



UNHCR

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
Haut Commissariat des Nations Unies pour les réfugiés

PROTECTION BRIEF

BULGARIA

DECEMBER 2024

REFUGEE INCLUSION IN EDUCATION



Ukrainian refugees learning Bulgarian language in Plovdiv/ © USRF

Operational Context

In 2024, the State Agency for Refugees (SAR) received 12,250 applications for international protection, including 2,601 (21%) from unaccompanied children. Of these, 7229 applications were terminated, with the applicants presumed to have moved on within the European Union. Refugee status was granted to 56 persons, while 4,894 persons received subsidiary protection. In addition, 3,141 applications were rejected.

Since the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine, an estimated 3,568,928 Ukrainian refugees have transited through Bulgaria. As of 31 December 2024, 201,484 refugees from Ukraine had been granted temporary protection in Bulgaria, with 74,739 having valid temporary protection. Approximately 30% of temporary protection beneficiaries staying in Bulgaria are children under the age of 18.

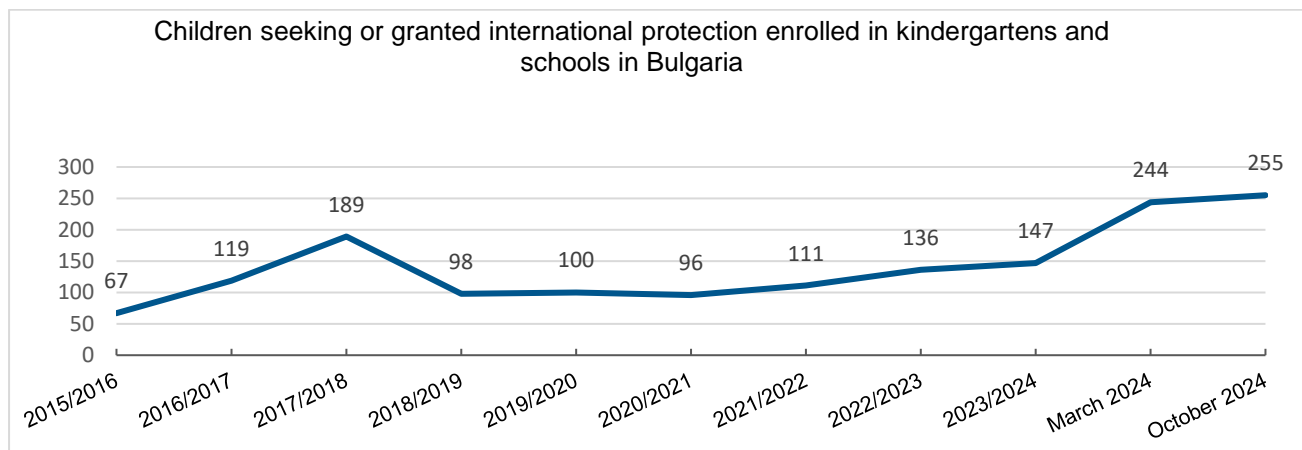
Bulgaria has made significant efforts in recent years to support access to education for displaced children and youth in state and municipal schools, to improve the quality of Bulgarian language training, and to address learning, social and emotional needs of refugee students. However, the increasing arrival of asylum-seeking and refugee children in Bulgaria has presented significant challenges to the local education system, requiring effective accommodation and integration of a diverse group of children with different nationalities, cultures, languages, socio-economic statuses, and previous educational experiences. Key integration issues include accommodation and longer-term housing, language support and access to health and social services.

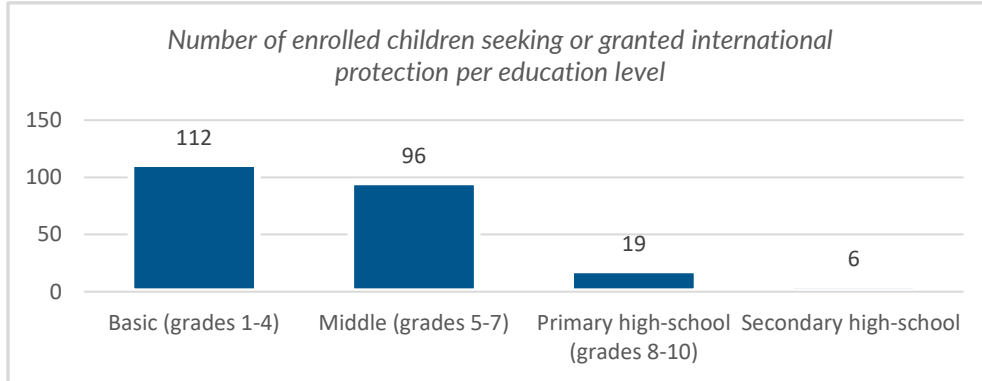
This brief examines the current situation regarding the inclusion of forcibly displaced persons in the formal education system in Bulgaria.

Key Figures

Children seeking or granted international protection

In September 2024, at the beginning of the school year 2024/2025, 377 children were accommodated in SAR centres, out of whom 344 were aged between 5 and 17. Of these, only 24 (7 per cent), are enrolled in pre-school and school education. There is no official data on the number of children granted international protection who permanently reside in the country, making it difficult to calculate the enrolment rate for this group. Additionally, the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) data on school enrolment does not distinguish between children still seeking international protection and those already granted such status.

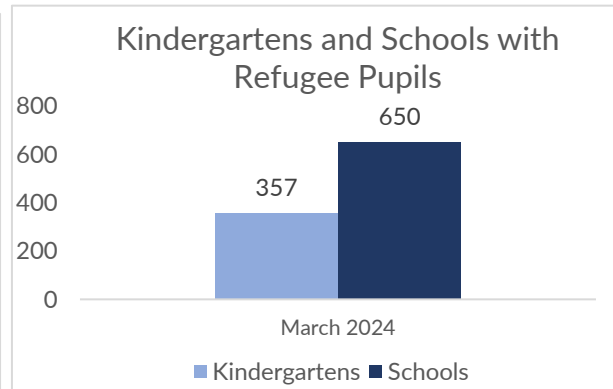
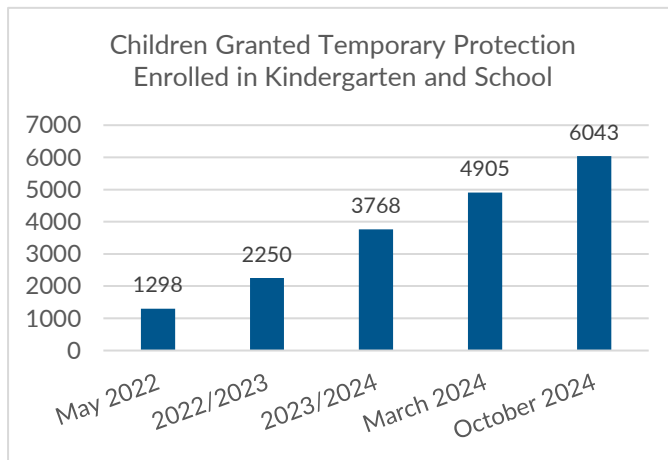




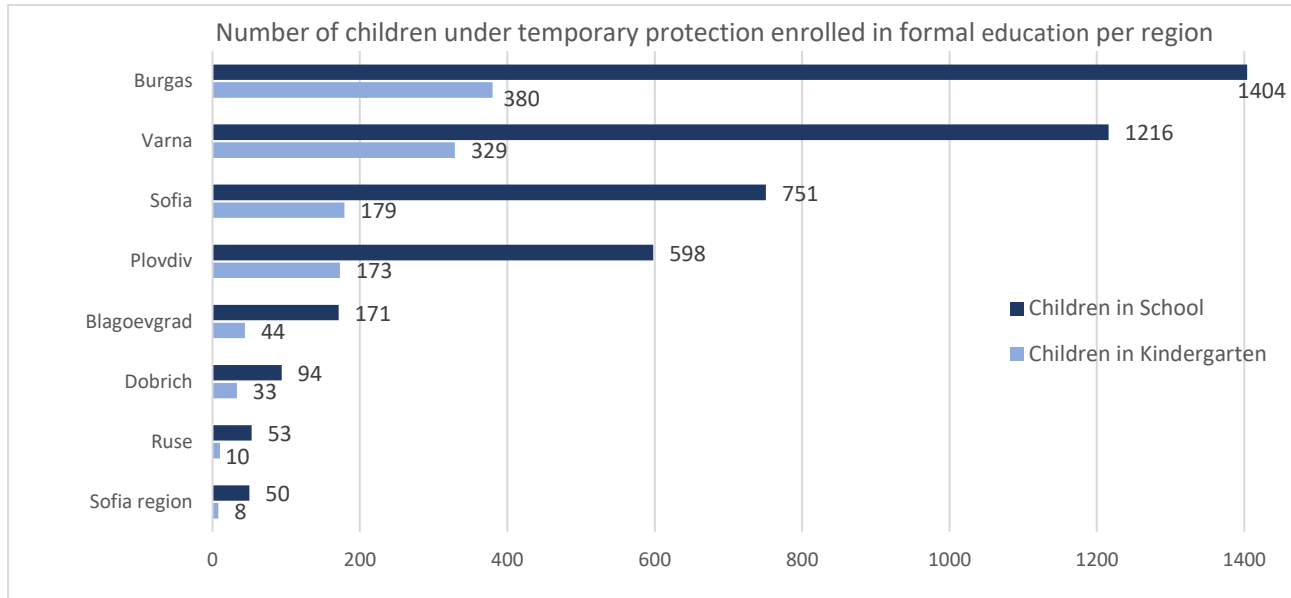
The largest number of children seeking or granted international protection in schools is in Sofia region (10 in kindergartens and 144 in schools), followed by Haskovo region, where RRC Harmanli is located (29 in schools). In total, 12 out of 28 regions in the country have registered refugee pupils.

Children granted temporary protection

The enrolment rate of children from Ukraine has increased significantly in comparison to 2022 when it was less than 10 per cent, reaching approximately 44 per cent in the 2024/2025 academic year. The total number of refugee children from Ukraine aged 5-16 as of 17 November 2024 is 13,619. The number of enrolled children in 2024/2025 school year has exceeded 6,000 – the largest group of newly accepted foreign students in the recent history of the country.



Of the 1,931 schools in Bulgaria for the 2023/2024 school year, 650, or one third, have refugee pupils.



Overview

Effective integration of refugee students into the Bulgarian school system requires tailored policies and practices that address their diverse educational, social, and emotional needs. With a growing number of children seeking international protection originating from countries experiencing protracted military conflict, significant educational disruption and psychological trauma are common. Closing existing learning gaps and effectively adapting to the Bulgarian educational framework is key to adequately meeting their needs. In addition, addressing their social and emotional needs requires creating a safe learning environment, encouraging peer and teacher interaction, fostering a sense of belonging, and helping them to cope with trauma.

Bulgaria's National Implementation Plan for the EU Migration and Asylum Pact provides a unique opportunity for legal and institutional reform to address these gaps.

Legal Framework and Practical Implementation:

Access to pre-school and school education

Pre-school and school education in Bulgaria is free and compulsory for all children between the ages of 4- 16. However, there is no policy to ensure compliance with the law with respect to forcibly displaced and stateless children. Pre-school education (4-6 years) is primarily organized in kindergartens where the enrolment procedures are coordinated by the municipalities. Access to primary (grades 1-7) and secondary (grades 8-12) education is regulated by ordinances issued by the MoES. Children seeking or granted international protection have the same rights to education as Bulgarian nationals. According to Art. 26 of the Law on Asylum and Refugees, they must be enrolled in formal education within three months of submitting their application for international protection. The law does not explicitly mention the educational rights of children with temporary protection, while the same approach in place for international protection applies.

The modality of the enrolment process depends on the possession of school certificates from the countries of origin/third countries. If children have such documents, the general enrolment procedures for pupils with foreign certificates apply and allows recognition of the diploma and enrolment in a preferred school. For those not in possession of such documents, an ordinance from 2017 establishes a three-step process: submission of an enrolment application in the Regional Education Administrations (REA); issuance of an enrollment order by the

REA to a specific school; and grade placement, based on an interview with the child by a school committee of professionals. Most international protection applicants and refugees, including unaccompanied children, lack such documents.

In practice, the enrolment process is regionalized with different dynamics set locally by the municipalities and the respective REAs. In the Black Sea region, there are challenges related to the lack of available free places in kindergartens and schools in resorts and smaller towns. Such challenges have been reported in the resorts of Ravda, Sunny Beach, St. Vlas. A positive step taken by the MoES is the provision of transportation for children accommodated in facilities in Sunny Beach and Golden Sands under the Programme for Humanitarian Assistance to schools in other locations (Varna, Aheloy, Kichevo). Although large municipalities in Bulgaria face challenges in offering places for local children for pre-school education in kindergartens, some of them have created options for enrolling refugees with temporary protection above the regular planned numbers (e.g. Plovdiv, Burgas). In other municipalities, refugees face access problems similar to the local population (Sofia). Monthly compensations for children who are not accepted in kindergartens due to lack of free places should be accessible to refugees by law, but in practice the parents often cannot meet the requirements to receive such support, such as signing a contract with a private kindergarten (due to the high monthly fees).

The REAs have taken different approaches to assuring access to school education, with the REAs in Varna, Dobrich and Ruse being the first point of contact in all enrolment procedures: they issue enrolment orders for every refugee child regardless of the availability or lack of school certificates from the country of origin. The REAs in Sofia and Burgas have adopted a decentralized approach with refugees seeking schools on their own.

Asylum-seeking children face difficulties in accessing preschool and school education. They have to be referred to the municipalities and the REAs by social experts in the SAR. However, there are no standardized school referral procedures in the reception centres, allowing personal assessment. Of particular concern is the enrolment of unaccompanied children. They are often not included in the national child protection case management system and not referred to the education authorities. Underlying this is the common assumption that their stay in the reception centres will be brief and that there is a lack of follow-up education support.

Other challenges remain in relation to the grade assessment of children without certificates, due to the lack of proper tools to assess previous learning and guidance to schools by the MoES. By law, children cannot be placed more than three grades below the grade that corresponds to their age, but there are cases where school committees make such decisions.

In September 2024, UNHCR and UNICEF, in cooperation with the MoES, launched an information campaign to encourage school enrolment. Information sessions were organized at community centres, hotels, schools, as well as online. Information materials were developed and widely disseminated. Partners in the Education Working Group, a network of organizations active in refugee education, coordinated by UNHCR and UNICEF under the Inter-Agency Refugee Coordination mechanism, were also actively involved.

[Bulgarian language in the formal education](#)

Legal framework: The Bulgarian government has adopted the approach of direct immersion of refugee children in regular classes without prior Bulgarian language support or any preparatory courses. Refugee children of compulsory school age have the right to receive additional Bulgarian language classes in kindergartens and schools, organized after the regular classes or during the official holidays. The number of these classes depends on the level of education and varies between 60 classes for pre-school education, 90 school hours for children between first and fourth grade, and 120 school hours for children between fifth and seventh grade, and 180 hours for children between eighth and in tenth grade. Pupils in grades 11 and 12 are not entitled to this support. The classes are organized following a written request from parents, and children are entitled to them only once, in the first year of their enrollment. Children may also receive support in Bulgarian through individual consultations.

The additional classes in Bulgarian language take place following a curriculum developed in 2017. Until 2023, no textbooks and learning materials were available for these classes, with UNHCR providing all schools with the textbooks developed with its funding to support learning Bulgarian as a second language. In 2023, the MoES produced A1 and A2 workbooks for the basic school level. An A2 workbook for grades 5-7 was also published in 2024.

Social Benefits

As per the Law on Social Benefits for Children, parents are entitled to financial support of 300 leva when their children are enrolled in the first, second, third, fourth and eighth grades. The Agency for Social Assistance (ASA) continues to apply the law in an exclusionary manner, rejecting applications from both refugees with international and temporary protection because they are not explicitly mentioned in the law as beneficiaries. There are numerous reports of parents being prevented by ASA officials from submitting application forms for this assistance. However, the judicial practice has been consistent in overturning rejection decisions, with UNHCR's partners recording more than 400 successful cases of judicial appeals.

UNHCR's response

UNHCR's *Refugee Education 2030: A Strategy for Refugee Education* places a strong emphasis on swift inclusion of refugees into national education systems of host countries. This requires promoting the equitable and sustainable inclusion of displaced children and youth into local education systems, fostering safe and supportive learning environments for all students regardless of legal status, sex characteristics, or disability, and empowering learners to pursue their education potential to the full so they can work toward a fulfilling and sustainable future. Bulgaria benefits from a number of UNHCR initiatives in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES), including the Bulgarian best practice - Academy for Refugee Teachers (organized by UNHCR, MoES and delivered jointly with the local partners EducArt and Teach for Bulgaria), and preparatory classes with the Personal Development Support Centres of the municipalities of Burgas, Harmanli, Plovdiv, Sofia, and Varna. UNHCR also operates a cash assistance programme in coordination with the Agency for Social Assistance (ASA) of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and the Cash Working Group comprising ASA, the Bulgarian Red Cross (BRC), IOM and UNICEF to support children of compulsory school age in particularly vulnerable refugee families, and to provide cash grants for refugees enrolling in higher education, homework and language support programmes for children with learning difficulties, Bulgarian language courses for adults provided by UNHCR's partner, BRC, and free Bulgarian language teaching materials.

Protection Risks and Needs

Low enrolment rates in the formal education system

The enrolment rates are improving among refugees with temporary protection but remain below the European average. Particularly alarming is the enrolment rate of children seeking or granted international protection, which stood at 7% for those still in the refugee determination procedure at the beginning of the 2024/2025 school year (see the graphs in the Key Figures section). The vast majority of children of compulsory school age accommodated in SAR centers are unaccompanied children, who often are not referred to the education system, due to their short period of stay in Bulgaria. The provision of quality child protection services to this vulnerable group remains a challenge, affecting their right to education, among other key rights.

One of the reasons for the low enrolment rates of asylum-seeking children is the lack of standardized school referral process in the reception centres of the State Agency for Refugees due to limited capacity. Filling in an application form for school enrolment is not part of the registration process for families with children, and the timing of the provision of information on education requires personal assessment of the SAR social experts. In

addition, the MoES has not introduced targeted measures to ensure the enrolment of these children in compulsory education. The National Mechanism for Joint Work of the Institutions on Inclusion and Dropouts Prevention, which aims to ensure the enrolment of all children of compulsory pre-school and school age, does not cover asylum-seeking children as they are not part of the population register.

Additional factors also contribute significantly to the low enrolment rates of these children: the lack of access to information and educational support, the background of parents who were deprived of educational opportunities due to displacement, many years of interrupted education on the part of children, low motivation due to intentions to leave Bulgaria, as well as safety concerns.

Although the enrolment rate for children granted temporary protection have improved, many continue to be out of school. This is confirmed by the UNHCR's 2024 Socio-Economic Insights Survey (SEIS) with refugees from Ukraine, according to which 56 per cent of the surveyed population reported children and young people under the age of 24 (including youth at the age of higher education) did not attending any educational institution in Bulgaria in the school year 2023/2024. The highest proportion of surveyed families reporting having children enrolled in education, were those reporting children enrolled in primary school (33.1 per cent of the responders with such children) or secondary school (35.5 per cent) during the same school year. 37 per cent of the households with school-age children reported at least one child not enrolled in education in Bulgaria. While the leading reason for this remains continuing on-line education in Ukraine, there are a number of structural challenges as well: lack of places in local kindergartens and schools (especially in Black Sea resorts with limited education infrastructure), long waiting periods for enrolment, challenges for refugees of providing formal proof of vaccinations, language barriers and lack of preparatory classes.

In addition, teachers face challenges in effectively supporting the social integration of refugee children, leading to cases of isolation or bullying. Refugee children highlight instances of social exclusion or neglect in the classroom.¹ Refugee students feel isolated or tend to self-isolate, especially girls wearing hijab, who feel that their religious beliefs are not always respected.² Cases of bullying have been reported in the Education Working Group, and in Plovdiv some of these were successfully addressed by the Compass Protection and Inclusion Centre partners at local level through cooperation between the schools and the refugee community.

In addition, refugee children often face stress while trying to cope with past experiences that affect their ability to learn, with higher rates of mental health disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression. Interviews reveal that traumatized refugee students can show signs of distraction, isolation, and academic setbacks. While schools offer free psychological support, they lack effective screening tools and structured practices to address refugee students' trauma. Trauma is often overlooked in schools and teachers often feel ill-equipped to deal with trauma-related issues. Overall, there's a need for better-equipped schools, and teacher training to effectively support the mental health of refugee students. In 2024/2025, the Academy for Refugee Teachers has tried to address these needs of the teachers, by including components such as inclusive education and trauma-informed teaching in the curriculum.

Lack of quality language support

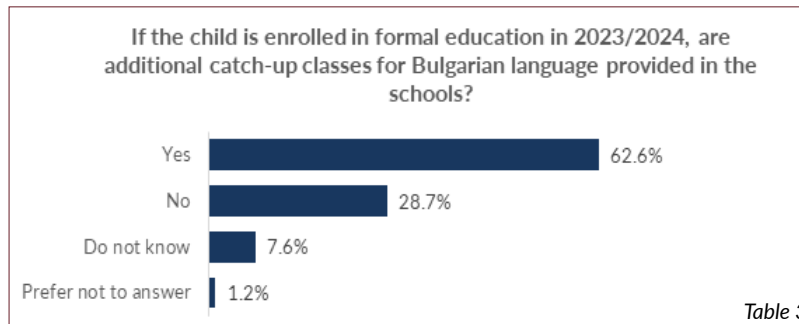
The acquisition of the Bulgarian language is a crucial step in the educational path of refugees. The approach of direct immersion in regular classes, combined with limited or no additional language support, the scarcity of teaching materials and the small number of professionals who are trained to teach Bulgarian as a foreign language, have all contributed to the difficult adaptation and educational challenges faced by refugee children in Bulgarian schools. Studies show that a lack of fluency in Bulgarian is one of the most important sources of disadvantage that adversely affects the academic performance and overall well-being of asylum-seeking and

¹ UNHCR. [Voices of Refugee Children](#) - AGD Participatory Assessment 2023, April 2024, p. 11-12.

² UNHCR, Institute for Research in Education. [Integration of Refugee Children in the Bulgarian Educational System](#), Sofia, March 2024, p. 63-64.

refugee pupils.³ Language barriers exacerbate all other obstacles to the academic progress such as psychological trauma, isolation, interrupted schooling, making children face double disadvantages in their learning journeys.

According to official data from the MoES, 832 refugee children enrolled in the school year 2023/2024 have received additional classes in Bulgarian language under the specific ordinance governing this support. At the same time, nearly 63% of refugee responders in the SEIS who have a child/young person in their household enrolled in education in Bulgaria in the school year 2023/2024, report that there are additional classes in Bulgarian language provided in schools (see Table 3).



In practice this means that a significant percentage of refugee children still have to acquire the necessary academic proficiency, in addition to the basic communication skills, without any targeted language training, while, simultaneously coping with the relevant subject content and examinations.

A positive development in the provision of Bulgarian language training is the creation of an A1 and A2 workbooks for grades 1-4, as well as A2 level for the grades 5-7 under a national programme by the MoES. The availability of age-appropriate teaching materials is consistently identified by all professionals as crucial to the quality of their work.⁴ These are still lacking for pre-primary and secondary school levels. More generally, Bulgaria is still lagging behind in the creation and development of diverse formats of teaching kits, such as digital language resources, videos, and online tutorials, adapted books, grammar exercises, etc. The available free resources are created by NGOs and remain limited to acquisition of basic language skills.

Lack of catch-up support in schools

Older children come from backgrounds marked by stress or trauma, limited parental support and child development opportunities in the course of displacement, and limited or interrupted prior schooling, and lack of literacy in their first language. Systematic assessment of the students' competencies as they enter the education system is crucial to their successful integration. Yet, there is no standardized approach to the grade assessment of children without certificates.

Although the Inclusive Education Ordinance allows for both general and targeted additional educational support based on an individual assessment of the child's needs, the practice shows that few such assessments are organized for newly enrolled refugee students, especially if they have certificates from previous learning. The possibility of creating individual development and learning plans is mainly used as a last resort for children who cannot cope with the school material and requires that the students to acquire knowledge on their own and then sit for exams, which makes it inappropriate for refugees.

What is missing in practice is special catch-up, bridging or accelerated programmes in Bulgarian schools that would accommodate the needs of refugee and other disadvantaged children. Such programmes are still not in place despite the explicit responsibility the EU Member States have to organize them under the EU Reception Conditions Directive.⁵ There is a lack of fast-track literacy programmes for children who are often illiterate in their mother tongue. Such children need adapted curriculum and programs that focus first on basic literacy, Bulgarian language training and then gradually subject knowledge. A language-focused preparatory program is

³ UNHCR. [Voices of Refugee Children](#), p. 11-12.

⁴ UNHCR, Institute for Research in Education, [Integration of Refugee Children in the Bulgarian Educational System](#), p. 57.

⁵ See Art. 16 (2) of the Directive (EU) 2024/1346 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection (recast)

crucial, especially for the higher grades, as children require substantial language training to excel in content courses.⁶ In 2024, UNHCR partnered with the Ministry to pilot 10 such preparatory courses through the municipal centres for personal development support, providing intensive language learning to 140 newly enrolled children in Sofia, Plovdiv, Varna and Burgas.

Providing quality linguistic and social support to refugee students requires properly trained teachers and school staff. Teachers need enhanced skills to teach Bulgarian as a foreign language effectively, both in dedicated additional classes, and as part of the general learning process. These very specific skills are not part of the compulsory modules that educational professionals study as part of their university degrees. Therefore, special efforts are required to create opportunities for continuous qualification and enhancing teachers' skills. The Academy for Refugee Teachers, set up by UNHCR and MoES, which focuses on the methodological approaches of teaching Bulgarian to refugees, is a first and important step in this direction.

Calls to Action

In the context of the National Plan for the Implementation of the Migration and Asylum Pact UNHCR recommends the Government of the Republic of Bulgaria to:

- Support the Ministry of Education (MoES), including through legal and institutional changes, to enable the implementation of support programmes that address *the specific needs* of forcibly displaced and stateless learners, specifically by introducing a system of preparatory classes, language support, bridging programmes, psychosocial support, anti-bullying programmes, and parental support programmes.
- Focus on targeted efforts to *improve enrolment rates* and ensure compliance with the Constitution and the Law on Preschool and School Education which stipulate compulsory school attendance, by:
 - ✓ Coordinated access to education as soon as possible after children's application for international protection through cooperation between MoES and the State Agency for Refugees (SAR), taking into account relevant EU legislation such as the Reception Conditions Directive and the Temporary Protection Directive.
 - ✓ Removing barriers to providing financial support to refugee children under the Law on Family Benefits for Children, in line with consistent administrative court rulings, through the Agency for Social Assistance.

UNHCR recommends the State Agency for Refugees to:

- Create an internal procedure for timely referral of newly accommodated children to school as part of their registration process;
- Facilitate *educational support activities for children accommodated in reception*, and support scaling up of the number of children benefiting from *additional education support* through organisations acting on behalf of UNHCR, including the Bulgarian Red Cross, USRF, NRG, and Reachout;
- Partner with the MoES to address reasons for dropouts such as lack of family support, schooling difficulties, lack of transportation, etc.

UNHCR recommends the Ministry of Education and Sciences to:

- Facilitate targeted efforts to *improve enrolment rates* and ensure compliance with the Constitution and the Law on Preschool and School Education which stipulate compulsory school attendance, through:

⁶ For the framework of a similar system, see UNHCR. [Considerations for Preparatory Education for Asylum-Seekers and Refugees in Iceland, 2023.](#)

- ✓ Inclusion of asylum-seeking children and children with temporary protection in the National Mechanism for Joint Work of the Institutions on Inclusion and Dropouts Prevention, which aims to ensure enrolment of all children at compulsory pre-school and school age;
 - ✓ Dedicated outreach efforts, including information sessions, in SAR reception centres and facilities under the Programme for Humanitarian Assistance;
 - ✓ Coordinated outreach efforts to the refugee communities jointly with UNHCR, UNICEF and the Education Working Group under the Refugee Response Plan (RRP); and
 - ✓ Development of localized information materials on enrolment and available support in schools;
- Introduce **flexible school immersion models**, including opportunities for preparatory classes focused on Bulgarian language acquisition, including by leveraging the experience of UNHCR and the municipal Centres for Personal Development Support; and **literacy and accelerated learning courses** for children who have experienced long periods of interrupted education, as most forcibly displaced and stateless children have;
 - Ensure **all refugee children receive additional Bulgarian language classes** under the Ordinance on the Acquisition of the Bulgarian Literary Language by supporting schools with the organization and set up of the classes, and continue to support the **quality of additional Bulgarian language classes** by promoting holistic approaches;
 - Collect data on the school performance of refugee children with a view to facilitate analysis of the reasons for dropping out and possible areas for improvement;
 - Ensure that all children have **access to educational facilities**, including by accommodating the needs of children with disabilities and continuing the good practice of providing transportation when necessary;
 - Increase the number of **trained schoolteachers** benefiting from inclusive education and teaching Bulgarian to forcibly displaced and stateless children by supporting the joint MoES-UNHCR Academy for Refugee Teachers;
 - Consider **holistic approaches to the educational needs of unaccompanied and separated children**, including collaborative efforts with Bulgarian civil society and international organizations, encompassing dedicated support programs designed to address their mental health, educational and social inclusion needs.
 - Provide **comprehensive psychosocial support services** within schools to address the trauma and adjustment challenges faced by refugee children, and assistance to schools with refugee pupils with additional capacity to organize educational and **extracurricular activities**, employing refugee education professionals as mediators and teacher assistants.

Implementing these recommendations requires a concerted effort from the Bulgarian government, educational institutions, civil society, and international partners. By adopting a holistic approach that addresses legal, technical, and social dimensions, Bulgaria can make significant strides in ensuring inclusive and quality education for refugee children. UNHCR stands ready to provide support to the Bulgarian institutions in all areas related to the provision of quality education to refugee and stateless learners.

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