

Empowering Refugee-Led Initiatives: Collaborative Solutions for Refugee Integration in Hungary.



On September 7, 2024, the Interagency Team and the Protection Working Group organized a workshop to prepare the 2025/26 Refugee Response Plan (RRP) for Hungary. The workshop brought together 16 refugee-led organizations (RLOs) and organizations run by Ukrainian diaspora members and other displaced persons in Hungary.¹ The primary aim was to involve these grassroots organizations in humanitarian planning and decision-making, foster equitable partnerships with local actors, enhance the relevance and sustainability of integration efforts, and ensure the development of culturally appropriate programs.

The findings and recommendations emerging from this workshop are based on the fundamental assumption that refugees are not only recipients of aid but also important service providers and agents of change. By integrating the perspectives and expertise of RLOs, the workshop highlighted the necessity of involving more and more refugees in the design and implementation of humanitarian programs. This approach empowers refugees and leverages their unique insights and experiences to create more effective and sustainable solutions for refugee inclusion in Hungary. The discussions culminated in actionable recommendations, divided into two main sections (refugee response and programming; and partnership and coordination), setting a concrete path forward for collaborative and inclusive refugee support initiatives.

1. IDENTIFIED PRIORITY RESPONSE AREAS.

A short survey with the participants revealed that 70% identified **education** as the top priority for supporting refugee protection and socio-economic inclusion in Hungary, with most workshop organizations already active in this area (participants observed that this may also reflect a bias since their main area of expertise is in fact education).

Employment was the next priority, cited by 50%, followed by **general protection** (45%), which includes legal assistance and support for vulnerable refugees.

Other key sectors mentioned were **health** (35%), **child protection** (25%), **accommodation** (20%), **mental health and psychosocial support MHPSS** (15%), **cash assistance** (15%), **food** (10%), and **peaceful coexistence programs** (5%).

During the discussion, participants observed how the various sectors intersect, considering, for example, that prioritizing employment would provide resources to address needs in other areas, such as accommodation and health and reduce dependency on aid.

The following activities and recommendations were highlighted during the group discussion and in a survey conducted with participants.

¹ 16 organizations participated with 21 persons: African Women Hungary Association, AKSEN Project, Bona Fide Charitable Organization, Litera Egyesület, Migrant women Hungary association (She4She), Next Step Hungary Association, OLIVE -- Open Learning Initiative, Parasolka Foundation, Ukrainian Program at Piarista Gymnazium, Ukrainian Association Unity, Ukrán Hagymányok Háza (House of Ukrainian Traditions), Ukrán nemzetiségi kulturális és oktatási Alapítvány, Ukrainian Refugee Education Centre Foundation (UREC), Ukrán Remény Egyesület, UGCC Foundation in Hungary, Vamos Foundation.



EDUCATION.

Curriculum and Extracurricular Support. Continue implementing complementary interventions in both curriculum and extracurricular activities to ensure comprehensive support for the enrollment and attendance of refugee students. Prioritize the adaptation and integration of vulnerable and marginalized groups, especially secondary school students and teenagers, into the educational system. To assist Ukrainian children in adapting to the Hungarian curriculum, it is recommended that Ukrainian translations of textbooks or Hungarian-Ukrainian glossaries be provided for each school subject. Additionally, expand the availability of Hungarian-Ukrainian schools and Hungarian language courses for schoolchildren. Support the continuation of Ukrainian extracurricular education with assistance from international and Hungarian organizations.

Access to Preschool. Increase the availability of preschools to enable parents to work, especially by strengthening collaboration with municipalities. Allocate additional funding to sustain and expand preschools for refugee children.

Access to Higher Education. Expand refugee access to higher education opportunities by addressing enrollment challenges and supporting language acquisition. Provide interpretation and administrative support for refugees facing challenges with complex application processes and unclear information. Ensure assistance with document preparation and enrollment, also through existing Hungarian-Ukrainian schools. Facilitate bridging pathways between different levels of education (e.g., from high school to university).

Special Needs Education. Children with special educational needs lack consistent support. Short-term programs like the AKSEN Project offer temporary help, but sustained funding is essential. Coordination between Hungarian institutions and Ukrainian specialists and mutual recognition of medical and educational certificates are needed to provide tailored and ongoing developmental support.

Psychological Support in Schools. Ukrainian children face challenges integrating into the Hungarian school system due to war trauma and bullying, highlighting the need for targeted inclusion and mental health programs. In particular: address bullying and foster inclusion through dedicated programs in the Hungarian education system to support refugee children's integration; ensure the availability of Ukrainian-speaking psychologists for children, as translation-based psychological help is less effective; providing MHPSS to parents and children to reduce pressure on parents and encourage children to seek help..

Joint recreational activities. Organize leisure activities in collaboration with Hungarian educational institutions to build relationships between Hungarian and Ukrainian-speaking children. Also, after-school support is essential for refugee children who are enrolled in Hungarian schools but struggle with the language. For instance, in Budapest's 5th district, interpreters assist children with homework, but these volunteer-based services are unsustainable. Create safe spaces and programs specifically designed for teenagers to socialize and integrate with local peers, helping them overcome isolation. Develop programs that give teenagers access to higher education, vocational training, and employment opportunities, facilitating their long-term integration into the Hungarian society.

EMPLOYMENT.

Facilitate Access to Secure and Meaningful Jobs. Ensure refugees can access meaningful jobs that match their skills and qualifications, beyond low-skilled and underpaid roles. Provide clear information about employment options suited to their education and experience, rather than focusing solely on unskilled labor vacancies.

Simplify Recognition of Qualifications. Simplify the process of recognizing Ukrainian diplomas and certifications, making it accessible in Ukrainian language. Ensure the process is known and accessible to refugees, free and fully enforced to prevent employers from underpaying qualified refugees. Focus on resolving challenges professionals face in specific fields where Ukrainian qualifications, such as speech therapy, cannot

be recognized in Hungary. Ensure Hungary fully implements the Lisbon Treaty's provisions on foreign diploma recognition, particularly in fields where refugees have relevant qualifications. Provide targeted training and equivalency programs, offering Hungarian language courses and diploma recognition support.

Bridge-Programs for Technical Certifications. Develop programs that combine language training with vocational pre-training to help refugees access technical colleges and earn certifications (e.g., electricians and hairdressers).

Promote Employment in Sectors affected by Labor Shortages. Leverage labor shortages in specific sectors, to create job opportunities for refugees. Create short professional courses in high-demand job market fields, such as childcare, to help refugees quickly enter the workforce. Promote programs for long-term labor market integration (rather than short-term and seasonal), with input from refugees on their job preferences.

Support for Working Mothers. Provide comprehensive support for working mothers, including childcare and education for children, from early childhood to university.

Protect Against Exploitation. Strengthen protections against exploitation, ensuring fair wages and work conditions. Offer legal support to help refugees navigate the labor market effectively.

Language Learning. Provide Hungarian language courses for both adults and youth, tailored to job preparation and focusing on job-specific vocabulary for refugees seeking employment. Create Hungarian glossaries for vocational school subjects to assist Ukrainian students in their studies.

HEALTH.

Improve Access to Healthcare. Address long waiting times (up to 3-6 months) for medical appointments, discouraging refugees (and nationals alike) from seeking care in Hungary, in particular children and older refugees, and prompting them to seek for medical services in Ukraine due to lower costs and perceived better quality

(this is often true for specialized services and treatment for chronic conditions).

MHPSS. Establish psychological service centers specifically for Ukrainian refugees, offering free or minimal-fee services. This is crucial as depression and anxiety are on the rise, and children are experiencing bullying in schools.

Overcome Language Barriers in Health and MHPSS. Language barriers and a lack of knowledge about navigating the Hungarian healthcare system make access challenging; despite some solutions for addressing language barriers, such as providing professional interpreters, these are not always available or can be very costly. Language barriers and perceived stigma also prevent refugees from seeking MHPSS support, even if available, an Provide consistent and professional language assistance, including interpreters, and ensure affordable translation services. Increase the availability of Ukrainian-speaking doctors and medical staff in hospitals to ease communication during medical visits.

Enhance Information Sharing. Improve access to reliable information about available healthcare services and procedures in Hungary, as current informal sources, such as "mum groups" on social media, often spread misinformation. Launch campaigns to inform refugees about their rights and entitlements in the Hungarian healthcare system.

Training for Healthcare Providers. In rural areas in particular, healthcare providers often lack awareness of how to treat refugees or understand their rights. Offer training and guidance to medical professionals on refugee healthcare needs and their entitlements.

PROTECTION.

Establish a Unified Call Center for Refugees. Create a Ukrainian-language call center to provide reliable information and advice on key areas such as healthcare, accommodation, education, and legal documentation. The model can be the 1818 hotline set up for Hungarians in Hungary. This service should be free of charge and accessible via multiple platforms (Viber, Telegram,

WhatsApp, website calls) to accommodate refugees who do not have Hungarian SIM cards. Ensure that the call center can be reached from Ukrainian phone numbers with no charge, unlike the UNHCR Regional Call Center.

Simplify Legal Status and Documentation Processes.

Temporary Protection (TP) status is renewed yearly; this sets a yearly framework for integration planning instead of longer terms. Provide refugees with clear information on other legal statuses, such as residence permits, and facilitate legal transitions and maintain family unity in cases of family members under different statuses. For the benefit of nationals and refugees alike, promote the digitalization of application processes for legal documentation to eliminate time-consuming manual processes and discrepancies in paperwork. Provide administrative and paralegal support in solving problems of obtaining disability status in Hungary and entitlements for older refugees.

Legal Assistance and Support. Provide legal support for various needs, including the legalization of stay, workers' rights protection, and family reunification; legal support for families with children or older refugees was also mentioned. Assist with document translation, filling out forms, and offering translation services in healthcare and state institutions. Ensure refugees know their rights, available services, and opportunities for integration or relocation to another country if needed.

Support for specific categories. Older refugees and those with disabilities face significant barriers in accessing medical care and services in Hungary. For example, stroke patients easily access treatment in Ukraine less so in Hungary. Obtaining disability status in Hungary is complex due to the non-recognition of Ukrainian medical documentation. Simplify the process for obtaining disability status in Hungary by accepting medical assessments from Ukrainian doctors or streamlining the medical test requirements. Provide targeted financial support and long-term care solutions for these vulnerable groups, ensuring they have access to appropriate healthcare and social services. Financial assistance is particularly needed for elderly individuals who cannot work and for nursing mothers who are heads of households and can only work limited hours. Enhance

coordination between Hungarian and Ukrainian governments to improve support for older refugees and refugees with disabilities.

OTHER GENERAL OBSERVATIONS.

Language as key barrier to integration. Participants have highlighted that overcoming language barriers is key to integrating into Hungarian society and language support is a crosscutting integration need across the response. Government-led Hungarian language programs are essential, supported by NGOs and paid instructors. Local volunteer-driven language programs, particularly outside Budapest, complement these efforts but should not replace the broader commitment from authorities. Since language learning takes time, programs should adopt a medium- to long-term approach. Participants emphasized that learning Hungarian is particularly challenging for those recovering from the trauma of war. Bilingual support, including interpreters for medical visits, administrative processes, and school meetings, is necessary. Services should be demand-driven, ensuring interpretation is available where needed rather than limited to existing providers. Support is also needed for translating documents, completing forms in state institutions, and navigating medical procedures with language assistance.

Target population. The issues faced by refugees in Hungary are not unique; non-Hungarian residents also encounter similar problems, such as inadequate digitalization and long queues for public services, especially in healthcare. However, the focus of the response should be on supporting Ukrainian refugees currently in Hungary who wish to stay for at least a few years, despite uncertainties about their future. Developing and strengthening community ties are also an important element of the forced displacement experience, with effect on long term integration of refugees in Hungary. Participants have stressed the importance of strengthening community ties by encouraging displaced people to be active and engaged and contribute to societal change, rather than passive members solely in need of integration.

Understanding the context. Current surveys, like SEIS, aim to take a snapshot of the refugee experience, and as

such they focus primarily on material aspects of life. There is a gap in understanding the everyday feelings and emotional well-being of individuals, and how these change over time. Participants proposed to implement smaller, more frequent surveys to capture the emotional well-being and everyday experiences of refugees, possibly with a selected group of respondents to be engaged in repeated interviews; and to include both immediate needs and long-term planning in surveys to proactively address challenges and support sustainable solutions.

Housing. Accommodation has not emerged as a pressing issue from the workshop. It is important to note that the workshop included English and Ukrainian speakers but did not include Hungarian speakers, which may have led to less focus on accommodation-related issues. However, recent changes in the subsidized housing scheme introduced in August 2024 by the Hungarian government have limited housing support for refugees from areas in Ukraine not considered affected by the war. However, in the survey, participants indicated that finding affordable housing is a major challenge for refugees, as many of them work unofficially (e.g., cleaning apartments), and most are families with children, which makes local owners hesitant to rent to Ukrainians. Additionally, official jobs offer low wages, making it difficult for refugees to secure housing without external support from charitable organizations, private individuals, or housing partnerships. Support for more permanent, low-cost accommodation is essential.

2. ENHANCING PARTNERSHIPS AND COORDINATION WITH RLOs.

RLOs are one of several key actors in the response, working alongside other organizations to provide assistance to refugees from Ukraine and other countries. Participants identified the following key stakeholders in Hungary:

Central Government: Ideally responsible for comprehensive policy solutions and coordination at a national level. However, due to bureaucracy and other challenges, their solutions are less likely to materialize effectively in the short term. While their focus is primarily on Hungarian citizens, they are involved in the broader context of public services, including for refugees.

Municipalities: More practical and responsive to local issues. They are closer to refugees' day-to-day challenges and can address these issues more quickly. They are key in implementing localized support and integrating refugees into the community.

UNHCR: Provides international support and protection for refugees, offering resources and guidance on rights and services.

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), including charities: Complement government efforts by providing direct support and services to refugees, migrants, and local communities. They address a range of needs, including humanitarian aid, educational support, and integration services. They therefore need to be adequately financed and supported.

Ukrainian Minority Self-Governments: Operate at various levels (state, capital, regional, local) and help refugees integrate into the local community through cultural and community-building activities. They organize cultural events, provide humanitarian aid, and influence local municipalities directly.

RLOs play a crucial role in mobilizing communities from the grassroots level and have extensive experience in understanding needs and delivering services to refugees and migrants in Hungary. According to the survey conducted during the workshop (multiple choice questions), their **key strengths** and added value in the response lie primarily in their deep understanding of refugees' and migrants' needs and how these evolve (65%), their ability to communicate through shared language and culture (60%), the trust they have built with the refugee and migrant community (60%), their capacity to empower refugees and migrants as service providers and agents of change (60%).

Despite all these strengths, RLOs face **significant challenges in Hungary**. The most pressing issue is the availability of only limited or unpredictable funding (80%). Other difficulties include bureaucratic and administrative obstacles and inadequate infrastructure, such as office space (35%), as well as limited information on refugee rights and services, inadequate mental health support for staff and volunteers, staffing shortages, and language barriers, each cited by 25% of respondents.



To address these challenges, RLOs have identified the **support they need**. Strengthening partnerships within the RRP between UN agencies, NGOs and civil society organizations is crucial. All respondents emphasized the need for sustainable funding to ensure program continuity and support for new initiatives. Half of the respondents highlighted the need for spaces for activities and office premises, while a third mentioned the need for food and non-food items for refugee distribution.

Capacity building for staff was also identified as an area where support is required. The main **training need** identified was on fundraising and grant proposal writing (70%). Other areas where capacity building shall be provided are managing social media and communication channels with refugees (30%), access to education (early childhood, primary, and secondary) (30%), child protection (25%), mental health and psychosocial support (25%), refugee rights and the legal framework in Hungary and internationally (25%), project management (25%), and monitoring and evaluation (20%).