



*Ukrainian refugees accommodated in the Council of Ministers recreational base in Bulgaria © UNHCR/Dobrin Kashavelov.*

## THE SITUATION OF VULNERABLE REFUGEES FROM UKRAINE

January 2025

### BACKGROUND

The war in Ukraine has triggered one of the largest displacement crises in the world, with over 6.2 million refugees dispersed across Europe alone.<sup>1</sup> Whilst obtaining an accurate estimation of the number of refugees with vulnerabilities is challenging due to the lack of reliable disaggregated data, according to UNHCR protection monitoring conducted in 11 countries,<sup>2</sup> 56% of refugee households from Ukraine surveyed include a person with a disability,<sup>3</sup> a person with a serious medical condition and/or are a household comprised only of older persons (aged 60 years and above). ‘Vulnerability’ amongst refugees can be more broadly defined to include groups other than the three categories listed above. This report, however, looks at the situation of refugees from

Ukraine falling within these three categories of vulnerability to illustrate the increased challenges they face in host countries accessing rights and services and how these difficulties may influence their decisions to return to Ukraine. Refugee respondents to UNHCR’s intentions survey report that they could be compelled to return to Ukraine even if this would not be their first choice, if they face challenges in accessing rights and services in host countries.<sup>4</sup> There are signs that more vulnerable households are increasingly taking the decision to return, with refugee returnees in Ukraine more likely to be households with vulnerabilities compared to refugees remaining in host countries. Those who returned report significant

1. See UNHCR Ukraine Data Portal available at <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine> (data as of 16 December 2024)

2. Poland, Moldova, Czech Republic, Belarus, Hungary, Romania, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Latvia, and Estonia

3. Disability is defined using the Washington Group short set of questions

4. UNHCR, Lives on hold: Intentions and Perspectives of Refugees, Refugee Returnees and IDPs from Ukraine #6 Summary Findings (November 2024), <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/112600>.

challenges meeting their basic needs inside Ukraine, raising concerns of increasing vulnerability and possible renewed displacement.<sup>5</sup>

The analysis is based on 6,837 protection monitoring interviews conducted in 11 countries by UNHCR and partners between July and October 2024<sup>6</sup>; 8,720 interviews conducted in 10 countries between May and June 2024 using the interagency Socio-Economic Inclusion Survey<sup>7</sup>; and UNHCR's Intentions Survey conducted between July and August 2024 covering 5,000 refugee households across 45 countries in Europe and 1,500 refugee returnee households in Ukraine.

## CHALLENGES IN HOST COUNTRIES

**Vulnerable households face challenges in securing stable accommodation, often caught between dwindling support programs and high rental costs.**

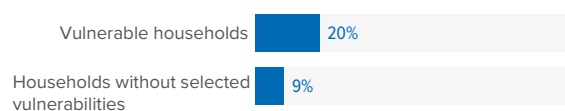
As with other households, the majority of vulnerable households live in rented accommodation (58%). However, in comparison to other households, a noticeably higher proportion of households with a person with a vulnerability reside in collective accommodation (13% vs. 6%) and government-provided hotels (7% vs. 3%).

According to protection monitoring, 14% of all households living in collective accommodation and 10% in government-provided hotels reported they would be forced to leave their current accommodation within three months from the date of the interview, higher than the 3% recorded among households renting on the private rental market, most commonly due to the termination of free accommodation schemes. As a higher proportion of vulnerable households reside in

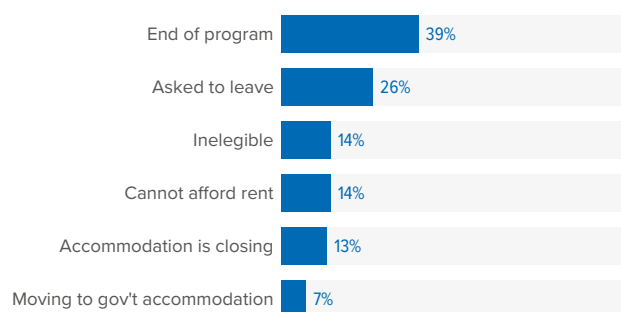
collective shelters and government-provided accommodation, they are more likely to be impacted. At the outset of the Ukraine refugee crisis, many host countries introduced free accommodation schemes for refugees, including collective shelters. However, many of these schemes have either ended or been substantially reduced.<sup>8</sup>

The end of free accommodation programs presents a serious challenge for vulnerable households, many of whom struggle to afford rent due to limited income.<sup>9</sup> In fact, a slightly higher share of vulnerable refugee households that are renting reported difficulties paying rent on time compared to other households (18% vs. 15%). This highlights the challenges in accessing sustainable accommodation arrangements as well as the compounded impact of the termination of free housing schemes on these vulnerable groups.

### % OF HOUSEHOLDS RESIDING IN COLLECTIVE SHELTERS AND GOVERNMENT PROVIDED HOTELS



### MAIN REASONS FOR HAVING TO LEAVE ACCOMMODATION IN LESS THAN THREE MONTHS (FOR VULNERABLE HOUSEHOLDS RESIDING IN COLLECTIVE ACCOMMODATION AND GOVERNMENT-PROVIDED HOTELS)



Data source: protection monitoring

5. Ibid

6. Poland, Moldova, Czech Republic, Belarus, Hungary, Romania, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Latvia, and Estonia

7. Poland, Moldova, Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Latvia, and Estonia

8. See UNHCR Slovakia Protection Brief #3 available at <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/110255>, UNHCR Romania Protection Brief, UNHCR Czech Republic Protection Brief available at <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/110878>

9. See also [Document - Helping Hands - The Role of Housing Support and Employment Facilitation in Economic Vulnerability of Refugees from Ukraine](#)

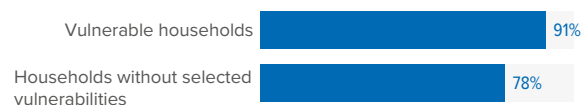
**A considerable share of vulnerable households in host countries rely on social protection benefits as a lifeline. However, many struggle to access them.**

Out of those interviewed, 91% of households containing a vulnerable individual have applied for social protection benefits in their host country, compared to 78% of other households. Most applied for grants for vulnerable groups, cash for food and accommodation, and housing assistance. Among vulnerable households that applied for social protection benefits, 22% reported facing challenges accessing them, which is higher than the 15% recorded among other households.

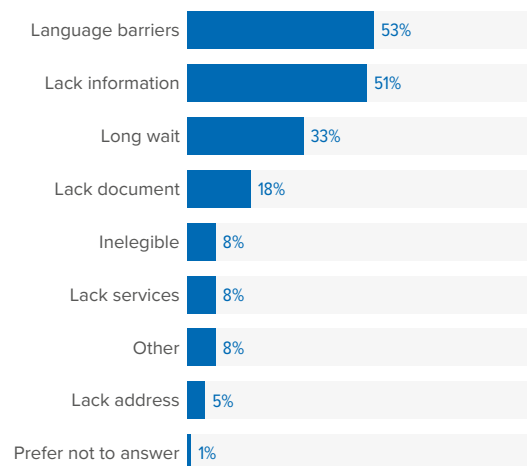
The most commonly reported obstacles to accessing social protection benefits include language barriers, lack of information, and long waiting times. Additionally, eight percent of households reported ineligibility for social protection benefits as an obstacle. In some contexts, beneficiaries of temporary protection – a legal status held by most of refugees from Ukraine – are not entitled to important social protection benefits. For example, in Slovakia, temporary protection beneficiaries are not eligible for disability and unemployment allowances, as access is tied to having permanent residency.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, in Hungary, relevant legislation fails to include temporary protection beneficiaries in a wide range of social protection benefits, including family allowances for households with a disabled child.<sup>11</sup>

Limited access to social protection benefits poses a particularly serious challenge for vulnerable households, as most rely on them for their subsistence. Among those interviewed, 45% of vulnerable households reported social protection benefits – either from Ukraine or the host country – as their primary source of income in the month preceding the interview, nearly double the 23% of other households who reported the same. Without these benefits, many will likely struggle to meet their basic household needs.

**% OF HOUSEHOLDS THAT APPLIED FOR SOCIAL PROTECTION BENEFITS IN THEIR HOST COUNTRY**



**CHALLENGES ACCESSING SOCIAL PROTECTION BENEFITS IN HOST COUNTRY (VULNERABLE HOUSEHOLDS)**



*Data source: protection monitoring*

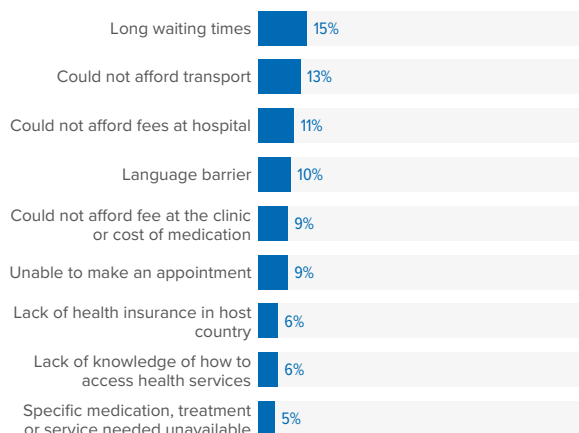
**Healthcare is identified as the most urgent need for most vulnerable households.**

Thirty-five percent of vulnerable households ranked healthcare as their most pressing need, significantly higher than the 8% of other households who reported the same. Among those interviewed, 14% of vulnerable households reported being unable to access healthcare, compared to 11% of other households. The most common impediments to healthcare include long waiting times, inability to afford associated fees, and language barriers. In focus group discussions, refugees emphasized the high cost of medication, the lack of interpretation services, and limited access to specialized care as significant obstacles.

<sup>10</sup> UNHCR Slovakia Protection Brief #3 available at <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/110255>

<sup>11</sup> UNHCR Hungary Protection Brief available at <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/107231>

### BARRIERS TO HEALTHCARE (VULNERABLE HOUSEHOLDS)



Data source: socio-economic inclusion survey

### Vulnerable working-age refugees in host countries face barriers such as long-term illness or disability, leading to lower labor force participation. They also have slightly higher unemployment rates compared to others.

Thirty-six percent of working-age individuals (aged 15-64 years) with vulnerabilities reported that they were not participating in the labor force in their host country, compared to 27% of others. Predictably, many are out of the labor force due to long-term illnesses and disabilities.

Of those participating in the labour market, 14% of vulnerable individuals reported being unemployed in their host country, slightly higher than the 9% unemployment rate reported by others. Vulnerable individuals and others report similar challenges to employment, including language barriers and challenges accessing decent work. However, individuals with vulnerabilities also face unique challenges. For example, refugees with physical disabilities often find that available job opportunities involve physically demanding work, making them unsuitable.<sup>12</sup> The lack of access to decent employment undermines refugees' self-reliance and their ability to achieve a dignified standard of living in their host country.

### INDIVIDUALS WHO ARE NOT PARTICIPATING IN THE LABOR FORCE (AGED 15-64)



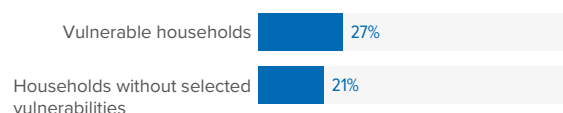
Data source: socio-economic inclusion survey

### Vulnerable households face challenges in accessing civil registration, including long wait times and lack of supporting documents.

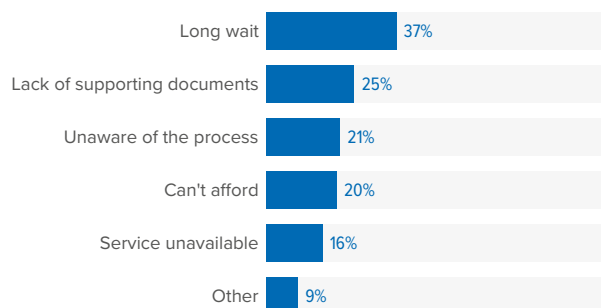
Nine percent of households with a person with vulnerabilities reported changes in their family composition since leaving Ukraine, including births, deaths, marriages, and divorces. Among this group, 27% faced challenges in registering these events with the authorities of their host country and/or Ukrainian consular institutions, as compared to 21% of households without persons with vulnerabilities who faced challenges registering family composition changes.

For vulnerable households, the primary barriers to accessing civil registration services in host countries include long waiting times, a lack of supporting documents, and unawareness of the registration procedures. Limited access to civil registration services can significantly hinder refugees' ability to access their rights and increase their vulnerability to protection risks. For example, without death registration, refugees may be unable to claim inheritance rights, while the absence of birth registration could put children at higher risk of statelessness.

### HOUSEHOLDS WHO REPORTED EXPERIENCING CHALLENGES REGISTERING VITAL EVENTS (OF THOSE WHO REPORTED CHANGES IN THEIR FAMILY COMPOSITION)



### BARRIERS TO CIVIL REGISTRATION (VULNERABLE HOUSEHOLDS)



Data source: protection monitoring

12. UNHCR Document - DISPLACEMENT PATTERNS, PROTECTION RISKS AND NEEDS OF REFUGEES FROM UKRAINE - REGIONAL PROTECTION ANALYSIS #2

## HOW CHALLENGES IN HOST COUNTRIES INFLUENCE RETURN DECISIONS OF VULNERABLE REFUGEES

Whilst some refugees have taken personal decisions to return to Ukraine, UNHCR intentions monitoring indicates that the ongoing international armed conflict remains the most significant barrier to return at the current time.<sup>13</sup> In this context, it is important to support individuals to reach well informed and truly voluntary decisions on whether to return, made without inducements such as restrictions on the ability to access rights and assistance in host countries.<sup>14</sup>

Concerningly, refugee households report that they could be compelled to return even if this would not be their first choice, if they face challenges in accessing rights and services in host countries. According to UNHCR's intentions survey, a substantial number of refugees surveyed reported that they would be forced to return to Ukraine if they have problems accessing rights in their host country – notably legal status (16%), accommodation (7%), and healthcare (6%) – even if the war continues. Households with vulnerabilities were more likely to report plans to return to Ukraine within the next 12 months as compared to others.<sup>15</sup>

Given the unpredictability of the international armed conflict in Ukraine, UNHCR underlines the importance of providing continued legal certainty to refugees. Extending the application of the Temporary Protection Directive beyond March 2026—for one or more years—is a pragmatic approach to achieving this goal. Providing access to alternative residency pathways, outside Temporary Protection (or similar protection frameworks), may also be an appropriate way of providing continued legal status for refugees who are unable to return to Ukraine. It is important that vulnerable groups – who may not be able to meet the eligibility requirements for some alternative

forms of residency due to a lack of employment or low income levels – are equally guaranteed access to legal status for as long as needed.

## THE SITUATION OF VULNERABLE REFUGEE RETURNEES IN UKRAINE

There are signs that more vulnerable households are increasingly already taking the decision to return, with refugee returnees in Ukraine more likely to be households with vulnerabilities compared to refugees remaining in host countries.<sup>16</sup> Many vulnerable households which have already returned struggle to meet basic necessities such as food, housing, and medical expenses. Amongst households with vulnerabilities, 50% report that their income covers none or only a little of their essential needs following return to Ukraine, compared to 39% of other households.<sup>17</sup>

Although early recovery efforts are underway in some parts of Ukraine, ensuring conditions for durable and sustainable returns remains crucial. With over 3.5 million internally displaced persons within Ukraine, humanitarian needs inside the country are extensive. The Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment 3 (RDNA) estimates the cost of reconstruction and recovery at \$486 billion, with 10% of the total housing stock in the country either damaged or destroyed. The war has resulted in increased cases of trauma and serious injuries, leading to a rapid rise in the number of people with disabilities.<sup>18</sup> Premature returns by vulnerable refugee households due to challenges in host countries may strain overburdened social services, worsening vulnerabilities and increasing the risk of renewed displacement.

13 UNHCR, Lives on hold: Intentions and Perspectives of Refugees, Refugee Returnees and IDPs from Ukraine #6 Summary Findings (November 2024), <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/112600>.

14 UNHCR, Position on Voluntary Return to Ukraine (June 2023), <https://www.refworld.org/policy/countrypos/unhcr/2023/en/124299>.

15 UNHCR, Lives on hold: Intentions and Perspectives of Refugees, Refugee Returnees and IDPs from Ukraine #6 Summary Findings (November 2024).

16 UNHCR, Lives on hold: Intentions and Perspectives of Refugees, Refugee Returnees and IDPs from Ukraine #6 Summary Findings (November 2024).

17 Ibid

18 Ukraine - Third Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment (RDNA3) : February 2022 - December 2023, <https://ukraine.un.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/UA%20RDNA3%20report%20EN.pdf>

## IMPACT STORIES: HOW UNHCR'S SUPPORT HELPS VULNERABLE REFUGEES FROM UKRAINE



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Natasha fled with her four children soon after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine began. She is a special education teacher, now working within her field in Lublin, Poland. Her daughter Nadiia, who has special needs, fell in love with hippotherapy<sup>19</sup>, which is organized by the Eleon Foundation with the support of the UNHCR. “Thanks to these sessions, Nadiia learned to distinguish the days of the week. Almost every day she would ask: ‘Mommy, when is Monday?’, because that’s when she had therapy. So, we started drawing suns on the calendar. That’s how she learned to name all the days,” says Natasha with a smile.

The Eleon Foundation, a UNHCR’s partner in Poland, continues to support children with disabilities, particularly refugee children from Ukraine. The foundation focuses on children with autism, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, musculoskeletal disorders, and developmental delays. In 2024, they provided 244 hippotherapy sessions for 28 children with special needs, significantly improving motor coordination, muscle strength, and reducing anxiety. These sessions were tailored to each child’s needs and supervised by qualified specialists, with parents reporting noticeable improvements in their children’s physical development and emotional well-being.

19. Hippotherapy is a form of physical, occupational, or speech therapy that involves the use of horseback riding to help individuals with physical, emotional, or developmental challenges.



Tetyana, 58, a Ukrainian refugee receives cash assistance from UNHCR in Poland © UNHCR/Tarik Argaz

In August 2023, after more than a year and a half of enduring constant shelling in Ukraine, Tetyana, 58, fled to Poland with her young son. Due to rheumatic fever, Tetyana’s mobility had been severely affected, leaving her reliant on a wheelchair and unable to work. Although they are currently living in a shelter, Tetyana remains hopeful about finding stable housing and receiving medical treatment to regain her mobility so she can work and support herself and her son. As part of a programme supporting vulnerable refugees from Ukraine, UNHCR Poland provided Tetyana with three months of cash assistance, helping cover basic needs like food, medicine, clothing, and school materials for her son’s education.

Supporting people like Tetyana is crucial in helping them rebuild their lives after fleeing conflict. With dependents to care for, such as her young son, Tetyana’s vulnerability is heightened, making it even more essential to provide stable accommodation and financial support. Without support in their host country, individuals like Tetyana would face even greater hardship.

## RECOMMENDATIONS



**To prevent premature returns, UNHCR recommends continued support for the most vulnerable refugees to access rights and specialized assistance in host countries.**

Strategies to include refugees in national systems should strive to address the unique challenges the most vulnerable face in accessing accommodation, decent work, documentation, healthcare, social welfare and other rights.



**Vulnerable groups must be guaranteed equal access to legal status in host countries,** whether through the extended application of temporary protection or access to alternative residency measures, until safe and sustainable return is possible.



**Support all refugees to reach fully informed, voluntary decisions on whether to remain in host countries or return to Ukraine.** Information on access to legal status, services and support must be tailored to and fully accessible by vulnerable groups.



**Invest in social services tailored to the specific needs of older persons, persons with disability and chronic illnesses inside Ukraine** to support sustainable returns of vulnerable persons in the future.

### For more information, reports and other resources:

- UNHCR Europe webpage
- UNHCR Ukraine Emergency webpage

### Operational data portals:

- Ukraine Refugee Situation

### Contact:

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www.unhcr.org/europe

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