

ROMA REFUGEES BRIEFING NOTE

Roma Task Force
Refugee Coordination Forum Moldova

The Roma Task Force was established in April 2022 with the support of the Refugee Coordination Forum under the Protection Working Group. Task Force members include humanitarian actors providing specific services for Roma refugees.

BACKGROUND

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has resulted in the displacement of millions of individuals, both within Ukraine and in neighboring countries. Many of those displaced have traveled to the Republic of Moldova, with over 850,000 Ukrainian refugees and 122,500 third-country nationals seeking safety in the country as of end November 2023, and with 113,000 Ukrainian refugees choosing to reside here.

Roma refugees are among the most vulnerable refugees in Moldova, at risk of statelessness, often separated from host communities by language and culture, and often unaware of available services. While the government of Moldova has welcomed Roma refugees onto its territory, as it has for all Ukrainian refugees, and has made efforts to identify and address the needs of this particular community, challenges to accessing rights and services exist and require attention.

This briefing note aims to provide an overview of the situation of Ukrainian refugees of Roma ethnicity in Moldova and the gaps and needs they face, as well as the current efforts underway by humanitarian stakeholders to address these challenges.

MAPPING OF ROMA REFUGEES

Reliable data on Roma people in the region is limited but estimates suggest that between 200,000 and 400,000 Roma people lived in Ukraine before the current conflict began on 24 February 2022 and that around 100,000 Roma people may have since fled.¹

In June and July 2023, the Roma Task Force undertook a mapping exercise of Roma refugees in Moldova and identified more than 1,500 Roma refugees in the country.² They joined an already existing ethnic Roma community in Moldova of around 10,000 persons.³ The total number of Roma refugees could well be higher due to mobility characteristics, unique to a portion of the Roma refugee population. Among those surveyed, 54% of Roma refugees were female and 46% were male, with 48% between the ages of 18 to 65, 47% below the age of 18, and 5% over the age of 65.

Approximately 6% were reported as having a disability or a serious medical condition. Of those 6%, the majority – 61 individuals – were residing on the Left Bank of the Dniester River, as compared to 37 persons on the Right Bank.

The majority of Roma refugees surveyed lived on the Right Bank of the Dniestr River, while approximately one-third reported living on the Left Bank, i.e., the Transnistrian Region. Most Roma refugees lived in towns or cities, with only 28% of those surveyed living in rural areas.

NEEDS AND CHALLENGES

Protection monitoring in Moldova has shown that Roma refugees have the same immediate needs as other refugees from Ukraine, including the need for financial assistance, clothing, access to healthcare and education. Certain issues, though, particularly impact the Roma refugee community, noted below.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS ROMA REFUGEES

Negative stereotypes and discrimination against ethnic Roma exist throughout Europe, including Moldova, impacting the ability of Roma refugees to access rights and services. A 2022 study completed by the organization SeeD (Center for Sustainable Peace and Economic Development) on Social Cohesion and Reconciliation (SCORE) found that only 26% of Moldovans surveyed would accept to interact personally with ethnic Roma.⁴

These findings are supported by focus group discussions with Roma refugees, as well as protection monitoring,⁵ with some refugees reporting discrimination and negative behaviours towards them in different areas. That said, many Roma refugees also reported feeling generally welcome in Moldova and that they intend to remain here until it is safe to return home.⁶

EDUCATION

Many Roma refugees require specialized education support. Some Roma adults, especially women, are not literate, which can lead to challenges accessing services. For Roma children, some have never attended school and require catch up education before integrating into traditional school settings. Other children may have attended school in Ukraine, but their education was interrupted when their family fled to Moldova. These factors, as well as general stigma against Roma in local communities, can create obstacles to in-school education. Due to the economic situation of many Roma families, they also often lack digital devices and computer literacy required to study online.

ROMA COMMUNITY MEDIATORS

An important resource in engaging with the Roma refugee community and addressing the challenges they face is the network of Roma community mediators, which includes around 43 mediators around the country. These mediator positions were created by the Moldovan government in 2013 to address the needs of ethnic Roma in Moldova. They have since proven to be a critical resource for the Roma refugee community as well, facilitating dialogue between Roma refugees and local communities as well as providing information and support on accessing available services.

⁴ https://api.scoreforpeace.org/storage/pdfs/REP_Moldova22_Social-Relations_v3_Package.pdf

⁵ See, e.g., OHCHR monitoring factsheets, available at: https://data.unhcr.org/en/search?type%5B0%5D=document&working_group=329&or_json=%7B%220%22:%20%220%22%7D&or=0

⁶ See, 2022 UNHCR Participatory Assessment (Feb 2023), available at <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/99673>

ACCOMMODATION

Nearly 45% of Roma refugees surveyed during the Roma Task Force's mapping exercise resided in Refugee Accommodation Centers (RACs), a much higher percentage than the Ukrainian refugee population overall. Of those, approximately 60% had been living in a RAC for more than a year. While the government does not direct Roma refugees to particular RACs, some RACs have particularly large Roma populations. This is due, in part, to the desire of many Roma refugees to reside together, as well as difficulties in accommodating large Roma families elsewhere.

The Roma Task Force found that 50% of Roma refugees resided in private accommodations and about 5% lived with host families. Roma refugees have reported difficulties renting apartments due to negative stereotypes by private landlords. In terms of conditions, during UNHCR's Participatory Assessment in late 2022, Roma refugees generally described conditions in RACs as better than in private accommodations. The houses that refugees were able to rent were reported to have had little to no basic housing items, with some participants reporting that they had to sleep on the floor and lacked wood to heat their homes.

EMPLOYMENT

Due to low literacy rates among the adult population and discrimination, adult able-bodied Roma refugees often face constraints accessing employment. Many report only being able to find seasonal jobs in agriculture, which are not stable, informal and often poorly paid.

CHILD PROTECTION AND GBV

Gender-based violence and child protection issues are significant protection risks and frequently overlap within the Roma community. Harmful traditional practices, grounded in perceived roles of women and girls, result in situations of early marriage and adolescent pregnancy, as well as intimate partner violence. This is particularly true in Roma religious communities. The work of Roma mediators has been essential to ensure support and access to services for survivors and to work towards changing gender stereotypes and addressing GBV roots. Roma women and children are considered at greater risk of trafficking due to compounding factors, including socioeconomic vulnerabilities.

RISK OF STATELESSNESS

Many Roma refugees are at risk of statelessness, as they also were in Ukraine. Many lack documentation or have only documentation issued by the former Soviet Union. Legal services are needed to confirm their citizenship and regularize their legal status. Luckily, Moldova was one of the first countries to establish statelessness determination procedures and has a keen awareness of the importance and complexity of this issue.

KEY RESULTS 2022/2023

Roma Task Force partners have supported refugees through different programs and activities, as reported to the Refugee Coordination Forum. Among the key results reported since the refugee emergency began in February 2022 until September 2023 include:



1,300 Roma refugees were reached with information sharing



2,435 Roma refugees received targeted support, including through over 450 Non-Food Item (NFI) distribution



500 Roma refugees were reached through psychological support services (PSS) and recreational activities



300 Roma children were included in basic literacy programs



325 Roma refugees were provided with cultural mediation support at Palanca Bus Hub



200 Roma refugees were facilitated in accessing safe accommodation spaces



360 individuals were supported with legal assistance



100 information sessions were conducted for RAC managers and staff about Roma culture and traditions



90 sessions were conducted on Sexual and Reproductive Health and menstrual hygiene



311 protection monitoring surveys conducted

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Promote the responsible collection and reporting of data based on ethnicity.
- Ensure accessibility to information on available services and how to legalize status.
- Ensure and monitor access to safe accommodations with basic WASH conditions.
- Intensify awareness raising campaigns regarding the importance of education, the risks of early marriage, GBV and other protection concerns.
- Provide catch-up classes to Roma children to facilitate education inclusion.
- Provide winterization items, especially clothes and firewood for those in rural areas.
- Increase the level of involvement of Roma refugees in activities carried out by humanitarian actors and ensure participation in decision-making processes.
- Actively engage Roma refugees in livelihood planning, with a focus on safe employment opportunities.
- Support local Roma organization in training and capacity building activities.
- Intensify advocacy efforts around the rights of ethnic Roma, both refugees and members of the local community.
- Create spaces and activities that promote integration and social cohesion.

STORIES FROM REFUGEES

Human interest stories play a crucial role in the accountability framework of humanitarian organizations, serving as a means to assess the quality and impact of their efforts.

"We are grateful we can stay safe and we are welcomed in Moldova."

Olga Ruda, a 34-year-old Roma refugee, arrived in Moldova with her nine children and her husband seeking safety. Illiterate but determined, the family embraced Moldova's opportunities. Receiving accommodations, the family expressed gratitude for the reception in the country that they received.

Seven children, motivated by their parents, are currently enrolled in literacy classes at the Refugee Accommodation Center (RAC). The children - Alexei, Veaceslav, Mikola, Ilona, Sofia, Artur, and Arsen - have not only learned to read and write in Romanian but have also been actively engaged in class discussions. Two of the children are also accessing online classes from Ukraine.

The children's education progress at the RAC has been significant – perfect attendance, happiness with their classes, and a shift from digital devices to literacy pursuits. They have also become catalysts for change, urging their parents to learn Romanian as well, breaking the cycle of family illiteracy.

Crucially, the Ruda children feel safe and integrated in Moldova. Their literacy success not only signifies academic progress for them but also stands as hope for all refugee children in Moldova.



Contacts

Co-Chairs of the Roma Task Force

Marin Alla, President, Tarna Rom and Roma Voices Coalition, allamarin@yahoo.com

Alina Sava, Field Officer, INTERSOS, fieldoff.chisinau.moldova@intersos.org