

PROTECTION BRIEF #2

REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

JANUARY 2024



Operational Context & Analysis

As of 30 November 2023, 981,848 refugees and third-country nationals had arrived in the Republic of Moldova¹ from Ukraine since 24 February 2022, the highest per capita number of Ukrainian arrivals anywhere in the world. While most continued westward to the EU, some 113,400 Ukrainian refugees and 8,500 third-country nationals had chosen to remain in Moldova, of whom 58% were female, 44% were children and an estimated 22% were older persons.

In responding to the refugee emergency, Moldova has displayed remarkable generosity and unity, rallying authorities at every level to address the pressing needs of those seeking refuge from the war in neighboring Ukraine. The government’s response has been supported by civil society, host communities, international NGOs, the private sector, committed volunteers, and UN agencies, with the goal of ensuring access to protection and services for those forcibly displaced.

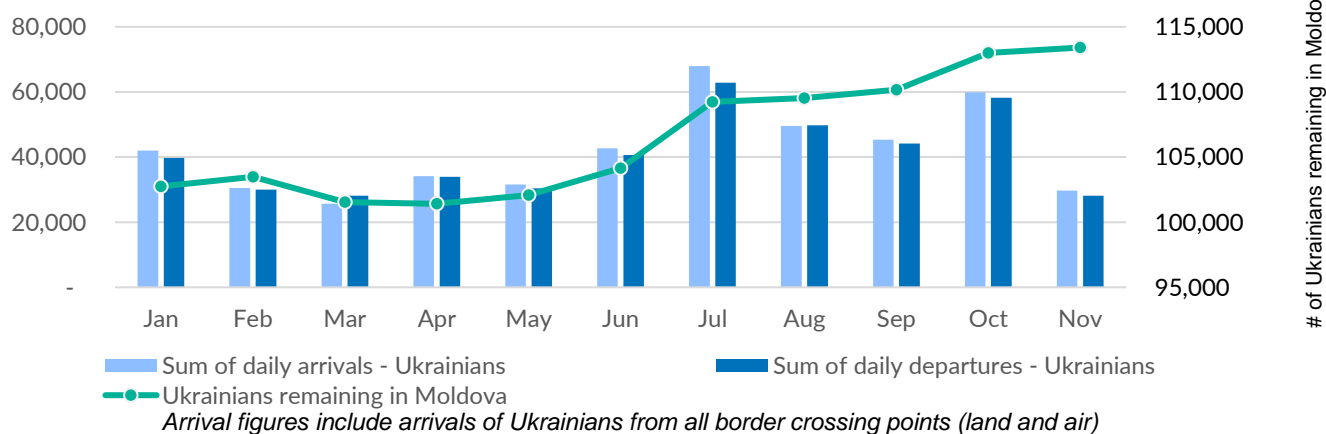
UNHCR has been actively engaged in monitoring, documenting, and analysing the profiles, needs, and intentions of refugees, with the aim of enhancing and promoting evidence-based protection interventions throughout the country. Since May 2022, it has been conducting protection profiling and monitoring activities, including at accommodation sites, centres for humanitarian aid distribution, Community Service Centres (CSC), and other locations.²

This report encompasses the outcomes of 762 interviews, comprising 1,886 household members, conducted between 1 September and 30 November 2023.³ Reference is also made to Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) gathered from a Participatory Assessment conducted by UNHCR Moldova in October 2023 in partnership with members of the Accountability to Affected People (AAP) Task Force.

Key Trends & Figures



Cumulative Arrivals & Departures (1 January – 30 November 2023)⁴



¹ Henceforth referred to as “Moldova.”

² UNHCR partners are also conducting border monitoring activities at border crossing points and transit hubs using a separate monitoring tool.

³ The number of surveys during this round is significantly fewer than the previous round (1,875 interviews) and therefore results should be considered indicative within a limited context. Due to revisions to the protection monitoring tool in November, this report does not cover until the end of 2023.

⁴ Republic of Moldova: Daiky population trends. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/dataviz/248?sv=0&geo=680>

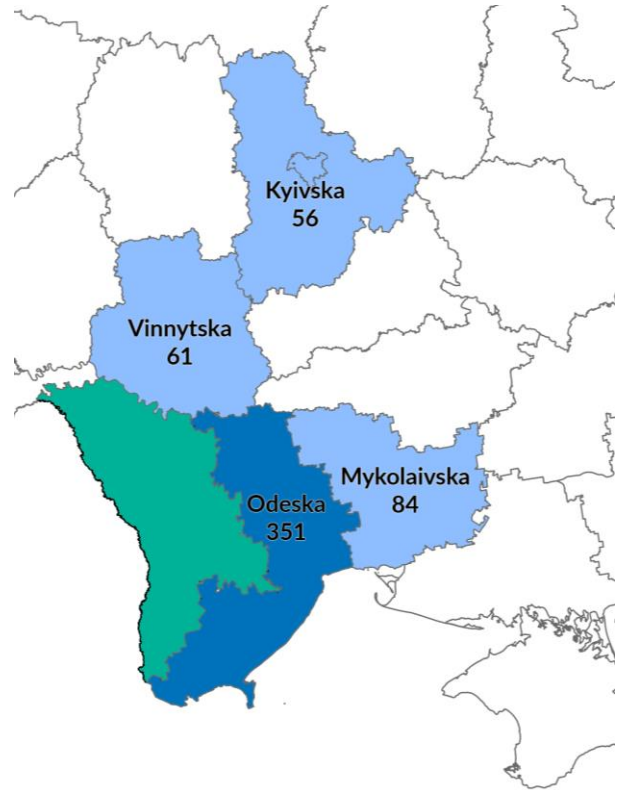
Profiles & Displacement Patterns

The most common household profile of those surveyed during the reporting period was single adults with dependents (37%), with an average age of 49 years old. This data continues to mirror the overall demographic pattern of refugees in Moldova, where 82% of surveyed households comprise women and children. The relatively low number of adult men continues to be generally attributed to their participation in the Ukrainian armed forces.

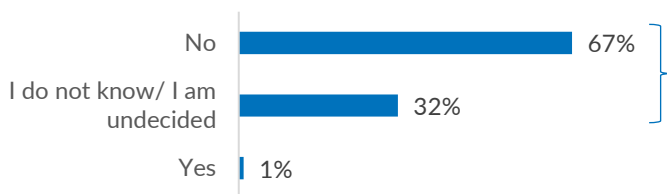
Among the 762 surveyed households, 4% reported having children separated from both parents, marking a slight increase from the previous reporting period (3%). These children, mainly aged between 16 and 18, can depart Ukraine without being accompanied by a parent but will be referred by the Moldovan Border Police to the Moldovan Guardianship Authority for an assessment of their care arrangements before being allowed to enter the country. Individuals aged 60 and above constituted 20% of the surveyed population, up from 17% in the previous reporting period. Households reporting family members with specific needs, including disabilities or serious medical conditions, decreased from 19% to 15%.

The overwhelming majority of respondents (89%) highlighted urgent needs, with material assistance (81%), healthcare (60%), and food (57%) being the most critical. Notably, healthcare emerged as a more pressing concern (50% to 60%) as compared to the previous reporting period, while food needs were prioritized less (67% to 57%).

More than one-third (37%) of respondents surveyed arrived in Moldova during the first quarter of 2022 and largely originated from Odeska (46%), Mykolaivska (11%), and Vinnytska (8%) oblasts. The number of those surveyed who had arrived in Moldova for the first time was low compared to the previous reporting period (11% to 6%). The majority of respondents, 67%, cited proximity to Ukraine as the main reason for choosing to come to Moldova, followed by language considerations, 58%. Having friends or relatives in Moldova and the overall desire to stay close to Ukraine also contributed to decision-making on where to reside.



Do you plan to go back to Ukraine in the next 3 months?



Plans for next 3 months



Pendular movements between Moldova and Ukraine persisted, with over half (56%) of respondents confirming at least one visit to Ukraine since their initial departure. Visiting relatives (48%), obtaining documents (32%), and checking on property (36%) remained the primary reasons for temporary returns to Ukraine. The results indicate that travel to and from Ukraine remains generally possible, facilitating the ability of Ukrainians to maintain contact with family members in Ukraine and to address other administrative tasks. Nearly all of the individuals surveyed (98%) had valid identity documents, with only 2% stating that a household member lacked a biometric or internal passport. Among those who had temporarily visited Ukraine, none reported encountering problems when returning to Moldova.

Protection risks

Access to Temporary Protection

On 18 January 2023, the Government of the Republic of Moldova approved the granting of temporary protection (TP) for refugees from Ukraine and certain third-country nationals, effective 1 March 2023. This important milestone provided a more secure legal status to Ukrainian refugees – a key step towards greater inclusion in Moldovan society. Data from the profiling and monitoring survey showed that 83% of respondents had applied for TP as of the end of November, a significant increase from the previous reporting period (53%). According to statistics provided by the General Inspectorate for Migration (IGM),⁵ as of 27 November, 31,055 persons had pre-registered for temporary protection, of whom 24,266 had been issued temporary protection documents.⁶

90%

Of respondents who applied for Temporary Protection received a positive decision

In considering the number of individuals who applied for and received TP, additional statistics bear consideration. In addition to TP, according to IGM statistics, as of the end of November 2023, some 10,000 Ukrainians who arrived in Moldova after 24 February 2022 had obtained another form of legal status in the country, including residence permits (6,972), confirmation of Moldovan nationality (~2,300), and submission of applications for asylum or granting of refugee status or humanitarian protection (436). The total number of those with legal status and pending applications for TP constituted 36% of the overall refuge population and constituted 64% of those Ukrainians

residing on the territory for more than 90 days (~64,000)⁷, a steady increase from the previous reporting period (28% and 48%, respectively).

The continued increase in TP beneficiaries is likely attributed, at least in part, to legal changes that occurred over the reporting period. In September 2023, the Commission on Exceptional Situations (CES) simplified the "proof of residence" requirements for refugees in Moldova. Before this decision, refugees needed statements from landlords confirming their residence, which many landlords refused to provide. With the September 2023 CES decision, refugees could self-declare their residence in Moldova, greatly simplifying the process. Furthermore, the CES decision expanded TP eligibility to parents or legal representatives from countries other than Ukraine accompanying eligible children in Moldova.

Prior to the TP regime coming into effect, the government's emergency laws governed the presence of Ukrainian refugees in Moldova, granting them access to the territory and various rights and services. A mid-May 2023 decision by the CES limited Ukrainian refugees' lawful stay in Moldova to 90 days within a 180-day period unless they secured a more stable legal status like temporary protection, international protection (e.g., asylum-seeker, refugee, beneficiary of humanitarian protection, stateless status), or a residence permit. Those arriving before May 15 were given until 13 August 2023 to regularize their status (90 days).

While the continued increase in TP enrolments is positive news, many Ukrainian refugees are now without legal status. While the Government has said it will not deport individuals who fail to regularize their status, individuals without legal status are ineligible for various government services and may face penalties, including fines. UNHCR and partners observed that Ukrainians without legal status leaving Moldova, even for brief visits to Ukraine, were being fined 600 Moldovan lei (~USD 30). Additionally, upon re-entry, individuals could not apply for TP at the border, possibly needing to apply for asylum, an option some are reluctant to pursue. UNHCR and its partners are actively monitoring this situation, providing guidance on rights and options at border points.

⁵ Government statistics on TP beneficiaries, as well as on Ukrainian nationals with other forms of legal status, can be found here: <https://igm.gov.md/ro/content/statistica-s%C4%83pt%C4%83m%C3%A2nal%C4%83-igm-7>

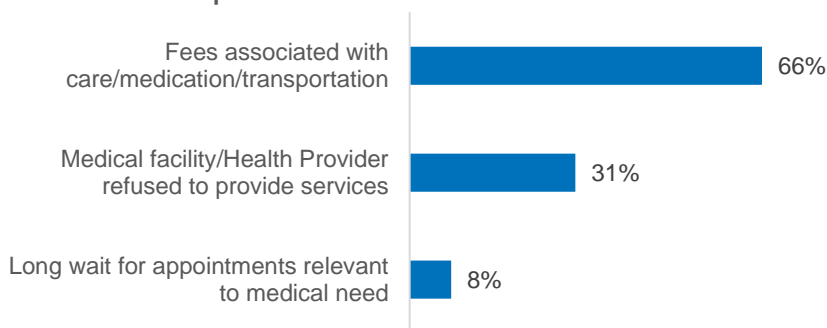
⁶ The discrepancy between government statistics on TP enrollment and data collected through protection profiling and monitoring can be attributed to the specific locations where the survey was conducted. These locations include humanitarian access points, community service centers, cash enrollment centers, etc., where refugees generally have greater access to information and assistance.

⁷ As of autumn 2023.

Access to Healthcare

Among those surveyed during the reporting period, healthcare was indicated as the second most urgent need (60%) after material assistance. For those aged 60 and above, healthcare was indicated as the primary need (80%). Fourteen percent (14%) of households indicated having at least one family member with a serious medical condition. Those who indicated facing difficulties accessing the healthcare system rose from 10% to 13% over the reporting periods.⁸ Of those individuals who indicated facing difficulties in accessing health services, over half (66%) stated that it was because they could not afford the services. In this regard, it should be recalled that beneficiaries of TP do not have access to subsidized medications or most specialized services, such that they need to pay for these health services themselves. Other difficulties included denial of access to services (31%) and long wait times (8%). Notably, those who experienced long wait times decreased significantly from the previous reporting period (24% to 8%), while unavailability of services,⁹ which was previously reported by 21% of respondents, was not listed whatsoever as a challenge during the latest survey.

Top 3 difficulties encountered



Changes in difficulties faced accessing healthcare could be due to the increase in the number of refugees who had obtained legal status, most notably TP. As of 1 March 2023, the Government revoked several CES decisions concerning healthcare for Ukrainian refugees, citing the availability of healthcare for TP beneficiaries. The Ministry of Health specified medical services accessible to TP holders at the time as including pre-hospital emergency care, primary healthcare, emergency

hospital care, outpatient dialysis, and emergency dental care. Later CES decisions expanded health care access beyond those with TP status. On 28 July 2023, the CES allowed the National Medical Insurance Company (CNAM) to cover emergency and primary healthcare costs for displaced Ukrainians willing to pursue TP (by pre-enrolling for TP) and another decision on 13 October 2023 ensured CNAM coverage for emergency and primary medical care, as well as free health exams, for all Ukrainian children, regardless of legal status.

Despite these improvements, challenges remain. Most specialized care and medications are not within the scope of available health services for TP beneficiaries. Additionally, many healthcare providers lack awareness of the services accessible to TP holders. Of the 56% of respondents who had visited Ukraine at least once since their initial departure, a quarter (25%) indicated that the main purpose of the visit was to access healthcare, more than doubling the percentage of Ukrainians doing so from the previous reporting period (11%).

The protection monitoring survey results are broadly consistent with data collected through UNHCR's 2023 Participatory Assessment.¹⁰ As in 2022, access to healthcare remained a primary concern of Participatory Assessment participants. Availability, cost, and quality of healthcare services were all noted as challenges. While acquisition of TP did bring some improvements in access to medical care, numerous participants across the country reported non-availability of medical services and high costs as continued obstacles to obtaining the medical care that they needed.

⁸ The relatively low percentage of respondents reporting difficulties in accessing the healthcare system (13%), given repeated reports through other protection monitoring mechanisms of problems in this regard, is of note. This is likely due to many refugees not trying to access the healthcare system due to their ineligibility for services, hesitancy to do so and/or skepticism about the services provided.

⁹ Refers to lack of services in the area.

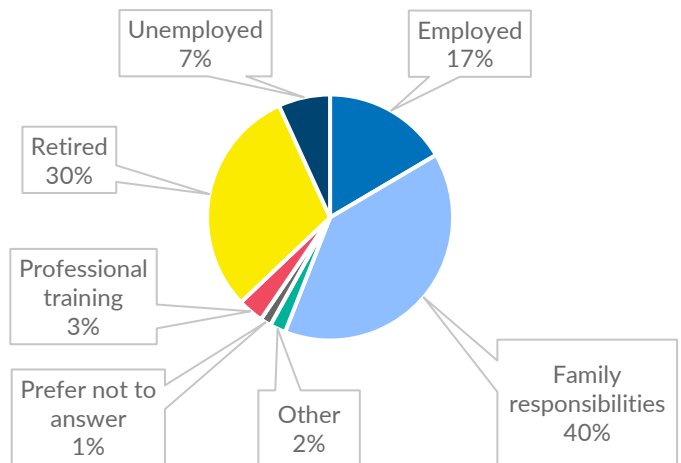
¹⁰ As part of its ongoing commitment to actively engage with forcibly displaced and stateless people, UNHCR conducted a Participatory Assessment in October 2023 to gain greater insights into the protection risks faced by these communities. A total of 261 persons participated across 18 raions, including in the Transnistrian region.

Access to Livelihoods Support & Employment

Survey results from the current reporting period continue to show that the Ukrainian refugee population in Moldova is well-educated overall, with 70% of respondents having completed higher education or university. Similar to the last reporting period, over half of those surveyed had been previously employed or self-employed before leaving Ukraine.

Despite this, of those surveyed, only 17% of respondents were employed in Moldova at the time, a significant decrease from the previous round (34%). Another 40% referred to “family responsibilities” as their main activity, an increase from the previous reporting period (25%). The main reasons cited by those who described themselves as “unemployed” were language barriers (56%) and limited job prospects (14%). A lack of desire to remain in the country, which was previously reported by 20% of respondents in the previous round, decreased to 2% during the new reporting period.

What is your current main activity (in this country)?



Evidence on future intentions supports this, as 90% of respondents stated that they were planning to stay in Moldova in the next 3 months and were not intending to return to Ukraine or move to another host country, an increase from 78% during the previous reporting period. Moreover, as compared to the findings of the 2022 Participatory Assessment, participants in the 2023 Participatory Assessment found their stay in Moldova better established, with the expectation of a longer-term stay in the country. This may be attributed in part to the increased acquisition of legal status in Moldova, notably TP, and improved access to accompanying rights and services, as well as increased recognition that the conflict in Ukraine may be prolonged.

Statistics from the National Employment Agency (NEA) of Moldova continue to show low employment rates for Ukrainian refugees in the country. As of mid-October 2023, some 1,250 Ukrainian refugees were formally employed in Moldova, with contracts registered with the NEA, representing only a small increase from the previous reporting period (1,170). This figure, however, does not include those working informally or remotely, or those working formally but whose contracts had not been registered with the NEA by their employer. The survey results suggest that many more refugees are working, even if not captured in official statistics.

The protection monitoring survey results also align with data collected through the 2023 Participatory Assessment. According to many participants of the Participatory Assessment, acquisition of TP did not address important challenges in terms of access to the labour market, including language barriers, access to childcare, skills mismatches, and low salaries.

Access to Education

39%

Of households with school-aged children reported at least one child not registered for education

Among the households surveyed, 82% were made up of women and children and over one-third comprised single adults caring for dependents (37%). Forty-six percent (46%) of respondent households had school-aged children. Within this group, 39% said that at least one child was not enrolled in school in Moldova, a notable decrease from the previous reporting period (61%).¹¹

At the beginning of September, the Ministry of Education and Research (MER) issued instructions stating that children from Ukraine could enroll in Moldovan schools regardless of their legal status. Schools were also

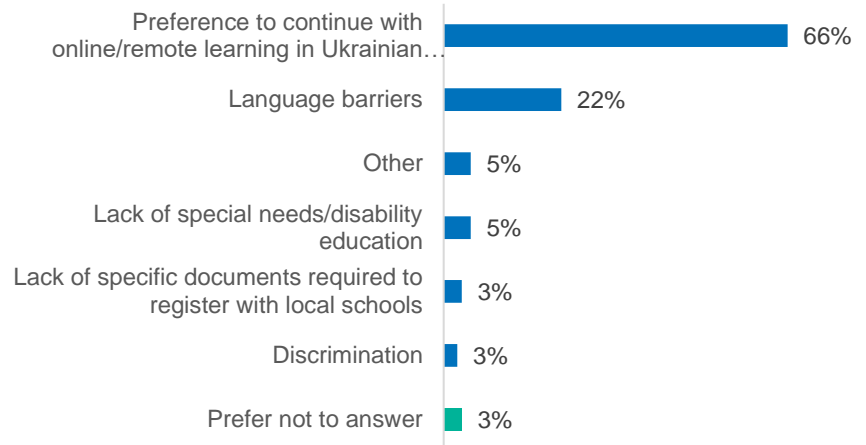
¹¹ The survey statistics and government statistics are not fully comparable as the survey does not capture the total percentage of children not enrolled in schools, but rather the percentage of households who have at least one child not enrolled in Moldovan schools.

requested to facilitate access to online learning for any child who wished to study the Ukrainian curriculum online but in a school setting.

According to data provided by MER, as of the end of November 2023, 2,237 Ukrainian children were officially enrolled in Moldovan schools, a 19% increase from the previous school year (1,815 children). Despite this relative increase in enrollment rates, still only around 6% of the total number of school-aged Ukrainian children staying in Moldova are enrolled in school.¹² A significant number of children are thought to be engaging in education primarily through online schooling offered by the Ukrainian Ministry of Education Platform, although there is no systematic tracking of this data.

Findings from the 2023 Participatory Assessment reveal that certain families have embraced a dual education approach to education, enrolling their children both in local schools for in-person learning and online in Ukrainian schools. This strategy aims to strike a balance between socialization and enhanced learning through instruction in the Ukrainian language. While the majority of respondents who had enrolled their children in local schools shared positive experiences, some challenges were identified, including issues with the reception of Ukrainian children by local students and teachers. Additionally, differences in the curriculum, particularly in the Russian language and Moldovan history, were also noted as challenges.

Why haven't they been enrolled in Moldova?



CALLS TO ACTION

Promote and monitor access to Temporary Protection: The increased number of TP beneficiaries in the country during the reporting period signifies a positive step towards ensuring a secure legal status and enhanced access to rights for those displaced from Ukraine. However, there now remains a significant group of displaced Ukrainians without legal status, despite the easing of requirements to obtain TP in September 2023. These individuals may face challenges in accessing services, as well as potential penalties for remaining in the country unlawfully. Continuous outreach, monitoring, and support, particularly regarding rights and border options, are essential to ensure that international protection is provided as needed.

Improve access to healthcare: Despite some improvements, access to healthcare for Ukrainian refugees in Moldova continues to be a major challenge. To enhance healthcare access, efforts should focus on expanding available specialized care and affordable medications, improving the awareness of healthcare providers about services accessible to TP holders, and bridging service gaps. By prioritizing these areas, with the financial support of the international community, Moldova can build a more inclusive healthcare system, ensuring that the health needs of refugees are met, in particular the most vulnerable.

¹² The denominator (total number of school age children) was calculated by determining the percentage of school age children (vs all children) who were receiving UNHCR cash assistance, and then extrapolating this percentage to the number of children recorded as present in the country according to Moldovan Border Police data..

Improve access to livelihoods and employment opportunities: Survey findings continue to indicate that numerous refugees are engaged in work in Moldova, be it through informal or formal employment. However, there remains a pressing need to enhance opportunities for refugees to join the formal workforce in Moldova, where they may enjoy higher salaries and fewer risks of exploitation and abuse. Survey results indicate that facilitating access to childcare could significantly boost refugee participation in the labor market. Furthermore, increased access to Romanian language classes and vocational training would also expand employment opportunities and contribute to long-term self-reliance and economic stability.

Promote increased enrollment in Moldova schools: To further improve educational integration for Ukrainian children in Moldova, it is essential that the Ministry of Education and Research, local municipalities and schools, and education sector partners enhance awareness about the Ministry's September directive, emphasizing that children can enroll in Moldovan schools regardless of their legal status. Schools should actively facilitate access to both in-person instruction and, for those parents who wish to continue with the Ukrainian curriculum, online learning in a school setting. Where possible, Romanian language classes should be offered to students to facilitate integration in local schools. Ongoing efforts should focus on collaborating with local communities, parents, and schools to create an inclusive and supportive environment for Ukrainian children, ensuring their successful education journey in Moldova.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful for the extensive involvement and support of UNHCR's partners in this Protection Monitoring Brief, in particular INTERSOS, Law Center of Advocates (CDA), REACH, and Charity Center for Refugees (CCR).

We are also grateful for the support of local authorities, civil society, international organizations and our donors. Most importantly, UNHCR would like to acknowledge the resilience and strength of refugees from Ukraine, who continue to share with us their challenges, fears, and hopes.

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