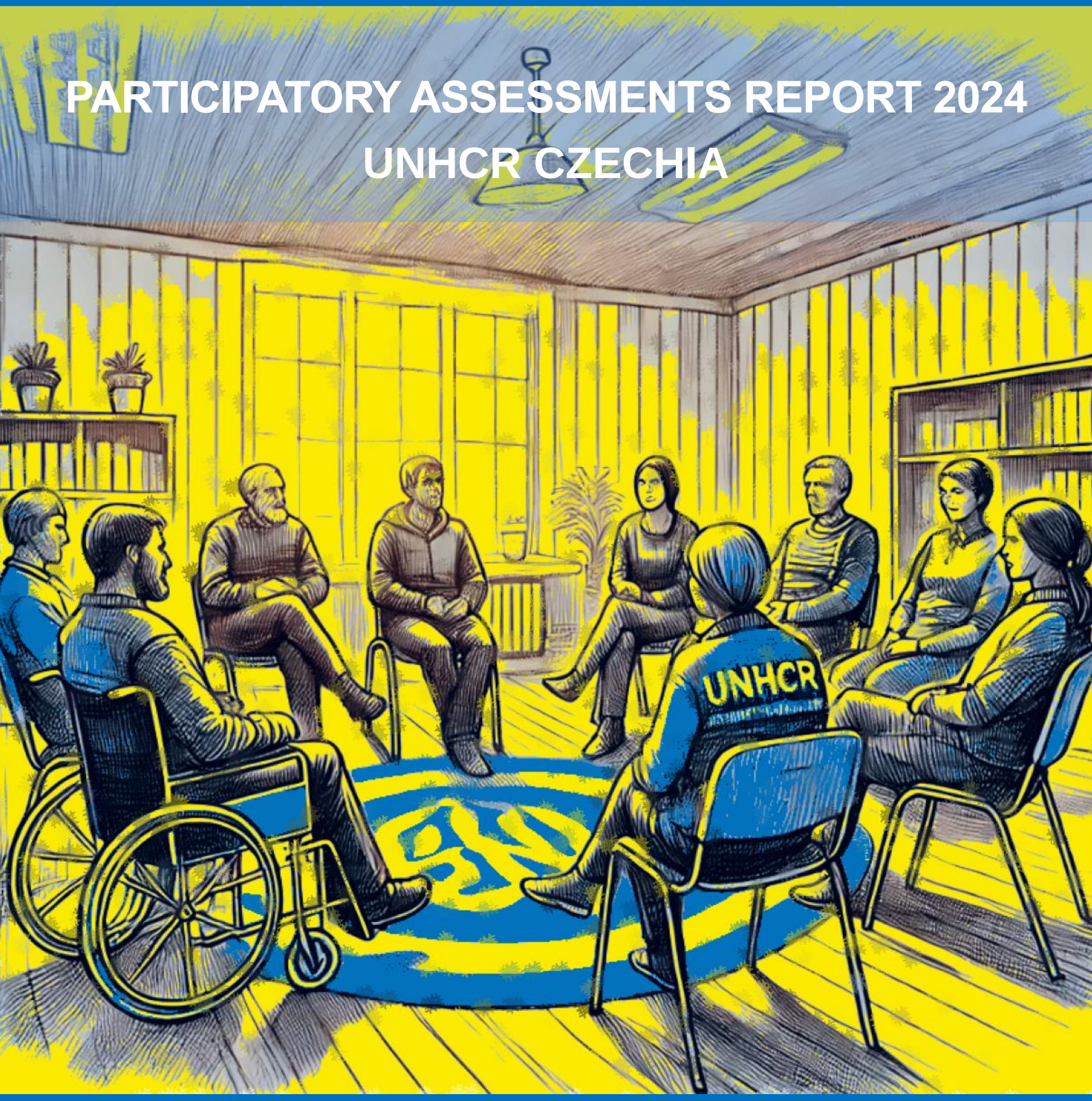
UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

# PARTICIPATORY ASSESSMENTS REPORT 2024

## UNHCR CZECHIA



## Acknowledgements

UNHCR, with support from the Refugee Facilities Administration, its NGO partners OPU, SIMI, Romodrom and AMIGA, as well as Refugee-Led Organizations, undertook a series of participatory assessments across Czechia. This report presents key findings from the assessments conducted between January and December 2024.

Findings grouped around specific themes have been included in UNHCR's quarterly Protection Briefs and shared with NGO partners and other stakeholders, among others, for response and advocacy. Outcomes particular to housing were shared with the Permanent Commission for Adaptation and Integration of Refugees from Ukraine, chaired by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, to inform government policy.

UNHCR acknowledges the unwavering resilience and strength of forcibly displaced and stateless persons in Czechia and remains dedicated to supporting them as they rebuild their lives, realize solutions and provide support to one another within their communities. UNHCR expresses gratitude for the continuous support of the Government of Czechia.

UNHCR is grateful for the support provided by donors to the Czech operation as well as those who have contributed to global UNHCR programs with softly earmarked or unearmarked funds:

Australia | Belgium | Denmark | Germany | Ireland | Netherlands | Norway | Republic of Korea | Sweden | Switzerland | United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland | Private donors

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# Snapshot of Participatory Assessments

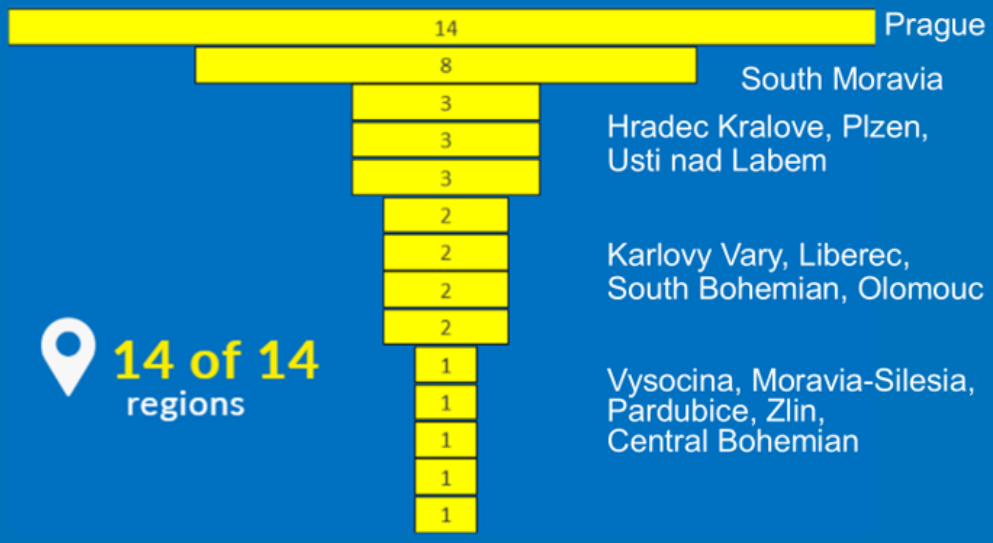
## 44 Assessments

**30** Focus Group Discussions

**14** Key Informant Interviews

**341**

refugees, asylum seekers and stateless persons




**14 of 14** regions

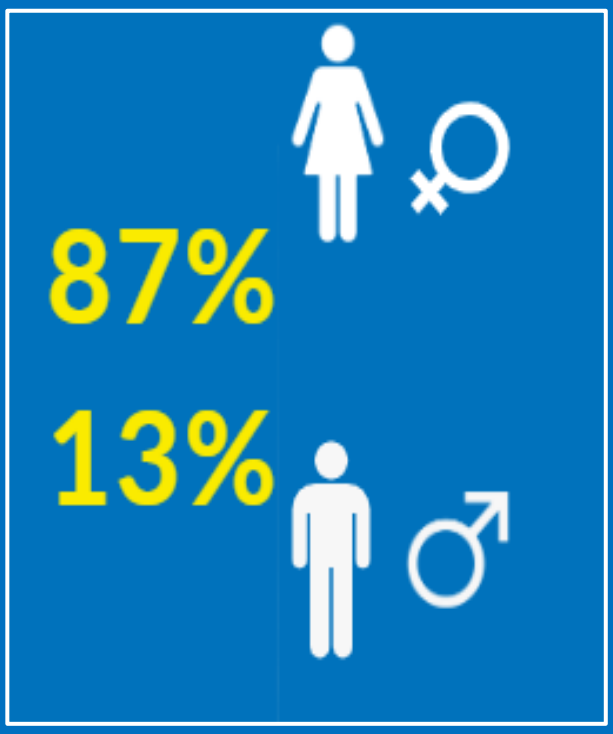
A total of 44 assessments were undertaken with 341 refugees, asylum-seekers and stateless persons across all 14 regions.

The majority of participants were women. Moreover, most participants were Ukrainian nationals, although a total of 6% were from 11 other countries of origin and 1% were stateless.

315 of the participants were Ukrainian Temporary Protection holders, with the remainder being holders of subsidiary protection, refugees, asylum-seekers, stateless persons or holders of other status, in that order.

Amongst Ukrainian participants, the top areas of origin in Ukraine were Kharkivska, Dnipropetrovska and Kyiv city, with most arriving between February and December 2022.

Age, gender and diversity of participants was considered in the constitution of assessments.



**7%**

**6 persons** with diverse sexual orientation/gender identity

**37%**

**13%**

# Overall Findings

In line with UNHCR's Policy on Age, Gender and Diversity (2018), UNHCR Czechia undertakes regular participatory assessments with refugees, asylum-seekers and stateless persons. The assessments serve as an important opportunity to share critical information, engage in two-way communication, consult communities on their needs, priorities and solutions, and solicit feedback. The findings from the assessments conducted in 2024 are outlined in this report, with a focus on key challenges and associated recommendations.

## Access to Housing

Overall, housing instability was highlighted as a persistent challenge faced by most refugees, asylum-seekers and stateless persons across the country. In particular, the affordability and availability of private housing remained a challenge.

With respect to Ukrainian refugees residing in collective accommodation facilities, reports of rising costs by as much as 30% for vulnerable groups caused economic hardship for many. Elderly refugees, in particularly, were notably affected by financial strains. Following the 1 September legislative changes limiting cost-free state-provided housing in collective accommodations, including for vulnerable groups, many refugees experienced challenges in transitioning to private accommodation. High rental costs, discrimination by landlords towards single mothers in particular, and the unavailability of housing for large families and those with disabilities to cater to their specific needs were marked obstacles. Some elderly refugees presented high levels of apprehension about their long-term housing prospects, fearing the possibility of homelessness. They were also amongst the groups who raised the most needs for tailored informational, social and legal assistance to support them in the process of transitioning to private housing, which in many cases was provided by municipal and NGO social workers and lawyers, including UNHCR partners.

Stateless persons also reported financial challenges in accessing housing, while asylum-seekers, refugees with diverse sexual orientation and/or gender identity, and Roma refugees disclosed incidents of discrimination by landlords in securing a new home.

Ukrainian refugees and stateless persons often relied on personal networks to overcome financial hardships. The role of social workers and lawyers in supporting applicants to navigate housing in Czechia, including rights and responsibilities, and staying safe, is crucial. Untoward schemes by some third-party housing agencies were flagged as risky actors overcharging vulnerable clients in need of housing.

Material conditions in accommodation facilities for asylum-seekers were generally reported satisfactory. On the other hand, some Ukrainian residents of collective accommodation facilities reported issues of overcrowding, poor sanitation, infestations and security concerns. In particular, children without parental care living text missing and Ukrainian Roma refugees, were most at-risk in indecent conditions in the facilities.

Ukrainian Roma refugees, elderly persons and those living in remote areas of the country, expressed challenges in accessing basic and social services, and presented feelings of marginalization. In some remote areas, elderly refugees did not have access to information through in-person counselling or even the Internet, rendering it challenging to make decisions about housing solutions. In some municipalities, local actors, including social workers and Mayors, were well connected with refugees providing consistent support and a stream of reliable information.

## Employment and Financial Independence

Refugees, asylum-seekers and stateless persons expressed strong desires for self-reliance and economic productivity.

Overall, most Ukrainian refugees were economically active, or seeking opportunities to join the workforce. Many reported barriers to securing employment commensurate with their qualifications due to language barriers or a lack of recognition of their foreign degrees and qualification. This was particularly noted amongst skilled professionals, including pharmacists, engineers and doctors.

With the non-alignment of retirement ages in Ukraine and Czechia, some elderly Ukrainian refugees desired who had already retired in Ukraine desired to re-enter the workforce in Czechia to mitigate the challenges of not being in receipt of a pension. In addition to this group, persons with disabilities and single mothers noted the challenges in finding jobs suitable for their specific needs, such as physical needs or caregiving responsibilities with children.

Frequent reports were made of employment agencies assisting Ukrainian refugees in securing jobs raising risks of labour rights abuse and of exploitation, including trafficking. This finding is supported by information collected through Protection Monitoring amongst Ukrainian refugees in Czechia in 2024. Many participants knew of Ukrainians working without wages, in poor conditions, or receiving unfair treatment – such as being required to pay for health insurance themselves. Some teenagers were found to be working excessively long hours or in unsafe conditions. Ukrainian Roma refugees reported several cases of informal labour with wage theft, and many teenagers over the age of 15 being compelled to work to support their families. Many Ukrainian refugees had encountered situations of scams or fraud, with a need for further awareness-raising on digital safety identified.

Asylum-seekers and stateless persons were most vulnerable to the lack of financial independence, with legal constraints on their right to work creating barriers to employment. Both groups also highlighted employers' lack of awareness around legal statuses and associated rights, making securing formal jobs challenging, and leading some to informal employment without contracts and legal safeguards.

The work of several NGOs, and some Refugee-Led Organizations, in providing useful information about employment rights, was highlighted as a good practice.

## Education and Language Learning

Refugee children reportedly were mostly able to access education, where many created friendships, deepened their integration into Czech communities, and learned the Czech language. Some Ukrainian families and children reported instances of bullying, and difficulties in balancing parallel education systems where children were enrolled in both Czech and Ukrainian distance education. Through assessments with youth, private unaccredited post-secondary education institutions with dubious activities, reports of embezzlement and mistreatment of students were reported.

Some Ukrainian Roma children faced barriers to accessing education, with parents unable to afford school supplies and reporting mistrust in the local education system.

Overall, Ukrainian refugees reported the language as their biggest barrier to integration. Most Ukrainians expressed a strong desire to be proficient in Czech to strengthen integration prospects. Some highlighted their experiences of befriending Czechs in their communities, including

through various clubs and recreational activities, with whom they had opportunities to practice the Czech language.

Ukrainian refugees in remote areas highlighted the inaccessibility to Czech language courses, rendering integration in their communities more difficult. Many participants sought specialized Czech language courses tailored to professional terminology, whilst most expressed a need for quality courses at various levels, including B1 and B2 for those who had already mastered basic proficiency and sought opportunities for advancement. It was also noted that some free courses, which those facing financial strains generally prefer, do not provide certificates recognized by employers, requiring refugees to pay for additional courses.

Elderly refugees and single mothers underscored the desire for free, quality courses provided in different formats – including in-person at flexible hours, and online – to accommodate their specific learning needs, work and childcare obligations. Stateless persons and refugees with diverse sexual orientation and/or gender identity also reported challenges in accessing Czech language programs, with the latter reporting discrimination towards LGBTIQ+ persons by some service providers.

## Access to Healthcare

Refugees and asylum-seekers enjoy access to public healthcare across Czechia. Overall, the quality of healthcare provision was reported to be high.

Amongst Ukrainian refugees, healthcare was the most commonly sought service, the most urgent need and the highest information need. Elderly Ukrainian refugees presented significant information gaps in available services, navigating the Czech healthcare system and understanding the medication and prescriptions used in Czechia. Many refugees experienced challenges in securing appointments, with most unable to find doctors accepting new patients. Furthermore, access to specialized services such as paediatrics, oncology, dental care and psychiatric services was reported to be challenging, particularly in remote areas. Some Ukrainian refugees, including within the Roma community, reported traveling to Ukraine to access medical services to mitigate the challenges in healthcare access in Czechia. Despite the gaps in knowledge around available service provision, such as the Ministry of Health's dedicated Ukrainian-language hotline to support patients, communities actively shared information that they did have to support each other in securing appointments. Many were also able to rely on Ukrainian and Czech friends, neighbours and acquaintances to provide language support during doctors' appointments.

While free healthcare was available to most, stateless persons reported difficulties in obtaining health insurance. This resulted in them often relying on out-of-pocket payments, further exacerbating their financial hardships, and leading to health issues being unattended to.

Refugees with diverse sexual orientation and/or gender identity reported incidents of discrimination in accessing public healthcare, including testing for sexually transmitted diseases and HIV.

Psychological distress, exacerbated by forced displacement, financial instability and feelings of marginalization, was commonly reported across all refugee, asylum-seeker and stateless groups. Some Ukrainian children and youth described emotional struggles, including loneliness and a lack of motivation, with many reluctant to seek professional help due to stigma. Ukrainian men reported feelings of low mood, financial stress, the psychological burden of supporting their families and feelings of being undeserving of help on account of their gender. Legislation on military mobilization in

Ukraine caused further apprehension in some men. Elderly Ukrainian refugees articulated deep desires for connection within their communities, both with Czechs and fellow Ukrainians alike. Many refugee women found support and belonging in groups organized by Refugee-Led Organizations and NGOs bringing refugees together for communal activities, fostering social connection and mutual support. Access to specialized mental health services was difficult due to the low availability of services, particularly in foreign languages.

## Safety and Inclusion

Many refugees reported welcoming attitudes from their local communities, with friendships and social connections being formed with Czechs and Ukrainians alike.

Nonetheless, harassment and derogatory remarks on account of nationality and language occurred in public spaces and schools. This was most commonly reported by Ukrainian refugee women and youth, without bystander intervention. Some instances of sexual violence, including domestic violence, were known in Ukrainian communities.

Refugees with diverse sexual orientation and/or gender identity generally feel safer in Czechia than in their countries of origin. Incidents of hostility in public spaces, on account of their sexual orientation and/or foreign appearance, were still observed. Roma refugees expressed feelings of social isolation and prejudice, and also generally lacked trust in social service providers based on previous negative experiences.

Social cohesion, community engagement and specialized gender-based violence programmes by municipalities, NGOs and Refugee-Led Organizations played a key role in providing safe and inclusive spaces for refugees to access vital care and support.

## Legal and Administrative Barriers

Stateless persons struggled with prolonged waiting periods in the Statelessness Determination Procedure. In turn, this caused psychological distress coupled with the inability to provide satisfactory proof of the right to work and access services, leaving them feeling socially marginalized.

Similarly, some asylum-seekers reported delays in the asylum procedure causing administrative hurdles in opening bank accounts, securing drivers' licenses, amongst other permits. The documents of stateless persons and asylum-seekers are frequently scrutinized by authorities and service providers often leading to obstacles.

Some Ukrainian refugees, particularly young adults, reported confusion over their rights and obligations in Czechia. On the other hand, reports were received of unaccompanied children concealing their status to avoid institutional care, further complicating their legal protection and support.

The work of NGOs in counselling refugees about their rights and obligations was reflected on some as a positive practice, while others were not aware of such services.

# Recommendations

## Access to Housing

- Continue to provide targeted social and/or legal assistance to elderly persons, refugees in remote areas with limited access to information and social assistance, persons with disabilities, larger families, stateless persons, Roma refugees and those with diverse sexual orientation and/or gender identity to secure private housing.
- Continue to identify and provide individual counselling and assistance to refugees in risky housing situations.

## Employment and Economic Inclusion

- Enhance initiatives connecting refugees directly with employers, minimizing dependence on employment agencies and raising awareness about risks. Particular attention should be given to employment opportunities that are suitable for elderly refugees and those with disabilities to support their income-generation and integration.
- Continue to disseminate information on the risks of irregular employment, how to stay safe when searching for employment and housing, and where to seek assistance through government and NGO service providers.
- Continue to share opportunities for re-training and upskilling qualifications, including through vocational training institutes and UNHCR's partnership with *Coursera Social Impact*, offering free access to over 12,000 courses and specializations for refugees, asylum-seekers and stateless persons. Continue to raise awareness about targeted programs available for youth, linking Ukrainian refugees with employment opportunities, including *Cesty*.

## Education and Language Learning

- Refer refugee learners in risky situations to the attention of Ministries and municipalities, law enforcement, the Office of the Ombudsman, as well as local and NGO service providers to provide assistance and support.
- Continue to raise awareness about available free Czech language courses, including through Labour Offices, municipalities and Refugee-Led Organizations. Establish a central resource for updating this information online.

## Access to Healthcare

- Strengthen information provision on available services on mental health and psychosocial support for refugees, including those provided in foreign languages.
- Ensure availability of accessible feedback and complaints mechanisms for patients accessing healthcare services.
- Continue to disseminate information materials explaining insurance coverage and differences in healthcare protocols in Czechia and Ukraine, listing available healthcare services.

## Safety and Inclusion

- Continue to support and expand activities enhancing social cohesion and fostering community support mechanisms, leading to increased integration prospects and positive wellbeing outcomes.

## Legal and Administrative Barriers

- Continue to advocate for legislative changes for easier access to permanent residency for stateless persons.
- Continue to provide legal assistance in individual cases of asylum-seekers or stateless persons experiencing prolonged waiting times in status determination procedures.
- Raise awarness about the asylum-seeker status and statelessness amongst different service providers to information gap in their rights to employment, financial inclusion and other areas.