Regional Refugee Response for the Ukraine Situation

MOLDOVA

MARCH 2025

DISABILITY BRIEFING NOTE

Disability & Age Task Force
Refugee Coordination Forum Moldova

BACKGROUND

Three years have passed since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, forcing millions of Ukrainians to flee their homes. Moldova, a country with a population of 2.4 million people, has hosted the highest numbers of refugees per capita. **As of March 2025**, approximately **127,000 refugees** from Ukraine **remained in Moldova**, with around 76,000 having received asylum, temporary protection, or residence status.

In 2024, from **the Socio-Economic Insights Survey** (SEIS) conducted by the IMPACT Initiative **10% are refugees with disabilities**, moreover, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (**OHCHR**) conducted **protection monitoring** interviews with 1,367 Ukrainian refugees in Moldova, of whom **12% were persons with disabilities** identified through the Washington Group of Questions. This subgroup of refugees faces severe challenges in accessing services, employment, and maintaining their well-being. The majority of refugees surveyed by OHCHR (79%) were women, and a significant portion were older adults, with 30% aged 60-69 and 24% aged 70-79. The most reported difficulties were seeing (46%) and mobility (43%), while 20% experienced cognitive impairments. Mental health concerns were prevalent, with over 60% reporting anxiety and depression, and more than half facing untreated serious medical conditions due to healthcare access barriers.

Additionally, **social listening** activities **by Laolalta's Info Unit** captured sentiments from refugees with disabilities, reflecting struggles with inclusion, accessibility, and financial security. One refugee shared: *"I arrived in Moldova alone, as my family stayed in Ukraine. The staff of Motivatie (a DATF members) has supported me emotionally and helped me pursue online courses to find employment."* Another older refugee highlighted accessibility concerns: *"It is difficult to get around; the streets and public transport are not designed for people like me."* These accounts emphasize the need for targeted interventions to improve access to services, information, and social participation for those with disabilities.

This briefing note provides an overview of the situation of refugees with disabilities in Moldova, highlighting key results achieved in 2024 by Disability and Age Task Force members, persisting gaps, and recommendations for improving inclusion and support. Forced displacement can create or exacerbate disabilities, placing persons with disabilities among the most at-risk and disproportionately affected groups in these contexts.

KEY RESULTS 2024

MAINSTREAMING

To ensure the effective inclusion of refugees with disabilities in the humanitarian response, the Disability & Age Task Force has implemented a range of **mainstreaming activities** aimed at improving access to essential services, protection, and social participation:

- **Capacity Building & Data Disaggregation:** Conducted training and collaborated with Information Management partners to improve data collection on age, gender, and disability.
- **Accessible Communication:** Assisted in revising Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) materials and developing accessible communication tools for refugees.
- **Inclusive Shelter Planning:** Supported the Basic Needs Working Group to ensure that accessibility was considered with regards to the closure of Refugee Accommodation Centers (RACs) and the relocation of residents to other RACs.
- **Training & Awareness:** Trained nearly 350 humanitarian actors on disability-inclusive humanitarian action and data collection.
- **Financial Assistance:** Ensuring access to cash assistance for nearly 4,700 refugees with disabilities, of whom 722 were children and 1,116 were older persons.

SPECIFIC INTERVENTION

In addition to mainstreaming efforts, **targeted interventions** have been implemented to address the critical needs of refugees with disabilities, reaching over 4,000 people:

- **Individualized Assistance & Case Management:** Provided medical and assistive devices, medication, adapted transportation, legal and psychological counseling and recreational activities for children to around 3,000 refugees, including 500 on the Left Bank of the Nistru River.
- **Mobile Support Services:** Delivered home visits, medication, financial aid registration, psychological and pedagogical support, rehabilitation, mobility aids, vision and hearing assistance, and hygiene products.
- **Accessible Information & Hotline Services:** Assisted 400 refugees with information and referrals through the Hotline support service for people with disabilities managed by Keystone Moldova.
- **Rehabilitation for Children:** Ensured rehabilitation services for children with intellectual disabilities and conducted autism-related workshops for parents.
- **Vision & Rehabilitation Services:** Provided 500+ refugees with eye exams, visual aids, rehabilitation, occupational therapy, adaptive technologies, caregiver training, and follow-ups to enhance quality of life.

GAPS AND NEEDS

Access to Information: Many persons with disabilities struggle to access critical information about services and rights due to the absence of disability-friendly communication methods, such as braille, sign language interpretation, and easy-to-read formats.

Healthcare Barriers: Refugees with disabilities struggle with high costs (especially for medical services not included among the health care package available to beneficiaries of temporary protection and their inability to purchase state health insurance), accessibility issues, and denial of care by service providers unaware of the rights that attach to their legal status.

Lack of Rehabilitation and Assistive Devices: A shortage of rehabilitation programs and occupational therapy support, including access to assistive devices, affects recovery and long-term independence for refugees with disabilities.

Housing Challenges: The closure of Refugee Accommodation Centers (RACs) has disproportionately impacted refugees with disabilities who require accessible housing and proximity to essential services. Many are not eligible for rental assistance due to their inability to work.

Financial & Employment Difficulties: Many refugees with disabilities rely on external aid, as employment opportunities are scarce due to physical limitations, discrimination, and language barriers. As a result, decreases in humanitarian funding particularly impact this group of refugees

Social Exclusion & Limited Accessibility: Inadequate public spaces, transportation, and community participation increase isolation.

Gaps in Information & Data Collection: Lack of accessible formats and disaggregated data hampers tailored support and policy development.

GBV: Women with disabilities are at increased risk of GBV due to physical dependence on potential abusers, isolation, and barriers to reporting abuse, with limited access to specialized protection services.

Education: Children with disabilities face exclusion from education due to inaccessible infrastructure, lack of trained staff, and insufficient individualized support.

Social Isolation: Older refugees with disabilities experience social isolation and limited access to healthcare, mobility support, and disability-friendly services, making it harder for them to receive assistance and negatively impacting their mental health.

RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR THE GOVERNMENT OF MOLDOVA

- Improve **accessible communication** tools to ensure refugees with disabilities understand their rights and available services.
- Develop **tailored employment programs** that address the specific challenges faced by refugees with disabilities, including skills training and workplace accommodations.
- Expand access to **health services**, **health insurance**, and **government social assistance** programs for persons with disabilities, with international support as needed.
- Strengthen official **data collection and analysis** to ensure the inclusion of persons with disabilities in government and humanitarian programmes, particularly, particularly in national strategies for foreign inclusion.
- Implement solutions to support and accommodate Ukrainian refugees with disabilities, including **personal assistants** and access to **disability-related services**.

FOR THE HUMANITARIAN COMMUNITY

- Strengthen **data collection** and analysis to better support older persons and persons with disabilities.
- Expand access to **mental health services**, with a particular focus on persons with severe mental disabilities who are disproportionately affected by the absence of such services.
- Consider **top-ups of cash assistance** to cover disability related costs for refugees.
- **Support local and international organizations** to ensure the continuation of service delivery and advocacy action.

STORIES FROM REFUGEES

"Do not be afraid to ask for help. Accept it and continue to develop your children's achievements."
Yevhen' mother

Miriam and Yevhen, both 7 years old, thanks to the support of Keystone Moldova, have made remarkable progress in overcoming the challenges of severe autism, thanks to dedicated therapy and support.

Their journeys, though different, showcase the power of consistent rehabilitation in transforming lives.

For Yevhen, a Ukrainian boy who arrived in Moldova in 2022, therapy has been a turning point. His family initially faced significant delays in accessing necessary services, but since 2023, Keystone Moldova has provided him with medication and rehabilitation, including sensory therapy.

Yevhen now responds better to his environment, demonstrating improved behavior and interaction with others. He has learned to express his emotions in new ways, using gestures to communicate his needs.

Miriam, a Moldovan girl, was orphaned at a young age and raised by her grandmother. Despite financial struggles, she has received essential therapies through Keystone Moldova. Once unable to communicate, Miriam can now use words and short phrases to express herself. She has also developed better emotional skills, helping her navigate daily interactions. Although socializing remains difficult, continued therapy has helped her engage more with others, boosting her confidence as she prepares for school. Group therapy sessions have played a key role in helping her adjust to new social environments, teaching her essential skills for interacting with peers and adults alike.

Their stories highlight the transformative power of rehabilitation and the importance of continued support for children with autism.

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