UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

LITHUANIA PROTECTION BRIEF #1

October 2024

Context

As of 1 April 2024, Lithuania had registered 85,000 refugees from Ukraine for temporary protection, constituting 3% of the country's population. Most refugees arrived in the first half of 2022, with more than 50,000 temporary residence permits issued by 30 June 2022. Although the number of new arrivals decreased during 2023-2024, it remained relatively stable at approximately 200 new registrations for temporary protection per week. With some of the refugees returning to Ukraine or moving to other countries, the number of active temporary protection beneficiaries was 41,000 as of 1 April 2024.

The Government of Lithuania has continued responding with generosity and solidarity to the largest arrival of refugees in its history. Since 2022, the Government, civil society, and host community have united to adopt a whole-of-society approach ensuring comprehensive reception and protection for refugees arriving from Ukraine. The refugee response, coordinated by the Ministry of Social Security and Labour, has focused on inclusion into mainstream Lithuanian education, social services and support systems, as well as providing access to the job market.

About this report: In Lithuania, UNHCR and its partner, Lithuanian Red Cross, have been conducting a protection monitoring exercise to assess the situation and needs of refugees from Ukraine. Between August 2023 and March 2024, 577 interviews were conducted. This report, complemented with focus group discussions presents the main findings of these interviews, including as it relates to access to work and information.

Key protection monitoring figures

577
total respondents

99%
of respondents are Ukrainians

75%
of respondents are women

7%
of households have at least one person with a disability

22%
of households have at least one member with a serious illness

66%
of respondents have at least one information need

Key protection issues

1. Limited access to information

Ensuring timely and easy access to information is crucial for the successful reception, inclusion, empowerment, and well-being of refugees in Lithuania. In 2022, government-led registration centres addressed this need by serving as one-stop-shops where multiple organizations provided essential services, including counselling and information provision. However, with the decrease in new arrivals and the subsequent closure of these centres, coordinating information provision has become problematic. Despite significant efforts to enhance and centralize information for temporary protection beneficiaries in Lithuania, it remains fragmented and challenging to navigate.

According to the Protection Profiling and Monitoring survey in Lithuania, 66% of respondents indicated having at least one informational need, with this figure rising to 74% among new arrivals. The information needs of refugees vary based on their duration of stay in the host country. New arrivals reported lacking information on financial aid (42%), accommodation (35%), job opportunities (34%), and healthcare (25%). In contrast, refugees who have been in the country for over six months continue to seek information primarily on financial aid (32%), access to healthcare (18%), and job opportunities (16%).

Focus group discussions highlighted the necessity for clear, reliable, and well-structured information on various topics, including accommodation accessibility (such as options for new arrivals, eligibility for rental compensations, and guidance on navigating the private rental market), eligibility for healthcare based on insurance status, and language requirements for job market participation, including proficiency levels and availability of Lithuanian language courses.

One refugee in Klaipėda shared their experience: “You feel lost. If you arrive in Lithuania, where you do not know anyone, have no previous contacts – you do not know anything. Unless you meet someone, you receive no information, you know nothing. There was no information after registration at the Migration Department – nothing about available social support, humanitarian assistance, etc. People find out about this in social media / chat groups, but not from official sources.” (August 2023)

In focus groups with refugees from Ukraine, participants often mentioned relying on information shared in social media groups, such as Telegram, Viber, and Facebook, as well as in-person information shared among friends, family members, or by NGOs. Official information channels were found to be difficult to navigate and rarely used.

The absence of targeted awareness-raising initiatives, individual counselling, and sufficient access to official information during the early stages of reception can pose protection risks. In such situations, individuals lacking information about available support services, including accommodation, employment, healthcare, and social assistance, may turn to unreliable sources that could jeopardize their safety and well-being.

2. Limited access to work

Ensuring fair and equal access to dignified work is essential for the successful socioeconomic inclusion of refugees in the host society. It is commendable that refugees from Ukraine gain an immediate right to be employed as they register for temporary protection in Lithuania.

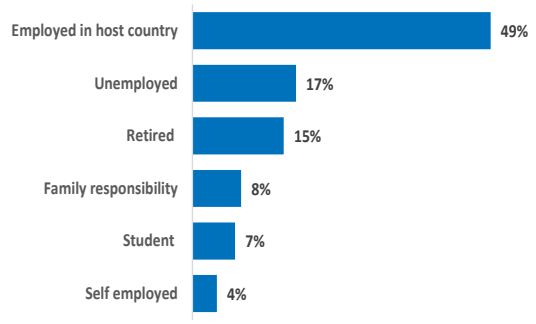
According to the Protection Profiling and Monitoring survey, 53% of respondents, who stayed longer than 6 months in Lithuania, reported being economically active, while 17% were unemployed at the time of the interview. Key reasons for unemployment included language barrier (29%), lack of childcare (19%), and lack of job opportunities (16%). Language barrier was consistently identified as the main obstacle to finding decent employment. Additional

challenges included inability to work long shifts (10–12 hours) due to family responsibilities, deskilling, and vulnerability in labour market when engaging in low-skill labour (discrimination, lack of social guarantees, etc.).

The urgency of employment as a need was emphasized by 25% of respondents (40% among the new arrivals), and 22% expressed a need for more information on job opportunities in Lithuania (34% among the new arrivals). Focus group discussions highlighted that employment was found to be the main source of financial stability, yet respondents noted a risk of dismissal and lack of job security.

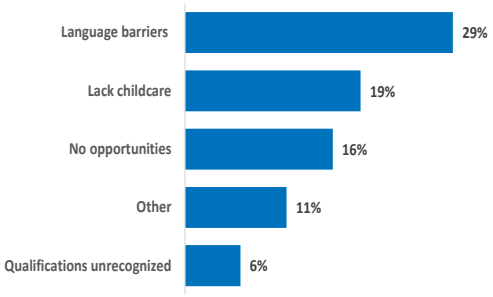
To secure a more stable job position and avoid deskilling, refugees need to overcome the language barrier, have their qualifications recognized, and use opportunities for professional development. The Government's decision to exempt citizens of Ukraine granted temporary protection in Lithuania from the state language proficiency requirement for three years from the date of their temporary protection, has been instrumental in increasing employment opportunities. However, as the deadline to pass the language proficiency exam approaches for the majority of refugees from Ukraine, it is clear that access to quality language learning services remains a concern. The motivation and urgency to learn the language are also strengthened by the ongoing war in Ukraine with no clear end in sight.

CURRENT MAIN ACTIVITY**



** Due to rounding some percent totals do not add up to 100%

BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT*



* Multiple responses were possible, so percentages can go over 100% when added.

3. Protection of persons with specific needs

Data from the Protection Monitoring Survey reveals that a significant portion of households among refugees from Ukraine face specific vulnerabilities. In Lithuania, approximately 22% of refugee households report having at least one family member with serious medical conditions and 7% – at least one family member with disabilities. Additionally, 22% of households are comprised of a single adult with dependents, and 13% of respondents are older refugees from Ukraine. These statistics underscore the presence of vulnerabilities within the refugee population from Ukraine.

In Lithuania, there is no systematic screening process to identify vulnerabilities among beneficiaries of temporary protection. While individuals may self-disclose certain vulnerabilities such as disabilities, pregnancy or single parenthood during their registration for temporary protection, this information is not utilized for making referrals to necessary services. Similarly, self-identified vulnerabilities when applying for housing through the Stronger Together website do not consistently lead to detailed assessments or referrals for appropriate accommodation.

The limitations identified in the current system include the absence of effective referrals for vulnerable individuals, leaving it largely up to the refugees themselves or NGOs to identify and connect them with essential social benefits and support services.

Calls to action

1. UNHCR recommends harmonizing and facilitating access to information on the rights and services of refugees from Ukraine. This includes clear and accessible communication channels, ensuring that information reaches all refugees, regardless of their age, language proficiency, digital skills, or literacy levels.
2. UNHCR recommends facilitating access to quality Lithuanian language learning to support inclusion and improve access to decent employment opportunities in Lithuania.
3. UNHCR recommends systematic and continuous vulnerability assessments for beneficiaries of temporary protection, which facilitate identification of persons with specific needs and effective referrals to service providers to ensure that beneficiaries of temporary protection receive the targeted and timely support they need.