also integrated into the social services as qualified employees.<sup>42</sup>

On the other hand, certain social protection benefits remain inaccessible for refugees due to their legal status, as Temporary Protection is not linked to temporary or permanent residence in Slovakia and instead, they are granted "tolerated stay" type of residence. These benefits include the Parental Allowance,<sup>43</sup> Child Allowance,<sup>44</sup> Compensation for Persons with Disabilities,<sup>45</sup> Birth Allowance,<sup>46</sup> Substitute Alimony,<sup>47</sup> Funeral Allowance,<sup>48</sup> Activation Allowance<sup>49</sup> and Unemployment Allowance.<sup>50</sup> With regard to the Unemployment Allowance, it is notable that Temporary Protection holders are

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<sup>32</sup> Under the new accommodation support system, the subsidy is provided by the Ministry of Interior to owners of accommodation who provide free of charge accommodation to Temporary Protection holders for the initial 120 days from obtaining Temporary Protection for the first time in Slovakia; and longer than 120 days, only if the Temporary Protection holder is considered a vulnerable person. According to the new system, a vulnerable person is:

- a member of a household receiving material need assistance from the Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family;
- a person with a severe disability receiving disability allowance from the Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family;
- a person 65 years of age or older;
- one of the parents or a caregiver (based on a court decision) taking care of a child under 5 years of age; and
- their child under 5 years of age.

Additionally, under the new system, facilities managed by the Migration Office can also accommodate Temporary Protection holders for the initial 120 days; or longer only if they are 65 years of age or older, single parents or caregivers of children under 5 years of age, and their children under the age of five.

<sup>33</sup> In Slovak "Pomoc v hmotnej núdzi".

<sup>34</sup> Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic (2024), [Životné minimum](#).

<sup>35</sup> Government Office of the Slovak Republic (2024), [Systémové riešenie poskytovania a financovania dodatočných výdavkov súvisiacich s odídencami z Ukrajiny](#).

<sup>36</sup> In Slovak "Dotácia na podporu humanitárnej pomoci osobe s osobitnou ochranou v súvislosti s jej závažným zdravotným postihnutím".

<sup>37</sup> Government Office of the Slovak Republic (2024), [Systémové riešenie poskytovania a financovania dodatočných výdavkov súvisiacich s odídencami z Ukrajiny](#).

<sup>38</sup> In Slovak "Príspevok na starostlivosť o dieťa".

<sup>39</sup> In Slovak "Dotácia na podporu výchovy k stravovacím návykom dieťaťa".

<sup>40</sup> In Slovak "Dotácia na podporu výchovy k stravovacím návykom dieťaťa".

<sup>41</sup> In Slovak "Príspevok na podporu náhradnej starostlivosti o dieťa".

<sup>42</sup> Slovak Office of the Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities (2024), [Správa o činnosti komisára pre osoby so zdravotným postihnutím za rok 2023](#); Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic (2022), [Usmernenie pre poskytovateľov sociálnych služieb v oblasti poskytovania sociálnych služieb osobám prichádzajúcim z Ukrajiny \(k 3. marcu 2022\)](#).

<sup>43</sup> In Slovak "Rodičovský príspevok".

<sup>44</sup> In Slovak "Prídavok na dieťa".

<sup>45</sup> In Slovak "Kompenzácia pre osoby so zdravotným postihnutím".

<sup>46</sup> In Slovak "Príspevok pri narodení dieťaťa".

<sup>47</sup> In Slovak "Náhradné výživné".

<sup>48</sup> In Slovak "Príspevok na pohreb".

<sup>49</sup> In Slovak "Aktivačný príspevok".

<sup>50</sup> In Slovak "Dávka v nezamestnanosti".

making the corresponding unemployment contribution to the Social Insurance Agency, without being able to claim this benefit. According to the official statistics, as of March 2024, approximately 30,000 refugees from Ukraine with Temporary Protection were employed in Slovakia.<sup>51</sup> Their mandatory contributions to the Social Insurance Agency are equivalent to those of employed Slovak nationals, including the unemployment insurance contribution which finances precisely the Unemployment Allowance.<sup>52</sup> Employees in Slovakia are generally entitled to this allowance if they paid the respective contribution for at least two years, and they are registered in the Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family database of job applicants. Nevertheless, Temporary Protection holders are unable to register for this due to their lack of temporary or permanent residence. Therefore, if the approximately 30,000 employed Temporary Protection holders were earning only a minimum wage (while many of them certainly earn more), it can be estimated that they are contributing more than €337,000 per month to a social benefit which they cannot access. Exploring the expansion of this and the other social protection benefits which are currently not available to Temporary Protection holders presents an important opportunity to strengthen the social protection of the most vulnerable.

When it comes specifically to refugees with disabilities, enabling their access to different compensation benefits including for personal assistance, transportation, adaptation of accommodation, or purchase of disability aids would also significantly support this particularly vulnerable group. As shared by a refugee during one of the focus group discussions with UNHCR:

*“Persons with disabilities cannot work in many cases; they need extra cash assistance and support for example to cover the costs of prothesis, wheelchairs...”*

*Participant of a focus group discussion in Opatovská Nová Ves<sup>53</sup>*

The MSNA indeed confirmed lower levels of employment in refugee households with a member with disability compared to other refugee households.<sup>54</sup> Additionally, allowing their access to forms of support that are currently tied to the possession of a Slovak disability card (which Temporary Protection holders cannot obtain) –e.g. discounted transportation fares, access to public services at no or reduced cost, or special labor conditions– would also importantly enhance their protection and inclusion.

According to the Protection Profiling and Monitoring data, 35% of the refugees surveyed between January and March 2024 applied for some form of State-provided social protection benefits for vulnerable groups. Among those who applied, 90% did not report facing challenges with access. Among the smaller portion (10%) who did, the language barrier was the most reported challenge (49%), followed by long waiting times (21%), being considered ineligible (13%), or lack of necessary documents (10%).<sup>55</sup>

UNHCR, drawing from its partners' counseling and support in numerous individual cases, noted challenges faced by some refugees with disabilities in relation to their access to Disability Allowance for Refugees. The Slovak Office of the Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities highlighted several systemic issues, including overly strict eligibility criteria that undermine the ability of refugees with disabilities to meet basic needs, a high degree of subjectivity in the assessment process, legal uncertainty, unpredictability in assessment outcomes, insufficiently reasoned decisions, the absence of legal recourse, and lack of possibility for retroactive payments. The Commissioner reported that in 2023, it reviewed and assisted with 20 cases, finding that eligibility had been incorrectly assessed in 14 instances, including serious conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis, post-laryngectomy status due to cancer, and immobility resulting from cerebral stroke.<sup>56</sup>

To facilitate vulnerable refugees' access to the public social protection system and help overcome some of the practical challenges, UNHCR supported the Government of Slovakia and the local authorities through assistance of its partner organizations, including at Blue Dots, providing social counseling and individual support to refugees in a multitude of locations and through mobile outreach teams. Moreover,

<sup>51</sup> Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family, [Zamestnávanie cudzincov na území Slovenskej republiky za rok 2024](#).

<sup>52</sup> Social Insurance Agency (2024), [Tabuľky platenia poisťného od 1. januára 2024](#).

<sup>53</sup> UNHCR, IOM, WHO, UNICEF (2024), [Slovakia: Multi-Sector Needs Assessment 2023 - Annex Report on Persons with Disabilities - June 2024](#), p. 4.

<sup>54</sup> UNHCR, IOM, WHO, UNICEF (2024), [Slovakia: Multi-Sector Needs Assessment 2023 - Annex Report on Persons with Disabilities - June 2024](#).

<sup>55</sup> UNHCR (2024), [Regional Protection Profiling and Monitoring: Protection Risks and Needs of Refugees from Ukraine](#).

<sup>56</sup> Slovak Office of the Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities (2024), [Správa o činnosti komisára pre osoby so zdravotným postihnutím za rok 2023](#).

for 10 months, UNHCR's partner in Bratislava provided interpretation to the Bratislava Office of Labour, Social Affairs, and Family during eligibility assessments for disability support.

UNHCR also materially supported the Banská Bystrica Self-Governing Region, donating equipment to a network of 10 Centers of Integrated Social and Health Care. These centers facilitate access to the social protection and healthcare system for older persons, persons with disabilities, and persons in crisis situations among vulnerable Slovak nationals and refugees, especially in remote locations. Finally, in support of the Slovak Government, UNHCR in collaboration with UNICEF also provided targeted cash assistance to 19,500 refugees with vulnerabilities between July and December 2023, complementing the public social protection system.

## Access to Reliable Information

Ensuring refugees have access to relevant and reliable information about their rights and available services is crucial for their protection and successful inclusion in the host country. In Slovakia, the MSNA revealed that 75% of respondents did not face challenges in accessing information about their rights and services. The remaining 25% reported difficulties related to lack of knowledge on where to find information (55%), unavailability of information in their language(s) (28%), and uncertainty about which information to trust (21%) as the main obstacles.<sup>57</sup>

According to Protection Profiling and Monitoring, refugees in Slovakia expressed a need for more information on key aspects of daily life. These include financial aid (44% between July-December 2023, and 35% between January-March 2024), healthcare (33% for both periods), accommodation (23% and 24% respectively), and job opportunities (23% and 21% respectively).<sup>58</sup> These findings were echoed in focus group discussions with UNHCR, where refugees expressed a need for additional and clear information on financial assistance from UN agencies, school enrollment for children, available accommodation, and access to healthcare.

Most refugees (55%) preferred receiving information via social media, followed by phone (31%), and websites (28%).<sup>59</sup> Accordingly, the Government of Slovakia, some local authorities, and various humanitarian actors in the country established social media channels, phone lines, and websites or website sections in Ukrainian and English to disseminate information to refugees. This approach helped make information accessible to a large portion of the community.

At the same time, 22% of respondents preferred receiving information in person and 21% from family or friends.<sup>60</sup> In the MSNA, households "with a member with disability reported facing more challenges accessing information, mainly due to a lack of knowledge of available sources of information".<sup>61</sup> Challenges were faced by 34% and 39% of households with a member with disability (depending on the level of disability), as opposed to 24% of households without such member.<sup>62</sup> While digital information provision is crucial, it is often the most vulnerable refugees, such as persons with certain disabilities or older persons, who need to receive information in a more tailored manner, in person or over the phone, in a language they fully understand, and with an opportunity to ask follow-up questions as necessary.

In response to these needs, UNHCR supported the Government of Slovakia and local authorities in significantly strengthening refugees' access to information about their rights and available services through a wide range of communication channels. The UNHCR Slovakia Telegram channel,<sup>63</sup> with over 10,000 subscribers, features reliable information in four languages on major legislative and policy developments affecting refugees, awareness-raising campaigns, financial assistance, and different activities and events. The UNHCR-UNICEF Helpline<sup>64</sup> answered over 13,000 calls between July 2023 and March 2024, addressing queries ranging from financial assistance to urgent protection matters. The UNHCR Slovakia Help site,<sup>65</sup> offering diverse information in six languages including a comprehensive

<sup>57</sup> UNHCR, IOM, WHO, UNICEF (2023), [Multi-Sector Needs Assessment Slovakia](#).

<sup>58</sup> UNHCR (2023), [Regional Protection Profiling and Monitoring: Protection Risks and Needs of Refugees from Ukraine](#); UNHCR (2024), [Regional Protection Profiling and Monitoring: Protection Risks and Needs of Refugees from Ukraine](#).

<sup>59</sup> UNHCR (2023), [Regional Protection Profiling and Monitoring: Protection Risks and Needs of Refugees from Ukraine](#).

<sup>60</sup> UNHCR (2023), [Regional Protection Profiling and Monitoring: Protection Risks and Needs of Refugees from Ukraine](#).

<sup>61</sup> UNHCR, IOM, WHO, UNICEF (2024), [Slovakia: Multi-Sector Needs Assessment 2023 - Annex Report on Persons with Disabilities - June 2024](#), p. 4.

<sup>62</sup> UNHCR, IOM, WHO, UNICEF (2024), [Slovakia: Multi-Sector Needs Assessment 2023 - Annex Report on Persons with Disabilities - June 2024](#).

<sup>63</sup> Telegram, [UNHCR Slovakia | УБКЕ ООН Словаччина | УБКЕ ООН Словакія](#).

<sup>64</sup> UNHCR (2024), [Contact UNHCR](#).

<sup>65</sup> UNHCR (2024), [UNHCR Help Slovakia](#).

mapping of support services available in Slovakia, received over 179,000 visits during the covered period. UNHCR also responded to over 200 queries through its Protection email, counselled over 200 refugees in person through its weekly in-person Protection counselling, and consulted over 170 refugees through focus group discussions between July 2023 and March 2024.

In parallel, UNHCR closely collaborated with partners, including at Blue Dots, providing comprehensive information and counselling on documentation, legal status, accommodation, social protection, healthcare, education, or employment. These partners, with UNHCR's support, also run their own communication channels, including a Facebook group with more than 54,000 members.

## Calls to Action

UNHCR welcomes the ongoing generosity of the Slovak Government and society in responding to the needs of refugees fleeing Ukraine, and the example this sets internationally and within the EU. Even with this commitment and favorable protection environment, some challenges persist. The Slovak Government's openness to proactive engagement with UN agencies and other key interlocutors including the civil society has made it possible to identify and address gaps in national systems, which also exist in other EU countries hosting refugees from Ukraine. In this sense, UNHCR formulates recommendations to the Government of Slovakia, with a view to strengthen refugees' access to rights and inclusion in the areas covered in this Protection Brief III.

### Recommendations: Accommodation

UNHCR recommends to the Government of Slovakia to:

- Explore alternative solutions for vulnerable refugees (including refugees with serious disabilities or serious medical condition) who cannot regularly appear in person before municipal authorities, which is a requirement for benefiting from accommodation subsidies. Possible alternatives could include online confirmation, mobile outreach visits, or confirmation through a third party with power of attorney.
- Reconsider the list of vulnerable groups eligible for accommodation support, to potentially include:
  - Caregivers of persons with disabilities or serious medical condition.
  - Single caregivers of children who cannot attend full-time school for serious reasons.
  - Pregnant women.
  - Single caregivers with three or more dependent children.<sup>66</sup>
- Identify capacities at collective accommodation facilities and centers for social services that can be adapted to persons with specific needs, particularly those with disabilities, serious medical condition, and older persons who require specialized care, assistance, healthcare, and/or barrier-free access. This will also strengthen residential social services capacities for the host community in Slovakia.

### Recommendations: Inclusion in the Social Protection System

UNHCR recommends to the Government of Slovakia to:

- Explore facilitating access to social protection benefits for Temporary Protection holders on par with Slovak nationals, particularly to Unemployment Allowance,<sup>67</sup> Activation Allowance, Parental Allowance, Child Allowance, Compensation for Persons with Disabilities, Birth Allowance, Substitute Alimony, and Funeral Allowance. These benefits could provide significant support and have a strong positive impact on the most vulnerable members of the refugee community.

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<sup>66</sup> This recommendation is made in relation to the accommodation support system introduced as of July 2024, following the period covered by this Protection Brief III.

<sup>67</sup> In relation to the Unemployment Allowance, it is recommended to allow Temporary Protection holders who were employed in Slovakia and subsequently lost their jobs to register in the Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family database of job applicants to be able to access this benefit.



- Ensure that Disability Allowance for Refugees assessments are conducted in languages that refugees understand, and take into account individual circumstances and the specific impacts of their disabilities.
- Consider accepting the validity of Ukrainian Disability ID cards, thereby facilitating refugees' access to benefits for Slovak persons with disabilities, such as parking, discounted transportation, etc.

## Recommendations: Access to Reliable Information

UNHCR recommends to the Government of Slovakia to:

- Further enhance the availability of up-to-date information on refugees' rights and available services in languages that refugees understand, including Ukrainian, Russian, and English, focusing particularly on making information related to eligibility for various social protection benefits easily understandable and accessible in plain language. This also includes communicating any changes related to the accommodation support system sufficiently in advance to enhance the predictability of the State-provided support.
- Strengthen information flow to healthcare practitioners and the public health insurance company and ensure that they are fully aware of refugees' healthcare entitlements, in line with the full healthcare coverage for all refugees.
- Support the capacities of frontline public workers, especially in major refugee-hosting locations, to better facilitate interactions with refugee beneficiaries, including by increasing the presence of interpreters and cultural mediators to help refugees access the relevant procedures effectively.



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### Previous publications

Slovakia Protection Brief I



Slovakia Protection Brief II

