

Understanding the information ecosystem: Roma refugees in Moldova



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This paper was written by Irene Scott and Marianna Prysiashniuk from Internews in Moldova in collaboration with Milica Vasilijic and Petar Subotin from the International Rescue Committee and Elena Sirbu from Roma Women's Platform 'ROMNI'.

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CONTRIBUTING ORGANISATIONS



ROMNI, known as the Roma Women's Platform (Platforma Femeilor Rome) is a non-governmental organization, designed to support and promote the rights of Roma girls and women in Moldova. In addition to material assistance and housing support, ROMNI helps refugees from Ukraine to navigate the Moldovan bureaucracy and offers legal services. ROMNI operates in Moldova and Transnistria.



Internews is an International non-profit organization that works to improve access to timely, actionable, and reliable information and contribute to healthy information ecosystems in 100 countries. Through support to local media, health, and humanitarian communicators and extensive work in identifying and combating misinformation, it aims to ensure everyone has access to the information and communication channels they need to make decisions for themselves and advocate for their needs.



The International Rescue Committee (IRC) is among the world's leading humanitarian aid organizations. IRC works with people forced to flee from war, conflict, and disaster, helping them to survive, recover, and rebuild their lives. Working in over 40 countries, the IRC seeks to be an operational and inspiring leader in matters of resettlement, asylum, and integration, demonstrating its credibility and expertise as a leading service provider, partner, and advocate across the arc of the global displacement crisis.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Eight months into the Russia-Ukraine war, Roma refugees in Moldova, continue to face significant barriers to accessing the information necessary to make decisions for themselves and their families and to access humanitarian services. The assessment shows that some barriers are well documented and have impacted their access to timely, verified, and actionable information long before their arrival in Moldova. These include a deeply ingrained distrust of authority figures (in particular, the Government), poor access to education, and lower literacy skills than other refugee groups. Other barriers are more recent, resulting from the new structural inequities they are facing in Moldova.

Here are the main findings from the assessment:

- **Roma community is an important information source:** Information sources that are most trusted and relied upon for Roma refugees are other Roma community members. They are either refugees, cultural mediators, or Roma support organizations. This approach ensures that information that does reach the community is in the appropriate language, contextualised, and shared in a culturally appropriate manner. On the other hand, this can place pressure on Roma organizations and limit access to a diverse range of information, as Roma refugees are not able to search and source information for themselves independently or compare a variety of sources due to limited access to mobile phones/computers as well as due to low levels of literacy.
- **Trust is heavily influenced by the message carriers:** The fact that the Roma community prefers to receive information from other Roma community members heavily influences the dynamics of trust in information and its providers. Roma refugees are often wary of information coming directly from the Government, relief agencies, or volunteers until it is verified by another Roma community member.
- **Language and Literacy are a barrier:** Members of the Roma refugee community, compared to the other refugees from Ukraine, have greater literacy difficulties. Women, the elderly, and people living with disabilities are more likely not to read and write or are doing so with difficulty^[1] This limits their access to printed and online information of services available to them, as well as their access to feedback and complaints mechanisms.

[1] [Language Factsheet: Romani language in the Ukraine response](#), Clear Global, September 2022

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- **Roma communities are diverse:** Roma refugees in Moldova are not a linguistically or culturally homogenous group. Some refugees confidently communicate in Russian, Romanian or Ukrainian. However, a not insignificant portion of the community is most comfortable communicating in Romani. Although Romani is considered a unique language, the geographic spread of Roma communities suggests that many dialects exist. Roma in Ukraine and neighbouring countries use a range of dialects, which might make it hard for some Romani speakers to fully understand each other at times[2]. Refugees in Moldova told us that Cotleari, Chisiniovschi, Lovari, and Servitska are the dialects used most.
- **Phone access is shared:** Roma refugees often share access to a mobile phone with each other, and most families have at least one. Phones are more likely to be owned by the male head of the household. Some groups, who may require specialised or sensitive information to meet their needs, such as women and girls, can be further isolated by this shared access.
- **Digital access:** social media is commonly used in communication with relatives and catching up with the news. However, Roma refugees are less likely to be members of Facebook, Telegram, and Viber groups, popular with other refugees from Ukraine. Financial barriers are preventing them from having the preferable level of internet access. Wi-Fi access is not universal, and families often cannot afford the data packages necessary to service everyone's access needs. In a response where digital information platforms dominate the landscape; this barrier further limits their access to key information channels in the digital arena.
- **Roma refugees in private accommodation feel more disconnected from the information they need:** Refugees who live in supported group accommodation (such as the Testemitanu centre) feel more confident accessing the information they need as they have better access to free Wi-Fi, cultural mediators, Roma organisations and other relief services. Roma refugees who live in private accommodation are less likely to be close to free Wi-Fi connections and are having less contact with relief services and information sources.

[2] [Language Factsheet: Romani language in the Ukraine response, Clear Global, September 2022](#)

- **Roma communities want feedback provided through appropriate platforms:**

While Roma refugees show some interest in providing direct feedback to inform response efforts, there are barriers preventing the response from meeting this important accountability commitment. Roma refugees are unsure of how to give feedback and what platforms are available to them. Response feedback is filtered through Roma organisations and cultural mediators – but community members lack platforms to directly share feedback and participate in the design of response efforts.

- **Greater access to Roma community media is prevented by financial barriers:**

Although there is an interest in accessing news and entertainment content in the Romani language, most refugees lack the basic equipment (television and radio sets) to engage with the existing community media options available to them. Roma refugees in privately rented accommodation are more likely to be in unfurnished or partially furnished spaces, without access to TVs or radios.

INTRODUCTION

Since February 24, 2022, the world has been confronted with one of the largest refugee movements since the World War II. More than 13 million people have been displaced by the war in Ukraine in the last six months, with 591,957 refugees entering Moldova since February[1]. As of September 2022, more than 90 thousand people are still seeking refuge in the country with the support of the Government, and partners including civil society, the private sector, volunteers, and humanitarian actors.

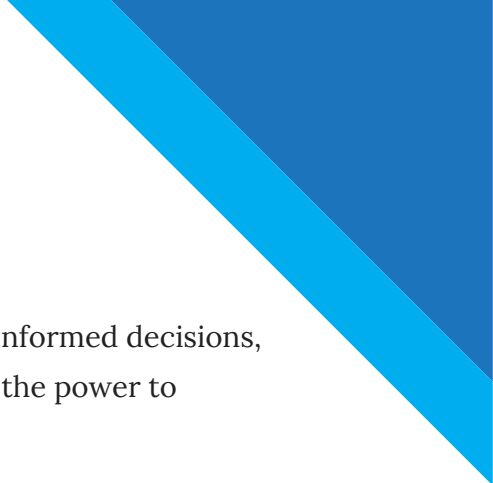
While there has been an extraordinarily swift response to create services to support these newly arrived communities, information and communication challenges have sometimes hampered their effectiveness. Information is a critical form of aid for communities impacted by the crisis. Timely, relevant, and accessible information helps affected citizens understand the situation and potential risks, make informed decisions, and gain access to life-saving aid.

Humanitarian actors and responders have been aware for some time that Roma refugees may face greater challenges in accessing the information. The same applies to accessing two-way communication channels they need to make informed decisions, express needs, and preferences, and participate in the design of response activities. As much as responders were aware of the problem, there were limitations in their knowledge of how to mitigate this gap.

This Information Needs Assessment report aims to better understand what barriers the Roma refugees from Ukraine are currently facing in accessing timely, relevant and verified information in Moldova, as well as to highlight the community's information and communication needs and preferences. This assessment activity does not aim to be representative of the diverse views and needs of all Roma communities in Moldova and is based on a small sample. However, we hope that through our continued collaboration with the community, we can fairly express the most pressing needs of newly arrived refugees and offer some practical recommendations for improvement.

We believe that through increasing access to more participatory information channels, tailored to refugee preferences, service providers can more closely align services with refugee needs and ultimately, better engage with the communities they hope to assist.

[3] [UNHCR Operational Data Portal](#), As of September 6



Healthy information environments enable everyone to make better-informed decisions, bridge divides, participate more fully in their communities, and hold the power to account.

This assessment is a collaborative effort of ROMNI, the Roma Women's Platform in Moldova, International Rescue Committee, and Internews in Moldova.

We would like to thank everyone who gave their time so generously to this assessment including representatives of the Roma Taskforce, local and international relief organizations, and Roma media organizations. Most importantly, we would like to thank the Roma community members who kindly shared their perspectives with us.

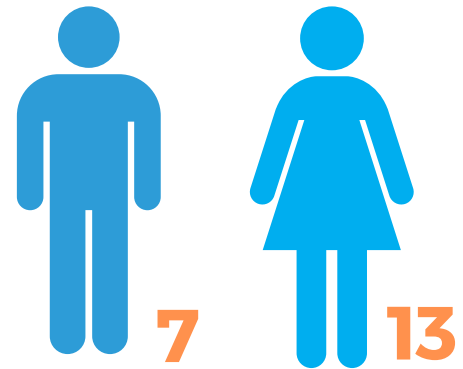
METHODOLOGY

This assessment was conducted between August and September 2022. Data collection included:

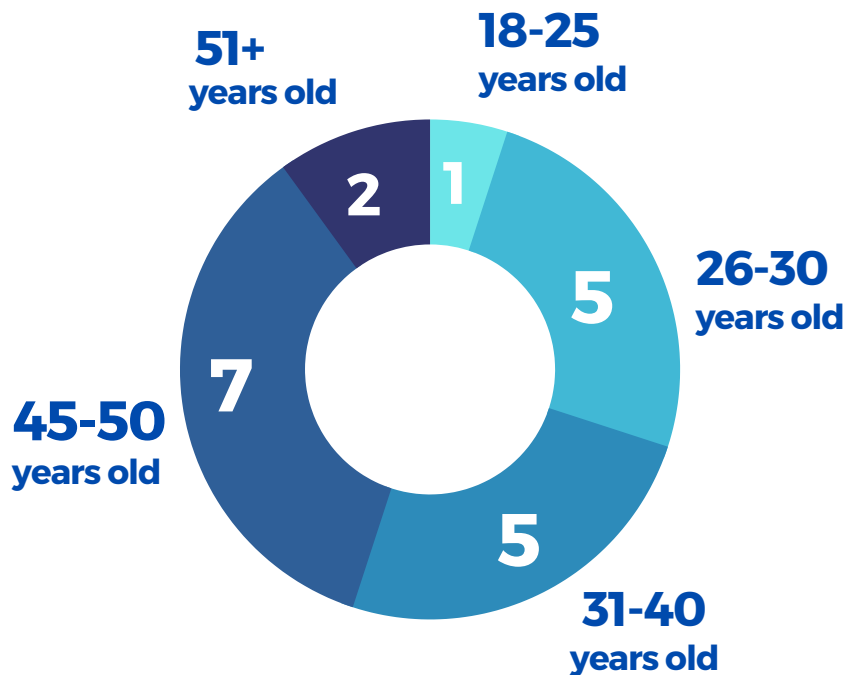
- 1) Rapid desk/literature review
- 2) Key informant interviews: four 45-minute interviews were held. Key Informants included Radio Patrino, ROMNI, and UNHCR who act as the lead of the Roma Taskforce (a coordinating body of humanitarian actors working to address Roma refugee needs). An additional focus group was held in collaboration with Intersos including with five key informants working as Roma community Cultural Mediators in Moldova.
- 3) Focus Group Discussions: Two sessions with Roma refugee community members were implemented by ROMNI in partnership with the IRC.

Focus group participants:

TOTAL = 20



GENDER



PARTICIPANT AGE

FINDINGS

Information Preferences:

Roma community members are the most important information source

Face-to-face communication with Roma community members (Roma refugees or Roma community members from Moldova) is the most preferred way to access information. This information is often unverified. Individuals, cultural mediators, and Roma organizations play a significant role in sourcing information, localizing it to meet community needs, and helping Roma refugees navigate the services available to them in the refugee response.

"We usually get information from other Roma refugees who have benefited from some services"

Historical injustice, language barriers, and prejudice experienced in Moldova, further contribute to the community's preference to trust and listen to people who share a similar background. Mistreatment from some volunteers and non-Roma NGOs has increased the level of mistrust in the intentions of volunteers and organizations from outside of the community.

"Information coming from other sources may not be trusted, if a non-Roma shares the information, it will be considered fake news"

Informants shared that transparency and clear communication with the community are important for building trust. If Roma feels they cannot access information about the services available to them and understand how such decisions are being made, this can contribute to further erosion of trust in the system. Community members prefer non-Roma organizations, volunteers, and humanitarian workers to be introduced to them via a Roma community member who can vouch for their intentions.

"You cannot do things for the Roma without involving the Roma or having a Roma person open the gate to the community"

Elderly and community leaders are important information influencers. Key informants shared that the community does not generally have trust in politics or politicians. Roma communities choose their leader, and they make decisions on behalf of and inform the wider community.

Some organizations and local authorities have hired Community Mediators to act as a bridge with the Roma community. Community Mediators have played an important role in interpreting information for both Roma and humanitarian workers, helping connect Roma refugees with services and helping service providers better understand the needs and preferences of the community.

Social Media: Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, Facebook, Telegram, Viber, and Tik Tok were all mentioned as being commonly used by Roma refugees. Younger users were more likely to use TikTok and Telegram and adult users preferred Viber – all other platforms were used universally. One respondent reported being part of a group sharing information related to the response on Viber, and another eight follow Ukrainian information channels on Telegram. Participants requested specific Telegram channels to be set up to share information and ask questions in the Romani language.

“Roma people need to understand what information is correct and what is not and be able to distinguish it.”

Social media is also sometimes used to access live streams. The most watched live streams are made by Roma who are still in Ukraine (in Romani), as well as sessions organized by journalists or non-Roma citizens in the Ukrainian language.

Roma community media

The Roma community in Moldova has established community media channels that have been responding to community information needs on both radio and television. These platforms have, in the last six months, expanded their services to also provide information to newly arrived Roma communities.

Radio Patrin is a radio station broadcasting from Chisinau, aiming to connect Roma communities with information on employment opportunities, security, health, and legal information and to facilitate communication and mutual understanding with other communities in Moldova. They host two online radio stations and one FM channel. They are in the process of developing a YouTube channel to launch video-based content. According to Radio Patrin, the station has a strong listenership, especially in Soroca where it is played on public buses. Besides broadcasting in Romani, the station also shares Russian language videos on Facebook.

Petalo Romano is a Romani language program hosted on Moldova 1 TV. The show presents the multicultural world of the Roma community in Moldova and promotes the integration of the Roma into public life. The show "Petalo Romano" is broadcast twice a month (on the second and fourth Monday of the month) and can be watched on Moldova 1 TV and on TRM.MD, starting from 14:30h. The show lasts 30 minutes.

While there is an interest in accessing news and entertainment content in the Romani language, most refugees shared that they lack the basic equipment (television and radio sets) to engage with the existing community media options. Roma in privately rented accommodation was more likely to be in sparsely or unfurnished spaces, without TVs or radios. Contributors living at the Testemitanu center say they were promised the installation of a TV more than three months ago, but this is yet to happen.

Official channels are underutilized

Just three participants mentioned using Dopomoga.md as a source of information - no respondents mentioned Government websites or the websites of other relief organizations. This may be due to a general distrust of government authorities, the perception that they would not find information in a language they could understand, or that information posted there was too complex or not related to their specific information needs.

However, participants did express a preference for hotlines if the information could be provided in their language or dialect. If this was not possible, the second preference was for delivering information in the Russian language. Hotlines were seen as being more accessible for people who face literacy barriers. Seven people said they had called a hotline but didn't receive the information they needed or didn't understand it.

“In case we call hotline Dopomoga the information is provided in Russian, and we don't always understand what is explained.”

INFORMATION BARRIERS:

Discrimination

There have already been reports suggesting discrimination towards Roma refugees in access to humanitarian and integration services [1]. For example, cases of discrimination have been recorded on the border crossings to Moldova, where Roma refugees were intentionally left without sim cards that were otherwise provided for other refugees from Ukraine. This discrimination from service providers and community members and prejudice has, in many ways, impacted the way the newly arrived Roma communities are now treated by the Moldovan community and some service providers.

Refugees feel they face greater barriers to accessing appropriate accommodation and food and reporting harassment by officials. Respondents shared that they feel they are

[4] [Moldova: Romani Refugees from Ukraine Face Segregation, Human Rights Watch, May 2022](#)

also facing discrimination accessing the information.

"I personally noticed that Roma refugees do not know the information which the non-Roma refugees know"

Some informants shared that local media in Moldova sometimes perpetuate negative stereotypes about the community. The Roma community is sometimes referred to using pejorative terms, or their experience is generalized by overly emphasizing poverty and challenges within the community.

"When I arrived in Chisinau on February 24 with my sick mother and 2 small children at the Palanca customs, someone from the Volunteers directed us to Moldexpo, I didn't receive any other information there. At Moldexpo we were not even allowed to pass the gate nobody give us any information."

Language, literacy, and cultural preferences and barriers

Language and illiteracy are major barriers to information access for many Roma refugees in Moldova. Women, elderly, and people living with disabilities are more likely not to read and write or do so with difficulties.

Key Informants shared that cultural differences are also impacting Roma women's levels of literacy. They are more likely to be illiterate due to cultural pressures to leave school at an earlier age. Roma girls are especially at risk when it comes to dropping out of school due to the practice of early marriages in certain communities and other aspects of gender inequality, including the perception that schooling is less necessary for women [1].

While there are no definitive figures for the levels of literacy of the Roma refugee population in Moldova, research from the Ukrainian Institute of Social Studies suggests that over 50% of Roma people lack formal education, with 68% of research respondents stating that they cannot read or write or can only read and write with difficulty; 59% stated they have no or have limited numeracy skills [2].

[5] Key Informant Interview with Vicorina Luca of Roma organisation, Radio Patrin

[6] Institute for Social Studies of Ukraine, International Foundation "Renaissance", Analysis of the real problems and needs of Roma in Ukraine, 2003.

Clear Global has recently released a factsheet on the Roma language which suggests that social exclusion also limits opportunities for Roma to become fully proficient and comfortable using the dominant language of their local area [3].

“Of course, there are dialect, cultural and religious differences, and it affects the access to information of Roma women especially, who are more illiterate than men, and this harms the access [to information]”

For this reason, information in audio and video formats are preferable and should be disseminated on social media as well, with Roma organisations participating. Participants mentioned that these formats would allow them to be more self-confident and allow them to easily understand and advocate for their rights.

Ukrainian Roma population is diverse and that is also reflected in the Roma refugees now in Moldova. We asked the participants in our focus group discussions what is their mother tongue, and we found that Cotleari, Chisiniovschi, Crimi, Lovari, and Servitska dialects were all represented.

Digital Access

Mobile phone ownership - This refugee response has been notable for expanding the application of digital responses to service delivery and the provision of information. However, while a digital response offers many efficiencies, an overreliance on information found online and on social media, or via mobile apps can further marginalize those who are digitally disconnected.

While there are no exact figures on the rates of mobile phone ownership among the Roma refugees in Moldova, our respondents estimate that one in ten owns an android phone and most people in the community have access to an android phone owned by someone else - often a family member. This presents greater access challenges for some. In a traditional family dynamic, the phone is most often held by male household member - which can limit access to women, children, and the elderly. This may also limit access to sensitive information found online.

[7] [Clear Global, Roma language factsheet, September 2022](#)

Internet access – Levels of access to the internet appear to be mostly influenced by three factors: device ownership, available income, and location of the accommodation.

As mentioned above, male household members are more likely to own phones, this can limit access to the internet for others. There is a financial barrier preventing Roma refugees from using the internet as much as they would like. All participants noted that they would like to be able to access the internet more often, however, they cannot afford the data packages required for the level of access they need.

Participants staying in privately rented accommodation were less likely to be near free Wi-Fi hotspots. This means that, while they may be able to access the internet at home (through a shared device), they were disconnected as soon as they leave the house.

Participants staying in the Testemitanu Center do have access to free Wi-Fi but report that the connection is weak and only available in some areas of the building. They can access free Wi-Fi at the nearby Malldova shopping center, but other Wi-Fi access points in the city center are too far away.

INFORMATION NEEDS:

Participants of Focus Groups Discussions shared that their main information needs are:

- Education: How children can access education and which schools are enrolling children who may not have Ukrainian, Russian, or Romanian language skills.
- Health Services: Participants need more information on where they can access free healthcare.
- Legal Information: Information related to their access to territory of the Republic of Moldova, legal documents needed, and mechanisms available to ensure the protection and access to rights of refugees that do not have personal documents. It is widely recognized that lack of personal identification documents was among the

key issues preventing many Roma in Ukraine from securing basic human rights and accessing social and other services. Due to the absence of reliable disaggregated data, it is difficult to estimate the exact number of Roma living in Moldova without personal documents. Estimates suggest approximately 10-20% of the community could be without documents, stateless, or at risk of statelessness [1].

The quality of information available is also impacting the community. Participants shared that for those that could access information online, the information was often dense, using complex terminology and acronyms without explanation. This is likely a broader challenge influencing other refugees in Moldova as well and is not pertaining solely to the experiences of the Roma population, which highlights the importance of information being available in plain language and accessible formats.

greater engagement with the Roma community itself in order to verifiably and meaningfully establish what their needs and preferences are and foster their agency in all matters affecting them.

[8] [Assisting stateless people trapped in Ukraine: report from the ground, 2022](#)

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings above, we suggest the following programmatic recommendations to improve communication, information supply, and account access for Roma refugee communities:

- **Work with the community:** Cultural mediators are already playing a significant role in connecting Roma refugees with the information and services they need. Mediators should be supported to collect, collate, and advocate for community preferences with a wider response. They should be an important channel to relate community members' priorities and streamline their responses. Humanitarian actors should be supported to hire and train mediators to ensure their services are accessible to the Roma community. They should consider diversifying mediator groups to include more women, teenagers, young people (through youth associations), and the elderly. Diverse mediator groups are more likely to be able to understand and respond to a wider proportion of community needs.
- **Work to integrate Roma into existing Community Engagement Accountability activities:** While rumour tracking projects start being set up, so they serve the wider refugee community, Roma refugees currently are not included enough in these activities. Cultural mediators could be an important in-road to collecting rumours and misinformation circulating within the Roma community. They can compare it with the misperceptions and information gaps present in the wider refugee communities and respond with verified information. This will allow the needs and concerns of Roma refugees considered alongside those in the wider community.
- **Build trust through listening:** Organisations which are providing services to the Roma community, specifically or as part of wider response efforts, should work through mediators to reach greater trust and support from the community. Building trust happens through listening to the community's needs and priorities and responding with direct actions that show you have understood and are truly advocating their needs.

- **Report back to the community:** It is common for organisations to extract information from the community through surveys and research and for the community to remain disconnected from the findings or the tangible impact of the contribution they gave. The impact of community contributions should be regularly shared to encourage a culture of feedback and get an improved, more accountable response in return.
- **Design accessible feedback mechanisms:** Clear, consultative feedback mechanisms for Roma representatives, activists, and community members at national, regional, and local levels to engage in policy design and implementation should be established. This is especially important when the decisions in question directly affect them. Authorities should ensure that programmes and service provision in education, health, and other sectors draw meaningfully on the perspectives and preferences of the community. Feedback mechanisms for the general refugee community should consider accessibility for people with low literacy by including audio, video, and in-person options to contribute while ensuring confidentiality.
- **Diversify communication:** The Roma community has a diverse range of information needs and preferences that are influenced by different barriers. Men do not face the same barriers as women, young do not have the same challenges as the elderly, and culture, traditions, and language may be different between groups. While many Roma refugees may face literacy challenges, harmful stereotypes (for instance generalising that the whole community is illiterate) further impact the community's integration. When engaging with the community, a mediator who speaks the appropriate dialect should be engaged where possible. The use of female mediators when discussing sensitive issues with women and girls should be standard practice. For Roma community members that are literate in Ukrainian or Russian, it should not be assumed that this literacy includes understanding complex terminology regarding protection, healthcare, or legal issues. Thus, a plain language explanation of these terms should be always provided.

- **Promote access to social media platforms:** While Romanian media organizations made some early efforts to provide information to refugees in Ukrainian, some refugees are unaware of this programming or unable to access it. Greater promotion is necessary. To achieve a wider reach, alternative broadcast platforms such as social media broadcast should be considered (i.e., Facebook live, YouTube and Telegram channels focused on information provision) or narrowcasting through information provision field teams at places where refugees are likely to stay for a longer time (accommodation centres, health centres, and info points).
- **Consider distributing TVs, radios, and phones:** A key barrier preventing the Roma community from accessing the community media information channels, specifically designed for them, is a lack of devices. Providing greater access to TVs, radios, and smartphones would overcome this barrier. Improved access to Wi-Fi would also produce a great benefit. Projects that aim to increase mobile phone access for women and others that traditionally have less access, should be developed in full consultation with the community to ensure buy-in and cultural sensitivity. See here the Internews guide to Radio Distributions [1] and a UNHCR guide to distributing mobile phones in humanitarian settings [2].
- **Realize the transformative potential of media:** Moldovan media can, at times, perpetuate harmful stereotypes about the Roma community. This ‘othering’ of the community can harm efforts towards social cohesion. Opportunities for media to connect with Roma refugees should be created to understand cultural sensitivities as well as community preferences and needs. Through a better understanding of the priorities of the community, the media can more effectively translate this information to their audiences and contribute to increasing understanding between refugee groups, as well as the host and Roma communities. Opportunities for Roma community members to co-create content that can be shared through traditional media platforms to amplify the voices of Roma should be also explored and supported.

[9] [Internews approach; Radio distribution](#)

[10] [Planning a Mobile Phone Distribution? 10 things to consider, okay... there's a few more, UNHCR](#)

CONCLUSION

Having access to timely, verified, and relevant information in a crisis is a human right^[1] and could be considered life-saving service. While relying on digital communication and information platforms has meant that information is more accessible than ever – right at the end of the fingertips of the majority – some groups are being left out.

Flexible and adaptive programming is needed to ensure that no group of refugees is left without information due to a lack of access to digital devices, the internet, and information in a language or format they can understand. Although this assessment focuses on the challenges faced by the Roma community, it is likely that other groups including older and younger people are not having their information needs met.

Moldova has strong and active Roma organizations that have been bridging the gap to date. But the need seems to be beyond the mandate and available resources of these organizations and more support is needed by the whole response to ensure more effective communication and engagement with the Roma community.

This is an area that warrants further research and discussion among the humanitarian community – but more importantly, this requires greater engagement with the Roma community itself in order to verifiably and meaningfully establish what their needs and preferences are and foster their agency in all matters affecting them.

[1] [The Signal Code: A Human Rights Approach to Information During Crisis, 2017](#)