PARTICIPATORY ASSESSMENT 2025

REPORT

FORCIBLY DISPLACED PERSONS FROM UKRAINE

UNHCR ROMANIA, 2025

UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

Acknowledgements

This report is based on insights gathered from a Participatory Assessment exercise conducted by UNHCR in Romania in July-August 2025, in collaboration with partners, local authorities, civil society organizations, Refugee-Led Organizations and other stakeholders focused on refugee inclusion. The assessment engaged Ukrainian refugees-holders of temporary protection in Romania – who arrived at different points in time since the onset of the conflict. UNHCR extends its gratitude to all stakeholders, including NGOs and community organizations, whose extensive support was crucial in the preparation of this report. UNHCR is also thankful to the Government of Romania for the extensive support provided to Ukrainian refugees since the beginning of the conflict. Above all, UNHCR recognizes the resilience and strength of forcibly displaced persons, including those from Ukraine, and remains committed to supporting their access to essential services, inclusion efforts, and opportunities to rebuild their lives within Romanian society.

PHOTO front page: *Iryna, a refugee from Ukraine and her sons take a moment to rest after a long walk in the Children's Park in Bucharest, June 2026. ©UNHCR/Mihai von Eremia*

CONTACT US:

Ana Grozea

Senior Community-Based Protection Associate

Bucharest, UNHCR Romania

E-mail : grozea@unhcr.org

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List of abbreviations

- **AAP** – Accountability to Affected Populations
- **ADRA** – Adventist Development and Relief Agency
- **AJOFM** – County Agency for Employment
- **ANAF** – National Agency for Fiscal Administration
- **ANOFM** – National Agency for Employment
- **CBO** – Community-Based Organization
- **CNRR** – Romanian National Council for Refugees
- **CP** – Child Protection
- **CBP** – Community-Based Protection
- **EUAA** – European Union Agency for Asylum
- **FDSP** – Forcibly Displaced and Stateless Persons
- **FGD** – Focus Group Discussion
- **GBV** – Gender-Based Violence
- **ICRC** – International Committee of the Red Cross
- **IOM** – International Organization for Migration
- **JRS** – Jesuit Refugee Service
- **KII** – Key Informant Interview
- **LEI** – Livelihoods and Economic Inclusion
- **LGBTIQ+** – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer, and others
- **MFT** – Multi-Functional Team
- **MHPSS** – Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
- **NGO** – Non-Governmental Organization
- **PA** – Participatory Assessment
- **PATRIR** – Peace Action, Training, and Research Institute of Romania
- **RLO** – Refugee-Led Organization
- **ROMEXPO** – Refugee Service Hub in Bucharest
- **SMS** – Short Message Service
- **UNHCR** – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
- **VMI** - Minimum Inclusion Income
- **WHO** – World Health Organization

Executive summary

In July-August 2025, UNHCR Romania conducted the Participatory Assessment (PA) exercise for forcibly displaced populations from Ukraine across eight municipalities with high concentrations of temporary protection holders. A total of 293 participants (189 women, 104 men; aged 6–83) took part in 32 focus group discussions. The exercise took place during a period of transition marked by significantly reduced humanitarian funding, planned field office closures, and high uncertainty over the continuity of services. Against this backdrop, the PA aimed to amplify refugee voices, inform programming, and strengthen accountability.

These findings reflect the experiences and perspectives of Participatory Assessment participants and may differ from the results of representative surveys or population-level projections. As a qualitative exercise, the Participatory Assessment is intended to provide depth and context rather than statistically representative results.

Although different demographics emphasized distinct priorities, a clear cross-cutting hierarchy emerged when considering both the frequency and the centrality of concerns. Language, livelihoods, and education consistently formed the core challenges, while mental health, social protection, and discrimination were raised as secondary but significant. Older persons' vulnerabilities were prominent within their own groups, and information gaps tended to reinforce rather than define other issues.

Key insights:

- Language as the primary challenge: Across all age groups, the inability to communicate in Romanian consistently emerged as the single most critical obstacle to inclusion, access to work, education, healthcare, and community participation.
- Economic vulnerability: Employment remained low among participants in the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), especially among women, youth and persons with disabilities. Informal jobs dominate, exposing refugees to potential exploitation, while bureaucratic and linguistic barriers limit access to formal labour markets.
- Education gaps: Children and youth face persistent difficulties integrating into Romanian schools. Many continue Ukrainian online studies in parallel due to barriers in enrolment, bullying, and the lack of tailored language support. Parents worry about the recognition of the Romanian diplomas once they return to Ukraine and children's long-term prospects.
- Mental health pressures: Stress, anxiety, and isolation were raised across demographics, exacerbated by caregiving burdens, family separation, and the sharp reduction of NGO psychosocial services compared to previous years.
- Uneven access to social protection: Refugees reported inconsistent application of entitlements (Minimum Inclusion Income [VMI], disability allowances, other

municipality given benefits),[1] confusion over eligibility, and perceived unequal treatment between municipalities and communities.

- Discrimination and social cohesion challenges: Roma and LGBTIQ+ refugees in particular described compounded stigma, while many others noted that Romanians increasingly perceive Ukrainians as "privileged," hindering inclusion.
- Older persons' vulnerabilities: Chronic illnesses, housing insecurity, and social isolation were most acute among older persons, many of whom rely on limited pensions and humanitarian aid.

Refugees' own recommendations centred on expanding practical Romanian language learning, improving access to jobs and effective recognition of self-declared qualifications/affidavits by some employers, ensuring fair and consistent application of benefits, restoring psychosocial support and safe community spaces, clarifying legal pathways, and fostering more opportunities for interaction with Romanians through sports, cultural, and educational activities.

The Participatory Assessment confirms that while Romania remains broadly safe and welcoming, the sustainability of inclusion depends on addressing persistent challenges and barriers to accessing rights, ensuring consistency in services, and enabling forcibly displaced persons to rebuild dignified lives with equal opportunities.

Introduction and methodology

At the time of conducting the Participatory Assessment, in August 2025, more than 192,944[2] refugees had been granted temporary protection in Romania. The country remains both a crucial transit corridor and a place of refuge. While refugees praise Romania's welcoming approach, they also highlight persistent gaps in equitable access, especially to the social protection benefits. This comes amid sharp global funding reductions for humanitarian and development agencies that have significantly scaled back overall protection services, including some key interventions such as humanitarian cash assistance. UNHCR Romania's Field Offices and some partnerships closed in September 2025, placing further strain on refugee' communities. Against this backdrop, the Participatory Assessment remains relevant to ensure refugee voices shape protection strategies and guide an effective, responsive operation.

The PA exercise was conducted in July–August 2025 across eight municipalities with high refugee presence—Suceava, Iași, Galați, Constanța, Timișoara, Arad, Bucharest, and Sibiu. In total, 31 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) engaged 293 participants (104 men, 189 women), aged 6–83. Of these, 61 were children, 52 adolescents (understood as 'youth' for the object of this report), and 57 older persons. All held temporary protection status, with

[1] While UNHCR is aware of some challenges regarding accessing state child allowance, this did not come up during the Focus Group Discussions held within the framework of this exercise.

[2] *UNHCR Data Portal, latest figure available as of 7 October 2025: https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine/location/10782*

60% arriving in 2022, 30% in 2023, and 10% in 2024. Participants lived primarily in private accommodation (over 90%), with fewer in collective centres as such sites have become scarce. Discussions highlighted concerns shaped by the pivotal timing of the assessment. Conducted during July–August 2025, the exercise was conducted after announcements of reduced or discontinued humanitarian services, creating uncertainty about the continuity of assistance, housing, and pathways into the national social protection system. These anxieties strongly influenced the issues raised, particularly fears about meeting basic needs once humanitarian cash and services are phased out.

The exercise was carried out by Multi-Functional Teams (MFTs) composed of UNHCR protection and operations staff and Ukrainian/Russian-speaking facilitators. Five NGOs and three Refugee-Led Organizations (RLOs) contributed, despite reduced funding compared to 2024. Their involvement broadened outreach and strengthened the inclusiveness of discussions.

In coordination with all offices in UNHCR Romania, the 2024 Information Management–designed Kobo tool was adapted to focus on four dimensions: children, youth, protection and well-being, and integration and community. This streamlined approach reflected operational priorities and resource limitations. The same vulnerable groups remained central—older persons, persons with disabilities, LGBTIQ+ individuals, Roma community members, youth, and children—ensuring continuity and comparability of findings. Unlike 2024, no predefined pairings between groups and dimensions were applied, giving teams flexibility to tailor discussions to local contexts.

It should be noted that the qualitative nature of FGDs, variations in data collection practices across locations, and inherent biases in FGDs limit the ability to generalize the findings of this report. Findings should therefore be interpreted with caution, as they reflect the specific experiences of those engaged in the FGDs rather than the wider refugee population.

Despite these limitations, the 2025 PA offers crucial insights into refugee priorities at a moment of transition. It confirms that meaningful participation, even under constrained resources, remains key to capturing lived experiences, informing programming, and guiding a response that reflects the realities of those UNHCR and partners serve.

Age, Gender, and Diversity-disaggregated key findings

This section covers the main findings identified after engaging with each of the population groups engaged in the Participatory Assessment exercise. More in-depth conclusions can be found across the document under the relevant section. Any percentages presented in this section refer only to PA participants and are intended to illustrate the prevalence of views within the discussions. They should not be interpreted as representative of the broader refugee population in Romania.

Children

- Integration is uneven: although 70% of children reported feeling safe and welcomed, only 30% felt fully part of their community.
- Language is the greatest challenge: cited in almost every group, with direct impact on education, friendships, and confidence.
- Bullying and exclusion are significant risks: raised in at least two out of six groups (≈33%), often tied to language and cultural differences, triggered by their accent and mocking from classmates.
- Family is central to coping: parents were universally the main support system, whereas reliance on NGOs was mentioned, but unevenly. Children mention being sad due to family separation, representing a burden on their mental health.

Youth

- Integration remains limited: while some youth reported positive interactions, in three out of six groups (50%) participants said they had few or no Romanian friends, with connections mostly limited to school acquaintances or NGO activities.
- Language is the primary challenge: Reported in nearly every group, the lack of Romanian fluency directly hindered school performance, employment prospects, and friendships. As one teenager put it: "Most helpful would be to immediately learn Romanian language."
- Employment is precarious and poorly understood: Around one in five youth (≈20%) reported some form of informal work, but half the groups admitted not knowing their labor rights. Age restrictions and language gaps further excluded them from stable jobs.
- Bullying and exclusion are persistent risks: At least two groups (≈33%) described experiences of discrimination or harassment — in schools, on the streets, or during sports. One participant recalled: "Smaller Romanians were bullying me during the game, throwing the ball on the road, hitting my leg."
- Youth feel excluded from decision-making: In four of six groups, participants said they had little influence in community or school-level decisions. Some cited school advisory boards as positive spaces, but these were exceptions rather than the rule.

They usually do not have any support network or know where to report or submit a complaint.

- Awareness of support networks is uneven: About half of groups reported knowing of UNHCR and NGOs (JRS, ROUA, World Vision), while others had no awareness of such organizations and community structures, relying instead on Telegram or social media.

Adults

- Language remains the single biggest challenge: raised in 11 of 13 FGDs (~85%), it affects access to jobs, healthcare, and daily interactions, leaving many adults unable to integrate fully.
- Economic vulnerability is high: fewer than one in three adults (≈30 of 107) reported stable employment. Many are underemployed in low-paying jobs despite professional backgrounds or rely on humanitarian aid and savings.
- Mental health concerns are widespread: this was discussed in seven FGDs (~54%), with stress, anxiety, and isolation mentioned being linked to unemployment, caregiving burdens, family separation, and reduced NGO psychosocial support.
- Concerns about children's documentation were raised in several focus groups (≈18%), particularly among parents in Suceava, Iași and Constanța. Families described challenges registering births in Romania when Ukrainian papers were missing or unrecognized due to lack of translations, and uncertainty about which Romanian authorities accept foreign documents. In some cases, schools requested additional Romanian certificates (such as language classes certificates), causing enrolment delays. Experiences varied across municipalities, with some reporting smooth procedures and others facing prolonged administrative obstacles. Social protection is uneven: in six FGDs (~46%), participants reported unclear or inconsistent access to allowances, transport discounts, and the VMI, creating confusion and mistrust in institutions.
- Community life has weakened: noted in seven FGDs (~54%), with participants pointing to the sharp reduction of NGO and community activities compared to 2023–24, leaving fewer spaces for integration and language practice. Gaps left by discontinuation of assistance since 2023 are strongly impacting the community.
- Discrimination hampers access to services and jobs: raised in five FGDs (~38%), with reports of refugees being refused or poorly treated in healthcare settings, and facing stereotypes in the labor market, where some Romanians view them as "privileged" because of humanitarian aid. Concerns were raised as parents feel no action would be taken if their children face bullying.

People with disabilities

- Mothers reported experiencing burnout due to the continuous effort required to navigate administrative procedures, access services, and secure appropriate support for their children. Obtaining disability certification was the most consistent challenge: raised in five of seven FGDs (~71%). The main complaint related to discrepancies in requirements among municipalities.
- Healthcare barriers were reported in four FGDs (~57%), linked to bureaucracy and lack of interpreters.
- Parents in four FGDs (~43%) described children with disabilities being excluded from schools.
- Access to social protection services and benefits such as VMI and disability allowance were inconsistent with refugees reporting contradictory information on enrolment procedures, unharmonized practices from location to location or not enough information in general: raised in five FGDs (~71%).
- Economic exclusion was noted in four FGDs (~57%), including language and accessibility barriers for AJOFM services (not adapted to different types and degrees of disabilities).

Roma community

- Discrimination was the most consistent theme, raised across all three FGDs, particularly in schools, housing, and employment.
- Education is a cross-cutting concern: children and youth described bullying and exclusion, while adults reported barriers in enrolment and lack of after-school support.
- Economic insecurity: adults rely on unstable informal jobs; youth fear similar futures without vocational pathways.
- Social protection and allowances were described as unclear or inconsistently applied, with Roma refugees perceiving unequal treatment.
- Language barriers: across age groups, Romanian learning opportunities were limited, blocking access to education, jobs, and integration.
- Community life: Roma participants felt doubly marginalized, both as refugees and as Roma, and suggested that more inclusive cultural and recreational opportunities be created.

LGBTIQ+ community

- Health and mental health access is inconsistent. Participants described long waiting lists, short therapy cycles, and frequent breaks in care; gender-affirming care was described as difficult to access safely and reliably.

- Information is fragmented. People rely on NGO channels and Telegram, with requests to centralize guidance and make it practical, visual, and up to date.
- Language acquisition matters in every interaction, on all levels. Existing courses are often level A1–A2 only, with turnover in instructors and few conversation-based or professional modules; participants want pathways to level B1/B2 proficiency.
- Safety and discrimination risks persist. Experiences ranged from supportive individuals to reports of harassment and transactional exploitation.
- Livelihoods and economic opportunities are precarious. Examples included remote work for a Ukrainian employer and short, underpaid projects; AJOFM engagement felt ineffective without tailored support.

Older people

- Health challenges are the main concerns: raised in all six groups, including chronic illness treatments, unaffordable consultations, and lack of access to family doctors.
- Financial insecurity is widespread: raised in five of six groups (≈83%); most rely on small pensions and humanitarian aid, which are insufficient.
- Language barriers block access: cited in five of six groups (≈83%), especially during medical visits and administrative procedures.
- Isolation and loneliness are acute: raised in four of six groups (≈67%), particularly among older women.
- Housing insecurity is prevalent: raised in four of six groups (≈67%), with fears of eviction once subsidies end.
- Social protection and benefits are poorly understood: raised in three of six groups (≈50%), with confusion about entitlements, errors in paperwork, and inconsistent practices.
- Information gaps hinder access to services: raised in five of six groups (≈83%); older persons often rely on peers or NGOs.

Children

UNHCR and partners conducted six focus group discussions (FGDs) with refugee children in Bucharest and Constanța and one questionnaire was applied in Sibiu (six participants), reaching a total of 61 participants. Group sizes ranged between eight and 13. The gender distribution was balanced, with 27 girls (44%) and 34 boys (56%). Most children were consulted in Bucharest (69%), while 31% were engaged in Constanța.

Alina, (3) and with her family from Sumy, Ukraine, at the World Refugee Day events organised by UNHCR and partners in Arad, Romania. June 2026 ©Centru de Vis/Damir Nurgaleev

Sense of safety and belonging

Children generally described Romania as a safe and welcoming environment. Nearly three-quarters shared positive experiences with neighbors, teachers, or classmates. For example, one child in Bucharest said: *"People are very nice here… teachers help me even if I don't understand everything."* Yet, only a minority (~30%) reported feeling fully integrated into their local communities, while most described partial inclusion or continued separation from Romanian peers.

School experiences

Schools were highlighted as both pathways to integration and spaces where barriers are most visible. Children valued access to education but reported serious difficulties:

- **Language barriers:** almost all groups raised this as the primary challenge. Children struggled to follow lessons, complete homework, and communicate with

classmates. A common piece of advice was: *"Start learning Romanian as soon as possible."*

- **Bullying and exclusion:** roughly 1 in 3 groups raised incidents of bullying or ridicule, often linked to accent or lack of Romanian language. One child shared: *"They laugh when I speak and don't understand me."* Others described being left out of group activities or having few opportunities to interact with Romanian peers.
- **Mixed inclusion:** some reported making friends and feeling safe, while others said they had "very few" or "no Romanian friends," underscoring uneven experiences between municipalities and schools.

Psychosocial challenges

Children frequently mentioned missing family members left in Ukraine. Separation from relatives, especially grandparents, was described as an ongoing source of sadness. In one group, a child noted: *"My relatives, particularly grandparents, are still in Ukraine. I miss them every day."* Additionally, long commutes to schools or activity centers were cited as stressful by several participants. At the same time, many children reported feelings of exclusion and isolation, linked to language barriers or negative interactions with peers.

Sources of support

Across all FGDs, parents and family were the first line of support when children faced difficulties. Teachers and classmates were occasionally mentioned, but less consistently. NGOs were recognized in some groups, particularly in Constanța, where children recalled receiving hygiene kits, food products, or vouchers. However, several children were unaware of available NGO services, suggesting that outreach is not reaching all communities equally.

Children's priorities and suggested actions:

When asked what could make them feel more supported and included, children consistently proposed:

- **More opportunities for interaction with Romanian peers** – highlighted in five out of six groups (≈80%). Children asked for sports (basketball, volleyball), cultural events, fairs, and creative workshops where they could meet and play with Romanian children. One participant explained: "*We want more social interaction… more time with friends, communicate with all children – both Ukrainian and Romanian."*
- **Additional language and learning support** – mentioned in two of the six groups (≈30%). Requests included structured Romanian and English lessons, tutoring, and exchanges that allow them to practice with Romanian peers. One group suggested: "*Some would like more English language learning activities and opportunities to exchange their knowledge of Ukrainian language with other Romanians."*
- **Economic support for families** – raised in two out of six groups (≈30%). Children voiced the pressures their families face and pointed to the need for jobs and financial assistance. As one child put it: "*If our parents could find jobs, it would be easier for us too."*

Youth

Between June and August 2025, UNHCR and partners conducted six focus group discussions (FGDs) with refugee youth in Bucharest, Constanța, and Suceava, reaching a total of 52 participants. Group sizes ranged from five to 15 youth, with an average of nine participants per session. The gender distribution was relatively balanced, with 23 young women (44%) and 29 young men (56%). Most participants were consulted in Bucharest (56%), followed by Constanța (33%) and Suceava (11%).

After a bike ride, Demian (17), a refugee from Ukraine, enjoys a moment of rest outside UNHCR's RomExpo Community Centre for refugees in Bucharest, Romania. June 2025 ©UNHCR/Bogdan Șerban

Most of the youth were adolescents aged 13–19, with most still enrolled in some form of education. From the total, around 80% (≈41 youth) continued their studies in Ukrainian online schools, while 42% (≈22 youth) were also attending Romanian schools or universities, often only as *audienți* rather than fully enrolled. A small number (≈5–6 youth) were not studying at the time of the discussions. About one in five (≈10 youth) reported engaging in informal or occasional work, including babysitting, summer jobs, or assisting in small businesses, though employment was typically unstable and unregulated.

In terms of displacement history, the overwhelming majority — around 85% (≈44 youth) — arrived in Romania in 2022, shortly after the start of the full-scale invasion. A smaller group, ≈15% (≈8 youth), arrived in 2023, while none reported arriving in 2024–25.

Accountability to affected populations (AAP)
Youth expressed limited awareness of community structures and feedback mechanisms. In half of the groups (3/6), participants said they did not know of any support networks, relying mainly on Telegram, Instagram, or parents for information. Where known, organizations such as UNHCR, JRS, ROUA, and World Vision were mentioned. Still, many felt excluded from decision-making: in five of the six groups, youth said they had little or no influence. One girl noted: *"In my high school, there is an Advisory Board, and it is really helpful in order to communicate what can be needed,"* but this was an exception.

Community engagement
Integration with Romanians remained uneven. In three of six groups, youth said they had few or no Romanian friends, with most relationships limited to school acquaintances. Others experienced support: *"We have been participating in a dance group for three years, found many new friends and support."* Yet bullying and discrimination persisted.

Education
Education was widespread but fragmented. The language barrier was the most pressing issue: "*Most helpful would be to immediately learn Romanian language."* Youth also suggested additional math and English classes, translators in schools, and summer programs to support integration.

Bullying was raised in around one-third of the groups (≈33%), making it a notable barrier to education and integration. Reported mainly in schools and sports settings, it came from Romanian classmates and peers, ranging from verbal stereotypes (some misogynistic allusions to Ukrainian girls were brought up during the discussions) to physical harassment in games ("*Smaller Romanians were bullying me during the game, throwing the ball on the road, hitting my leg"*) and war-related taunts *("People shout 'Glory to Russia'* at them in class"). While not universal, such experiences left youth feeling excluded and mistrustful, discouraging participation in school life, and reinforcing their reliance on Ukrainian-only networks.

Employment
About one in five youth (≈10/52) had some form of informal work, often seasonal or part-time (babysitting, shop work, manicurist, delivery/courier). Most, however, were not working due to age restrictions and language barriers. Half of the groups admitted they did not know their labor rights: *"No, any information would be interesting and useful."* Others rejected exploitative offers: *"They were offered 12 hours of work in a restaurant without any contract, but they didn't accept it."*

Social cohesion
Social ties with Romanians were often superficial, while Ukrainian peer networks remained central. Youth relied heavily on digital platforms (Telegram, Discord, TikTok, WhatsApp) for connection, reinforcing isolation from host communities. In three of six groups, they specifically called for sports clubs, cultural events, and mixed camps to build friendships. As one girl stated: *"We know Romanians from work or as acquaintances, but we are not friends."*

Safety and security
Most youth described Romania as mostly safe, but experiences of discrimination and harassment were raised in at least two of six groups (≈33%). Incidents included verbal abuse such as *"Glory to Russia"* shouted at them in schools or on the street, and an older neighbor telling them to *"go back to Ukraine."*

Youth priorities and suggested actions:

When asked what could make them feel more supported and included, youth consistently proposed:

- **Structured Romanian language learning** – raised in five out of six groups (≈83%). Youth emphasized that learning Romanian is essential for school, work, and friendships. They called for in-person courses and school-based support, rather than online-only lessons. One teenager explained: "*It is so cool to know Romanian to speak with classmates."*
- **Opportunities for employment and skills-building** – highlighted in four out of six groups (≈67%). Many youth wanted jobs to support themselves and their families, but faced age and language barriers, as well as limited knowledge of labor rights. They recommended more vocational training and structured pathways into employment.
- **Inclusive activities with Romanian peers** – mentioned in three out of six groups (≈50%). Youth highlighted the lack of meaningful interaction with Romanians outside of school and asked for more sports clubs, summer camps, and cultural or creative activities.
- **Mental health and psychosocial support** – raised 13 times. Youth spoke about stress, loneliness, and the impact of separation from family members. One participant admitted: "*Sometimes you feel you don't belong anywhere*."
- **Support with higher education and exams** – this was raised 12 times. Older youth in particular recommended tailored support for Romanian and history exams, as well as access to translators and guidance for university entry. As teenager said: "We need help for history and Romanian exams, otherwise we cannot pass."

Adults

UNHCR and partners conducted 13 focus group discussions (FGDs) with refugee adults aged 18–64 across seven municipalities, reaching a total of 107 participants. Group sizes ranged from six to 12 adults, with an average of eight participants per session. The gender distribution was predominantly female, with ≈91 women (85%) and ≈16 men (15%) engaged in discussions.

Liudmyla (68), a university lecturer from Odesa, Ukraine, photographed at the National Library of Romania in Bucharest, where she volunteered as an English teacher for refugees from Ukraine. June 2025 ©UNHCR/Bogdan Șerban

Most adults had arrived in Romania during 2022 (≈70%), shortly after the escalation of the war. A smaller share came in 2023 (≈25%), while only a minority (≈5%) reported arriving in 2024. Participants came from diverse professional and educational backgrounds: some were trained engineers, teachers, or healthcare workers, while others had interrupted studies or informal work experience.

Employment rates were low: across the FGDs, fewer than one in three participants (≈30 adults) reported having stable or regular work. The remainder were either unemployed, engaged in occasional informal jobs, had disabilities or illnesses that prevented them from working, or were relying on humanitarian support and savings.
In terms of family composition, the majority of participants were women with children. Several participants also lived with older relatives or persons with disabilities, highlighting the caregiving roles many adults carry alongside their own integration challenges.

These findings reflect the experiences and perspectives of PA participants and may differ from the results of representative surveys or population-level projections. As a qualitative exercise, the Participatory Assessment is intended to provide depth and context rather than statistically representative results.

Protection and well-being

Mental health and psychosocial support: mental health pressures were raised in seven of 13 FGDs (~54%), with participants reporting stress, anxiety, and a lack of safe spaces to share their concerns. These issues were often tied to unemployment and family separation. Adults described the reduction of NGO-led psychosocial activities since 2023 as leaving them without support. One woman explained: *"We need more opportunities to talk in groups, otherwise the sadness grows."*

Education: concerns about children's education emerged in six FGDs (~46%), with parents pointing to barriers such as long commutes, lack of information on enrolment, and bullying tied to language differences. Families highlighted complications with school enrolment itself, including limited spaces and bureaucratic delays that sometimes forced children to wait for months to enrol or attend schools far from home. In three FGDs (~23%), parents explained that their children were only accepted as *audienți* (listeners), attending classes without being formally registered, which unexpectedly left parents with an increased uncertainty about diplomas and progression. Others raised the difficulty of Romanian language exams required for formal enrolment or higher education, citing the lack of affordable preparatory courses. As a result, around 40% of families reported continuing Ukrainian online schooling in parallel to ensure continuity. One parent summarized the challenge: *"My daughter goes every day, but she is not on the list — how can she graduate?"*

Persons with specific needs: participants in five FGDs (~38%) highlighted the challenges faced by adults with disabilities and chronic illnesses. Difficulties included renewing disability certificates every six months, lack of accessible information, and untrained interpreters at medical commissions.

Legal status: concerns about legal documentation were raised in three FGDs (~23%). While most participants held valid temporary protection, many expressed confusions about renewal procedures and the implications of moving between municipalities, with some fearing gaps in validity if TP renewal appointments were delayed. In two groups, participants voiced anxiety about what would happen if the EU Directive underpinning temporary protection is not renewed, and whether they risked losing a legal status altogether. A small number also asked about possible longer-term solutions — including pathways to permanent residency or citizenship — but said they lacked clear information. As one man noted: *"We live here three years already, but nobody can tell us what comes after."*[3]

[3] *It should be noted that quotes and findings in this report reflect the context at the time of the assessment. In this case, quotes were made before a final decision was made as per any eventual extension or alternative pathway to residence in Romania was decided.*

Civil registration: challenges appeared in two FGDs (~15%), mostly regarding children born in Romania Parents described difficulties obtaining birth certificates due to missing Ukrainian documents or delays in translating papers, which created uncertainty about their children's documentation and future access to services. One mother explained: *"At the hospital they asked for documents I did not have with me — I waited months before getting the certificate."* Some families also mentioned problems updating marital status or registering address changes, especially when moving between municipalities.

Return intentions: intentions were mixed across four FGDs (~31%). Some adults planned to stay in Romania until the war ends, while others expressed a desire to return soon, citing economic hardship or discrimination. A smaller group (about 10%) wished to settle permanently if integration prospects improve. Given the qualitative nature of the Participatory Assessment, and the fact that participants were primarily individuals engaged with humanitarian services and support structures, these findings should not be interpreted as representative of the broader refugee population in Romania.

Social protection concerns were raised in six FGDs (~46%), with participants frequently describing the system as complex, inconsistent, and difficult to access. Refugees reported confusion about eligibility for benefits, and several said they had been given conflicting information by different institutions. A recurring issue was the Minimum Inclusion Income (VMI), while some refugees were able to apply, others were told they were not eligible despite being in similar financial situations. One participant shared: *"I applied for VMI, but they said it is only for Romanians. My friend in another city got it — why is it different?"* In addition, persons with disabilities highlighted serious barriers in securing disability certification, which is required for accessing financial support and services. The process was described as bureaucratic, lengthy, and in some cases discriminatory. Families caring for children with disabilities also reported being denied allowances because their Ukrainian documentation was not recognized by Romanian authorities. The lack of clear guidance and the perception of unequal treatment across municipalities led to mistrust in social institutions. For many participants, these barriers compounded already precarious economic conditions and left them reliant on humanitarian support.

Gender-based violence concerns surfaced in two FGDs (~15%)., with women describing risks both for harassment outside the home and domestic violence within families. A recurring concern was the risk of exploitation or harassment in workplaces or during job-seeking, particularly for women with limited Romanian language skills. One woman noted: *"The employer told me I must accept everything because I am a refugee and have no rights."* In both groups, participants also mentioned domestic violence cases within the refugee community, linked to stress, unemployment, and isolation. However, awareness of available services was limited within those participating in these two FGDs. While some women had heard of the national domestic violence helpline, very few felt confident using it due to language barriers and uncertainty about confidentiality. Another challenge raised was the lack of tailored GBV services in municipalities, with women highlighting the need for confidential counselling and safe shelters accessible in Ukrainian and Russian. As one

participant explained: *"I know there are centres for women, but not in my language — it is impossible to explain my situation."*

Child protection: concerns about children's safety and well-being were raised in four FGDs (~31%), mostly by mothers. Parents highlighted risks of bullying and discrimination in schools, particularly linked to language difficulties and accent. One mother explained: *"They laugh at my son when he cannot answer in Romanian, and he does not want to go to school anymore."* Others worried about children spending long hours alone at home while parents sought work or attended language courses, leaving them isolated and vulnerable. Participants also described gaps in referral pathways for child protection: while schools sometimes intervened in bullying cases, parents felt there was no clear support system when issues escalated. Families caring for children with disabilities raised particular concerns about exclusion, with reports of schools resisting enrolment or not providing necessary support services. In two discussions, parents also raised fears of online safety risks, noting that their children spend significant time on Ukrainian online schools and social media, often unsupervised. The absence of structured after-school activities was described as exacerbating this exposure.

Community and integration

Social cohesion challenges were discussed in seven of 13 FGDs (~54%). While some adults described good relations with neighbours, most felt only partially included. Refugees often described interacting only within Ukrainian circles, limiting broader integration. As one participant put it: *"We live among Romanians, but we do not live with them."*

Relations with the host community were raised in eight FGDs (~62%). Some adults mentioned acts of solidarity, such as teachers and neighbours offering help. However, discrimination and stereotypes were equally common. Refugees felt Romanians perceived them as "privileged" due to humanitarian aid. One woman shared: *"They think we get too much support, so they don't want to hire us."*

Support groups were mentioned in five FGDs (~38%), mainly women's clubs and informal gatherings organized by NGOs. Participants valued these as safe spaces to share experiences and cope with stress. However, the decline in activities since 2023 left gaps. A participant noted: *"Before, we had a group where we could talk every week. Now there is nothing."*

Inclusion activities: requests for inclusion activities came up in six FGDs (~46%). Adults emphasized the importance of cultural and sports events where they could interact with Romanians. They stressed that language courses alone were not enough without real-life practice. One man explained: *"If we could cook, sing, or play sports together, we would learn the language faster."*

Socialisation practices were discussed in four FGDs (~31%). Many participants reported feeling socially isolated, with limited circles restricted to family or other Ukrainians.

Parents of young children in particular described having "*no time or place*" for social life. One mother said: *"Our lives are school and home. There is nothing in between."*

Community-based services were referenced in seven FGDs (~54%). Adults noted that NGOs and centres had provided valuable support in 2022–24, including legal advice, language classes, and psychosocial help. By mid-2025, however, services were fewer and coverage uneven across municipalities. A participant stressed: *"Those in Bucharest still have activities, but here (Suceava) everything has stopped."*

Livelihoods and economic inclusion: employment was one of the most frequently cited challenges, discussed in seven FGDs (~54%), with refugees describing persistent barriers to stable and dignified work. While many participants reported securing occasional or seasonal jobs, these were often informal, underpaid, and without contracts, leaving them potentially exposed to exploitation and lacking social protections. One man explained: "*They pay us cash for one month, and then nothing — if you complain, they say go back to Ukraine*."

Access to employment assistance services was uneven. In three FGDs (~23%), participants said they had registered with AJOFM but received little follow-up or support, often due to language barriers or limited staff capacity. Some noted that vacancies presented were mostly low-skilled or short-term, not matching their qualifications. Women in particular reported difficulties balancing childcare with available work opportunities.

Difficulties also extended to **banking and financial services**. Several participants mentioned that opening bank accounts was complicated, with some banks requiring documents they did not have or refusing to accept Ukrainian IDs despite EU guidance. This created obstacles for receiving salaries formally and made many reliant on cash payments.

Employment conditions were another source of concern. In two FGDs (~15%), workers described unsafe environments or lack of compliance with employment health and safety standards but felt unable to report abuses for fear of losing work or because of limited Romanian language skills. One participant stated: *"They give us the hardest work, without equipment, and if we say no, they fire us."*

At the same time, some adults expressed interest in **entrepreneurship** as a pathway to self-reliance. In two FGDs (~15%), participants discussed small business ideas such as catering, tailoring, or IT services. However, they cited major barriers including lack of start-up capital, limited access to credit, and bureaucratic hurdles in registering a business. As one woman said: *"I had a small bakery in Ukraine, but here I don't know where to start."*

Language barriers were mentioned in 11 FGDs (~85%), the most cited issue during adult discussions. Although nearly all participants had attended courses, they described limited progress without opportunities to practice. Confidence was a major obstacle: *"Everyone*

studied, but when we try to speak, we are afraid of mistakes." Adults linked language directly to employment, social participation, and even health access, underlining its centrality to integration.

Adults' priorities and suggested actions:

Adults participating in FGDs emphasized the need for improved access to services, clearer information, and more opportunities for integration. Key recommendations included:

- **Expand language learning opportunities**: raised in 11 of 13 FGDs (~85%). Participants recommended more free or affordable Romanian language courses, with practical formats (conversation clubs, workplace-focused classes) to build confidence and facilitate integration.
- **Increase employment support**: raised in seven FGDs (~54%). Adults asked for tailored job-matching services, effective recognition by all employers of Ukrainian qualifications when some proof of past employment and qualifications are missing, and more opportunities for dignified work rather than short-term or informal jobs.
- **Ensure fair and consistent social protection**: reported in six FGDs (~46%). Participants highlighted the need for transparent and uniform access to allowances (including VMI), transport discounts, and disability-related benefits, with clear eligibility guidance.
- **Strengthen mental health and psychosocial support**: raised in seven FGDs (~54%). Adults asked for safe spaces, counselling groups, and community-based psychosocial activities to cope with stress, isolation, and caregiving burdens.
- **Improve access to education for children**: raised in six FGDs (~46%). Parents suggested clearer school enrolment procedures, recognition of Ukrainian studies, affordable preparatory courses for Romanian exams, and anti-bullying measures.
- **Provide clear and accessible information**: raised in five FGDs (~38%). Adults asked for step-by-step, multilingual guidance on rights, legal documentation, healthcare access, and social assistance.
- **Promote community and inclusion activities**: raised in six FGDs (~46%). Participants recommended cultural events, sports activities, and mixed social spaces with Romanians to build connections beyond language courses.
- **Address discrimination in services and jobs**: raised in five FGDs (~38%). Adults recommended anti-discrimination campaigns, training for service providers, and stronger worker protections to counter stereotypes and unequal treatment.
- **Clarify legal status and future solutions**: raised in three FGDs (~23%). Participants asked for clear information on temporary protection renewal, implications of moving municipalities, and possible long-term pathways (residency, citizenship, solutions for after March 2026).

Persons with disabilities

UNHCR and partners met with persons with disabilities across seven focus group discussions, approximately 61 participants either having disabilities themselves or being caregivers in Constanța, Bucharest, and Iași. The majority were women (≈64%), followed by men (≈31%). Most participants arrived in 2022, while a smaller share came in 2023–24. Discussions highlighted barriers in accessing disability certification, social protection allowances, healthcare, education, and employment, as well as experiences of social isolation and reduced support networks.

Mental health and psychosocial support: participants with disabilities and caregivers described persistent stress, anxiety, and exhaustion linked to the constant effort required to secure services and advocate for their children's needs. In roughly 43% of FGDs, mothers spoke of burnout and the lack of respite, compounded by the reduction of NGO-run psychosocial activities since 2023. While mental-health services were available in some areas, they were described as short-term or inconsistent, leaving families without sustained support.

Education: education-related challenges were equally significant. In about 43% of FGDs, parents reported that schools resisted enrolling children with disabilities or failed to provide any specialized support. The absence of inclusive teaching assistants and accessible facilities was repeatedly mentioned. One mother recounted: "They told us better to keep the child at home, because they cannot adapt." These barriers reinforced feelings of exclusion and limited children's opportunities for development and socialization.

Social protection: across multiple FGDs, participants also detailed administrative obstacles in renewing disability certificates every six months. The process often interrupted access to benefits and ongoing medical treatment. Families explained that moving between counties could reset the entire certification procedure, resulting in loss of entitlements mid-treatment. As one participant said: "I lost my disability certificate in the middle of treatment because the law changed." Others emphasized the absence of trained interpreters at medical commissions, which made communication difficult and increased the emotional toll of the assessments.

Although concerns about Temporary Protection were raised indirectly, some feared that delays in renewal could further complicate access to disability-related benefits. Opinions about return to Ukraine were mixed: a few participants felt that the disability certification system there was more familiar and predictable, while others preferred to remain in Romania if access barriers could be addressed.

Social protection was the most recurrent topic, discussed in around 71% of FGDs. Participants described confusing and inconsistent rules for disability allowances. Ukrainian certificates were generally not recognized under Romanian law, and families reported receiving contradictory guidance from municipalities on how to obtain Romanian

certification. One parent explained: “We need the Romanian certificate, but the doctors refuse to issue one because our child’s diagnosis is from Ukraine.”

While gender-based violence was not a dominant theme, women with disabilities in one group raised concerns about exposure to harassment and coercive offers when seeking informal work. Parents also described exclusion of children with disabilities from schools, after-school programmes, and peer activities, noting that bullying and isolation increased the risk of long-term social exclusion.

Community and Integration

Social cohesion and relations with the host community: participants described limited opportunities for social participation and minimal contact with the host community. Persons with disabilities were often isolated within family units, with social life revolving almost entirely around home responsibilities and occasional NGO visits. Experiences with Romanians were mixed — some reported kindness from neighbours, teachers, or volunteers, while others encountered stigma when using public services or applying for jobs.

Support groups and inclusion activities: support groups once facilitated by NGOs were described as vital for both information sharing and emotional wellbeing, but many had ended by 2023. Their absence has deepened isolation and reduced access to peer support. Families repeatedly asked for inclusive cultural and sports activities where children and adults with disabilities could participate alongside host-community members.

Community-based services: participants also pointed to uneven access to community-based services. Support structures were strongest in Bucharest but much weaker in other cities, where specialized staff and information were scarce. Economic inclusion remained extremely limited. Adults with disabilities were almost entirely excluded from formal employment, while informal work was rare and precarious. In around 29% of FGDs, participants said that AJOFM services were inaccessible due to language barriers or lack of disability-friendly facilities. A few mentioned difficulties opening bank accounts without Romanian disability documentation, and one participant expressed interest in starting a small business but cited lack of capital and challenges registering due to health status.

Language barriers: language barriers compounded these difficulties. In more than half of FGDs (~57%), participants said that navigating public services in Romanian was a constant struggle, reinforcing dependence on family members or NGO intermediaries. Overall, respondents portrayed a cycle of administrative and social exclusion that limits both autonomy and participation — but also expressed willingness to engage more actively if systemic and linguistic barriers were reduced.

Participants' priorities and suggested actions:

Across the FGDs, participants consistently emphasized the need for clearer procedures, inclusive services, and accessible community life. Key recommendations included:

- **Simplify disability certification procedures:** raised in five of seven FGDs (~71%). Participants asked for fewer renewals (not every six months) and for Ukrainian certificates to be recognized or provisionally accepted to avoid interruption in receiving the allowance should there be gaps linked to other updates of supporting documentation or due to relocation between counties.
- **Ensure consistent application of rules across municipalities:** raised in four FGDs (~57%). Families requested harmonized application of eligibility criteria for social assistance benefits, so outcomes do not depend on where they live.
- **Train interpreters and (disability recognition) commission staff:** reported in three FGDs (~43%). Participants asked for trained interpreters and medical commission staff able to manage sensitive disability-related terminology.
- **Increase school inclusion support:** raised in three FGDs (~43%). Parents recommended assigning teaching assistants, adapted curricula, and support services to ensure children with disabilities can enroll in schools and not be excluded from education in Romania.
- **Expand accessible psychosocial support**: reported in three FGDs (~43%). Caregivers called for counselling and peer support groups to cope with stress and burnout, stressing that many activities had stopped since 2023.
- **Promote inclusive community activities:** raised in two FGDs (~29%). Families recommended creating more cultural, recreational, and sports events that actively include persons with disabilities and reduce isolation.
- **Improve employment opportunities:** raised in three FGDs (~43%). Adults suggested tailored support from AJOFM, accessible training, recognition of disability status in job-matching, and small grants for entrepreneurship.
- **Provide clearer information in multiple languages:** raised in four FGDs (~57%). Families would like more step-by-step, multilingual guidance (Ukrainian, Russian, Romanian) on accessing entitlements, allowances, and services.

Roma community

UNHCR together with the Roma Education Fund conducted three focus group discussions with Roma refugees in Bucharest in July 2025, reaching a total of 44 participants across adults, children, and youth, as follows:

- **Adults**: 16 participants (13 women, three men) from Izmail, Odesa, and Mykolaiv regions. Most had arrived in 2022, shortly after the escalation of the war.
- **Children** (6–13 years): 13 participants (seven girls, six boys). The majority came from Odesa (nine), with others from Mykolaiv (two), Chernihiv (one), and Kyiv (one). Most arrived in 2022, with a smaller number in 2023–24.
- **Youth** (13–18 years): 15 participants (nine girls, six boys) from Odesa (eight), Mykolaiv (five), and Chernihiv (two). Nearly all arrived in 2022, except one in 2023.

Protection and well-being

Mental health and psychosocial support: stress, stigma, and isolation were recurring themes. Adults reported the pressure of unstable jobs and uncertainty about support. Children described sadness linked to bullying and exclusion from peers. Youth spoke about feeling "different" and struggling to fit in socially. None of the groups reported tailored psychosocial support for Roma.

Education: barriers to education were reported at all levels. Adults said they faced bureaucratic obstacles enrolling children and described a lack of after-school programs. Children spoke about being mocked for their background and accent, sometimes refusing to attend school. Youth highlighted the absence of career guidance and vocational programmes and feared discrimination in higher education. A teenager shared: "Even when we learn Romanian, they still see us as different."

Social protection: Adults described difficulties accessing VMI and other allowances, often receiving contradictory information compared to non-Roma refugees. Youth echoed frustrations, noting that unequal treatment reduced their trust in institutions.

Persons with specific needs: Adults reported that Roma children with disabilities face double exclusion, both as Roma and as children with special needs. Families felt their concerns were deprioritized.

Return intentions were mixed: some adults preferred to remain in Romania for safety and stability, while others expressed a desire to return after the war, citing discrimination and economic insecurity. Youth expressed little interest in return, emphasizing a wish to study and work in Romania if opportunities improved.

Community and integration

Social cohesion and relations with the host community: All groups felt excluded from the broader host community. Adults described discrimination in housing and jobs; children mentioned being laughed at by peers; youth felt socially isolated and "outside" Romanian peer groups. While some positive relations with individual teachers or neighbours were noted, systemic discrimination overshadowed these.

Support groups and inclusion activities: Adults and youth highlighted the lack of structured Roma-specific activities. Children expressed interest in recreational activities where they could mix with Romanian peers safely. Families recommended more cultural activities celebrating Roma identity alongside integration-focused events.

Socialisation practices: Children reported spending most time within family or Roma-only circles, with little structured opportunity to meet any Romanian peers, in general (not only Roma). Youth described isolation, especially outside school, and asked for more clubs,

sports, and arts opportunities. Adults also highlighted the absence of safe, inclusive spaces where Roma refugees could socialize beyond their community.

Community-based services: NGO services (language classes, occasional events) were seen as valuable but inconsistent. Adults stressed that Roma families often felt "last in line" when services were limited. Youth noted that some NGOs were more inclusive than others.

Livelihoods and economic inclusion: Adults rely on irregular informal jobs in cleaning, construction, and seasonal work, often underpaid or exploitative. Youth were particularly concerned about their future, asking for vocational training, apprenticeships, and fair access to jobs that match their skills.

Access to employment assistance services: Adults described AJOFM as ineffective, with language and discrimination barriers. Youth were aware of job fairs but said they were "not for us," because opportunities were low-skilled and did not match their aspirations.

Language barriers: raised in all FGDs. Children reported struggling with school due to Romanian language gaps; youth criticized the lack of B1/B2-level courses; adults said beginner-only language courses did not prepare them for work or daily life.

Participants' priorities and suggested actions

Roma participants across adults, children, and youth shared the following recommendations during the FGDs:

- **Equal treatment and protection from discrimination**: Adults recommended that schools, employers, and service providers ensure Roma refugees are treated the same as others. Youth called for schools to actively address bullying and stigma. Children asked for teachers to "*protect us when others laugh*."
- **Education and after-school support:** Parents recommended clearer procedures for enrolling children and more support for after-school programmes. Children asked for more opportunities to play sports and join clubs with Romanian peers. Youth recommended vocational classes, career guidance, and help with entering high school or university.
- **Employment opportunities:** Adults recommended fair access to stable, contracted jobs instead of being pushed into informal work. Youth asked for vocational training, apprenticeships, and part-time work opportunities suitable for teenagers.
- **Social protection:** Adults recommended that allowances and benefits be applied consistently across municipalities, without discrimination. Youth asked for clearer information in simple language about what support they can access.
- **Language learning:** Adults recommended more conversation-based Romanian classes to help with daily life and work. Youth recommended B1/B2 courses linked to future jobs and studies. Children asked for Romanian lessons in school that are adapted to their level, so they do not feel left behind.

- **Community and inclusion activities:** Adults recommended cultural events that include Roma traditions. Children recommended sports and arts activities with Romanian children. Youth recommended youth clubs and volunteering opportunities where they could meet peers outside the Roma community.

LGBTIQ+ community

UNHCR together with partners conducted one focus group discussion with three LGBTIQ+ participants in Bucharest. The group included two participants that identified as women and one participant identifying as a trans man. Conversations focused on access to health (including gender-affirming care), mental health, information pathways, education and language learning, safety, livelihoods, and community life. Participants generally valued supportive individuals and NGO spaces but emphasized gaps in public services, unpredictability in access, and fragmentation of information.

Protection and well-being

Mental health and psychosocial support: participants described intersecting challenges affecting their physical and mental health, coupled with challenges to access to education, and social protection. All three had previously engaged with psychosocial services provided by NGOs, yet the support was often short-term — typically limited to around ten sessions — with waiting lists and service interruptions that disrupted continuity. They emphasized the importance of individualized and consistent care, as well as safe, identity-affirming spaces where they could speak openly. One participant, a trans woman, shared: "I had to stop my transition because I can't find safe hormone therapy in Romania."

Education: access to education was also limited by language and administrative barriers. Participants explained that recognition of diplomas and entry into universities were confusing and time-consuming, requiring Romanian proficiency tests and official document translations. They suggested practical navigation support, such as step-by-step roadmaps and bridge courses that align with both higher-education and employment pathways.

Legal status and return intentions: while all participants held Temporary Protection status, legal concerns were less pressing than barriers related to health, documentation, and integration. None expressed plans to return to Ukraine in the near term, citing safety concerns, as well as the unavailability of gender-affirming healthcare and mental-health support there.

Social protection: social protection systems remained largely inaccessible to them. Participants had relied mainly on NGO assistance — including vouchers, counselling, and ad hoc financial help — but described this support as fragmented and unpredictable. They asked for clearer and centralized information about eligibility criteria and public assistance options. Awareness of support systems and services to survivors existed, yet participants voiced limited trust in confidentiality mechanisms and reported occasional harassment or coercive situations, such as housing offered in exchange for favours.

Community and integration

Social cohesion and relations with the host community: social ties were largely confined to NGO or LGBTIQ+ circles. Outside those environments, participants reported isolation and a sense of "starting from zero." While many individuals from host communities — neighbours, volunteers, or teachers — were described as supportive, public institutions were seen as less responsive. As one participant phrased it: "People here are the treasure of Romania, not the government."

Support groups and inclusion activities: peer groups and community spaces were seen as essential for safety and belonging. Participants valued informal Telegram channels and structured support groups facilitated by NGOs but requested that such initiatives be expanded and better moderated. They also called for more accessible, mixed activities — cultural events, volunteering, and art workshops — that allow meaningful interaction with Romanians while providing opportunities to practice language and build confidence.

Language barriers: language learning remained one of the most persistent barriers to integration. Participants expressed frustration that most available classes were limited to beginner level, with high instructor turnover and few opportunities for conversational practice. As one put it: "We don't need just more language classes — we need something that actually gets us to B1 or B2."

Livelihoods and economic inclusion: in terms of livelihoods, participants described precarious or short-term engagement — such as remote work for Ukrainian employers or temporary projects through the European Solidarity Corps — often underpaid and ending soon. Structural obstacles included language barriers, limited job-matching for refugees with diverse gender identities, and lack of safety mechanisms in workplaces. Some had attended AJOFM sessions but found them too general and insensitive to SOGIESC-related risks, recommending instead the presence of trained counsellors and safer referral pathways.

Participants/ priorities and suggested actions

From the FGD in Bucharest (three participants), several concrete suggestions emerged to improve access to services and inclusion for LGBTIQ+ refugees:

- **Ensure access to gender-affirming healthcare**: Participants asked for safe, legal, and affordable access to hormone therapy and gender-sensitive medical services. This was described as the most urgent health gap.
- **Expand and stabilize mental health support:** Longer-term therapy options with trauma-informed, identity-affirming professionals were requested, instead of short NGO cycles.
- **Provide advanced Romanian language classes:** participants asked for structured B1/B2 courses, conversation clubs, and vocationally linked training, noting that beginner-only classes block access to work and education.
- **Centralize and tailor information sharing**: a single, multilingual, regularly updated platform was recommended to reduce reliance on fragmented Telegram chats or word-of-mouth.

Older persons[4]

UNHCR and partners conducted several focus group discussions with older refugees (65+) in Suceava, Iasi, Galați, Timișoara, Constanța, Arad, and Bucharest. In total, approximately 57 older participants were consulted across six FGDs. The gender distribution was 49 women (86%) and eight men (14%). Most were retired, many lived with chronic health conditions or disabilities, and group sizes ranged between seven and 13 participants.

Igor (77) from Odesa, and his dog, Pryanik, photographed in a park near their new home in Bucharest, Romania. June 2025 ©UNHCR/Bogdan Șerban

[4] *For the propose of this report, older persons should be understood as persons above the age of 65.*

Health and disabilities

Health concerns were raised in all six discussions and consistently described as the most pressing challenge. Participants spoke at length about living with chronic illnesses and disabilities, often without adequate medical care. Waiting times to see specialists such as neurologists and oncologists were reported at up to six months, leaving many unable to access timely treatment. When forced to turn to private doctors, consultation fees of 100–200 lei per visit were described as impossible to cover on pensions.

Access to family doctors was another barrier. In one group, only two out of ten older participants were successfully registered with a doctor; the rest reported being denied because they were not employed. Those with disabilities faced additional hurdles, including poor translation of medical documents, contradictory information from institutions, and technical errors with CNAS (national insurance house) insurance. One man recalled how his appointment was cancelled because *"the doctor refused to take me."*

Problems with CNAS were a major concern: many reported being denied care because they appeared as "uninsured" in the system, and some were told to pay RON 2,430 (US$ 538) to obtain coverage, an amount unaffordable for most. Participants emphasized that without clear CNAS guidance, translation, and consistent recognition by doctors, they were left anxious and often unable to access essential healthcare.

The older persons also expressed frustration with interpretation quality, explaining that medical terms were often mistranslated, leaving them uncertain about their diagnosis or treatment. As one woman in Bucharest explained: "Sometimes interpreters are not using medical terminology during interpretation and provide much less information in Ukrainian/Russian than the doctor in Romanian." For many, health insecurity shaped decisions about the future. As one participant said plainly: *"Without medical insurance we cannot survive here in Romania – we will need to return."*

Livelihood and income

Financial insecurity was discussed in five of the six FGDs, and it was described as a constant source of stress. Nearly all older participants were retired and relied on small pensions, usually from Ukraine, which were insufficient to cover rent, utilities, and medical costs in Romania. Humanitarian cash assistance and NGO support were considered essential, yet participants were deeply concerned about the decline in available aid.

A small number of older persons described attempts to take on occasional work, such as cleaning, packaging, or production-line jobs. However, most admitted these roles were short-lived, as their age and poor health made sustained employment impossible. One woman in Constanța expressed what many others echoed: *"We are grateful for small jobs, but they are not enough for rent and medicine."*

Social protection and benefits

Concerns around social protection were raised in three of the six FGDs, especially in Bucharest and Ilfov, and they revealed how older refugees often fall through the cracks of state support. Participants described frequent confusion about entitlements such as free public transport, food vouchers, and social kitchens. Information provided by DGASPC or DAS offices was inconsistent, and some beneficiaries were referred to offices outside their locality, making access logistically impossible. Errors in official documents further compounded exclusion: one woman explained, "*I got card for social support… but due to misspelling mistakes could not receive granted support.*" Others described contradictory practices, with some municipalities offering certain benefits while others did not.

A particularly heavy burden was placed on those with disabilities. Disability certificates, essential for accessing benefits and health services, have to be renewed every six months, with applications submitted two months before expiry. This leaves little time to collect the necessary medical documentation and created constant anxiety about lapsing status. In one case, a refugee's two-year disability certificate was revoked after the introduction of Emergency Ordinance No. 96/2024, regarding the provision of humanitarian support and assistance by the Romanian state to foreign citizens or stateless persons in special situations, coming from the area of armed conflict in Ukraine, which limited validity to six months. Although the law was not retroactive, the certificate was cancelled, forcing the participant to reapply. Language barriers further complicate the process, as interpreters at medical commissions often lacked medical terminology, leaving beneficiaries uncertain whether their conditions had been correctly evaluated.

Finally, confusion also surrounded the VMI. Several older refugees reported that they were not clearly informed about eligibility and, in some cases, were told they could not apply because they held temporary protection status. With no accessible information in Ukrainian or Russian, most did not attempt to apply, even if they might have qualified.

The lack of clear and consistent information meant that many older refugees felt their access to benefits depended more on luck or NGO advocacy than on transparent procedures. At the same time, they praised NGO support—especially the CNRR interpretation hotline, which was described as a rare source of clarity: "*The hotline supported not only with interpretation but also with bureaucratic issues,*" explained one male participant.

Language and integration

Language barriers appeared in five of the six groups and were closely tied to participants' sense of exclusion. Many had attended Romanian language courses, but these were described as too fast-paced, too complex, or not designed with older learners in mind. As a result, participants reported little progress and remained dependent on others for even basic interactions with doctors, landlords, or local authorities.

The inability to communicate was not only a practical barrier but also an emotional one. Several participants described feeling powerless when facing bureaucracy or medical consultations. A retired woman in Arad summed it up: *"Without the language, you feel blind – you cannot talk to the doctor, you cannot understand the papers."*

Isolation and support networks

Social isolation was described in four of the six groups, particularly by older women living alone or widowed. While some mentioned supportive neighbours or church communities, most said they lacked opportunities for structured social interaction. The absence of such spaces contributed to loneliness, with several participants linking isolation to declining mental healthiness.

In the Bucharest/Ilfov group, women were explicit about their desire for connection, expressing unanimously the need to create social clubs for older women. One participant explained: *"We spend most of the time alone. Only at church or community meetings do we see other people."*

Housing and living conditions

Housing insecurity was discussed in four of the six FGDs, reflecting both financial vulnerability and a sense of instability. Some older participants were living in collective centres, such as M11 in Galați, while others depended on subsidized rentals. Although these solutions provided temporary relief, participants expressed deep concern about the future. They feared eviction or homelessness once subsidies and humanitarian aid came to an end, given that pensions alone could not cover the cost of rent. A woman in Constanța voiced a widely shared anxiety: *"When support ends, we do not know where we will live. Pensions cannot cover rent."*

Information and services

Access to information was raised in five of the six groups, and most older persons admitted they relied almost entirely on other Ukrainians or community Telegram channels. Official information was considered inaccessible due to the Romanian-only language format and complex bureaucracy. Only a handful of participants had heard of UNHCR's Help page, while most turned to NGOs or peers to understand how to apply for social assistance benefits, register with doctors, or renew temporary protection documents. As one woman in Timișoara explained: *"If no one tells us, we simply do not know."*

Participants' priorities and suggested actions:

When asked what would make life in Romania easier and more meaningful, older persons consistently proposed:

- **Improved access to healthcare** – faster specialist appointments, affordable consultations, reimbursement of prescriptions, and translation or accompaniment support during medical visits.
- **Financial support** – pension top-ups (including when receiving it from Ukraine) or additional humanitarian cash to cover essential expenses, especially rent and medicines.
- **Tailored Romanian language courses** – slower, adapted classes designed specifically for older learners.
- **Social clubs and community activities** – especially for older women, to reduce isolation and provide peer support.
- **Clearer information on social assistance benefits and entitlements** – accessible guidance in Ukrainian or Russian on social assistance, transportation, vouchers, and medical coverage.

Conclusions and recommendations

The 2025 PA highlights both resilience and fragility within Ukraine's displaced communities in Romania. While the country remains a safe environment, persistent challenges risk undermining longer-term inclusion. Refugees consistently voiced a desire to contribute positively to Romanian society, yet require clear pathways, fair treatment, and targeted support.

Refugees in Constanta engage in art classes organised at the Center for Civic Resources, July 2024. ©UNHCR/Gabriela Leu

- Humanitarian support phase-out has left many without safety nets, particularly older persons, persons with disabilities, and women caregivers.
- Without the continuation of Romanian language courses, including for advanced Romanian language acquisition, sustainable access to education, jobs, and services will remain limited.
- Mental health and psychosocial wellbeing are deteriorating due to isolation, economic hardship, and shrinking community activities.
- Trust in institutions is weakened by inconsistent implementation of social assistance benefits and fragmented information.
- Social cohesion is fragile: discrimination and lack of interaction opportunities slow down integration.

Participants' priorities and suggested actions compiled across all demographics:

- Expand and diversify Romanian language learning – free, progressive courses (level A1–B2), conversation clubs, and job-linked training.
- Promote dignified livelihoods – effective accepting and recognition of qualifications by all employers, strengthen AJOFM engagement, support entrepreneurship, and ensure fair working conditions.
- Ensure fair, transparent, and harmonized access to social protection – with multilingual guidance and disability-inclusive procedures.
- Reinforce education pathways – anti-bullying measures, tailored exam support, preparatory classes, and accessible after-school programmes.
- Invest in mental health and psychosocial support – restore safe spaces, counselling groups, and peer support networks.
- Strengthen community and inclusion activities – cultural, sports, and volunteer programmes fostering equal interaction with Romanians.
- Address discrimination and promote equity – targeted awareness campaigns, training for service providers, and protection of marginalized groups (Roma, LGBTIQ+, persons with disabilities).
- Provide clear information and legal clarity – centralized, regularly updated, multilingual platforms covering entitlements, TP renewal, and future residency pathways.

The priorities and needs identified through the Participatory Assessment can help inform programming, advocacy, and coordination efforts by UNHCR, authorities and partners to strengthen refugee protection and support long-term solutions that advance social cohesion, inclusion, and self-reliance in Romania.

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