

PROTECTION BRIEF #2 HUNGARY

December 2024

Operational Context and Analysis

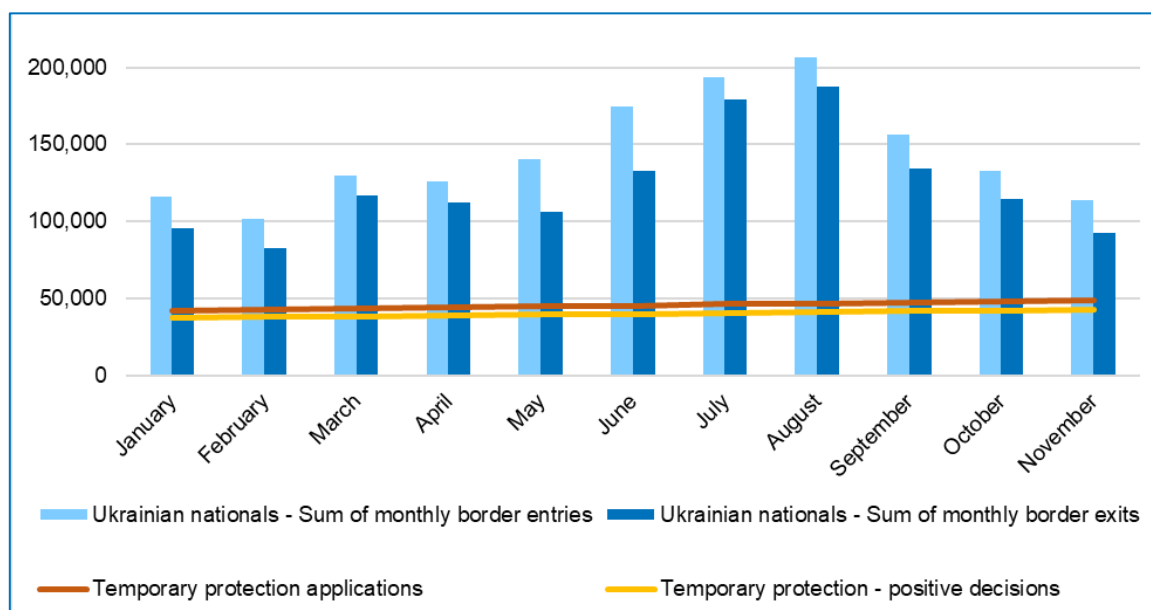
Hungary has maintained an open-door policy for refugees fleeing Ukraine from the start of the crisis in February 2022 and was the first EU country to introduce a national form of temporary protection. It then swiftly adopted the EU's temporary protection directive, the application of which has been extended in Hungary and throughout Europe until March 2026. In November, there were almost 39,000 Ukrainian refugee beneficiaries of temporary protection in Hungary. An additional approximate 20,000 Ukrainians who arrived since March 2022 were residing in the country with other temporary stay permits (i.e. employment or study), and over 3,000 persons have been granted humanitarian protection status. Altogether, there were about 61,500 refugees from Ukraine in Hungary at the end of November 2024.¹

UNHCR Hungary, together with its partner [Menedék](#), regularly engages in [protection profiling and monitoring](#) to identify protection concerns, inform more effective responses to address these, and support advocacy efforts aimed at improving the protection environment. This is done through surveying households of refugees from Ukraine in key locations throughout Hungary, including in community centers and accommodation sites. The key insights in this protection brief are based on 871 interviews conducted between January and December 2024, supplemented by Focus Group Discussions and Key Informant Interviews.

Key Figures and Trends



Cumulative arrivals and departures (January – November 2024)²



¹ This includes active temporary protection, residence permit and international and national protection holders. Ukrainians who are present on the territory through the 90-day visa free regime and dual Ukrainian-Hungarian nationals are not reflected in these figures.

² Figures include entries and exits of Ukrainian nationals from both Hungary-Ukraine and Hungary-Romania border crossing points (land).

Profiles and Displacement Patterns

The most common household profiles of those surveyed were couples with dependents (36%), single adults with dependents (28%), and older persons with or without dependents (16%), with an average head of household age of 47 years old and a household size of 3.

A relatively small percentage (18%) of respondents had arrived in Hungary for the first time during the year, with close to half (45%) of respondents surveyed having arrived already during the first quarter of 2022. A quarter of respondents originated from Zakarpatska oblast (21%), followed by Kharkivska oblast (19%) and Kiviv city (16%).³ These areas reflect both direct conflict zones as well as regions impacted by secondary effects of war and instability, such as the profound deterioration of energy infrastructure and key public services that have been affected country-wide. Among those surveyed, 18% of households reported using the Hungarian language at home. Almost all respondents (97%) reported holding Ukrainian nationality.

Over half of the respondents (61%) confirmed that they had visited Ukraine at least once since their initial departure, 67% of whom stated that they had returned to their previous place of residence. The average duration of stay for the majority of those who returned to Ukraine was less than two weeks, with the primary purposes for return being to visit relatives (48%), access healthcare (24%), and obtain documents (12%). These results are largely unchanged from the previous period, although fewer people had indicated their temporary return last year (38%). Almost all respondents who returned home (96%) stated that they did not encounter any difficulties returning to Ukraine or re-entering Hungary.

Four in five respondents (77%) stated that they still had immediate family members in Ukraine, 60% of whom reported that they faced challenges reuniting in Hungary. Out of those who reported difficulties reuniting with family members, the top two factors cited as preventing reunification were disability or medical conditions and financial constraints, both at 35%. The current martial law in Ukraine was also frequently mentioned.

PROTECTION RISKS

1. Accommodation security and support remains a key need among refugees

Accommodation types varied among the 871 households surveyed. Half live in rented apartments (53%), 88% of which confirmed the use of formal rental contracts. The other half of respondents include 21% who rely on government-subsidized housing in collective shelters or hotels, 16% who are living with a host, mostly family members, and the remaining 9% who primarily indicated that they were transiting through Hungary.

Less than half (43%) of respondents stated that there was no time limit to their stay in their current accommodation, but a relatively high number – almost one in four respondents – had no clarity on the expected length of stay allowed for their current housing situation, and 9% reported that they would need to vacate their current accommodation within 3 months. In focus group discussions, refugees highlighted issues such as insecure employment, low household income, and financial shortages, all of which contribute to uncertainty regarding the duration of their rental arrangements. The discussions also highlighted the situation of older refugees, many of whom lack income or access to their pensions from Ukraine, resulting in long-term challenges securing private accommodation. As a result, they often reside in collective shelters or overcrowded apartments with family members.

It is important to note that on 28 June 2024, new government rules for providing state subsidies for the accommodation of refugees from Ukraine were published. These rules stipulated that after 21 August, applicants and/or beneficiaries of temporary protection and dual Ukrainian/Hungarian nationals fleeing the

³ Other notable regions include Dnipropetrovska (10%), Donetsk (8%), and Zaporizka (7%).

war are entitled to subsidized accommodation only if they have come from a territory in Ukraine listed as a “war-affected area” by the Hungarian Government.⁴

Following the legislative change, UNHCR estimates that around 2,700 Ukrainian refugees lost their entitlement to subsidized accommodation in Hungary. Common negative coping mechanisms identified during field monitoring visits include the temporary renting of financially exploitative alternatives, or in some cases, the return to Ukraine or onwards movement to another country. Many of the affected families are larger than the average household size with multiple children and with a Roma minority background, which may further impact their ability to find alternative housing such as rental flats, due to lack of willingness by homeowners to rent. While the legislative change allowed for a one-off opportunity for refugees to request continued accommodation support out of leniency due to a specific vulnerability (disability, old age, medical condition), it is not an option for refugees who arrived after 10 July 2024.

Prior to this change, accommodation support was already the top priority urgent need among the refugee population from Ukraine in Hungary. More than material assistance or healthcare, accommodation was cited by 35% of all respondents surveyed, regardless of their arrival date in Hungary. Of the 80% of respondents expressing information needs, information on how to secure accommodation information was significant (24%) while financial aid was the most sought-after need expressed (60%). In focus group discussions, refugees underscored that housing remains their top priority, emphasizing the necessity of financial aid to secure shelter and direct accommodation assistance programs.

2. Employed refugees are at heightened risk of labour exploitation

The Hungarian Government grants all refugees benefiting from temporary protection unlimited access to the labour market. Employment changes or periods of unemployment do not adversely affect security of stay for beneficiaries of temporary protection. However, for Ukrainian refugees with non-protective residency status, (work or study-based permits), loss of employment would require them to immediately find another ground for their stay (which could potentially be temporary protection).

Survey results show that 51% of the Ukrainian refugee population surveyed has completed higher education, including university, and indicate wide readiness to join the labour market. However, practical and administrative obstacles hindering access to work persist. The top three hurdles mentioned by respondents include language barriers, lack of educational certification recognition, and lack of information on jobs that match their qualifications. In response to some of the challenges, the Government established a grant program via the National Employment Public Fund for employers, to provide a maximum of 12 months of Hungarian language teaching for their Ukrainian employees and operate daycare centers for the children of their Ukrainian employees.

Concerningly, almost half of the employed respondents (46%) reported working conditions with limited legal protection and a possible increased vulnerability to labour exploitation. For example, employed respondents reported working without employment contracts (19%), working excessively long hours (20%), and confiscation of their documents by employers (8%) – all of these are at a higher percentage than what was reported in other Ukrainian-hosting countries undertaking protection profiling and monitoring. In addition, 5% have only irregular or no access to their earnings due to delays in payment. During interviews, some refugees reported that employers offered accommodation but were then surprised when their rental expenses were deducted from the total amount of their monthly salaries.

According to UNHCR’s key informant interviews, vulnerability to labor exploitation arises from factors such as poverty, language barriers, lack of information about the content of protective labor contracts, and the lack of alternative employment opportunities, especially in rural areas. This is particularly heightened for the Roma refugee community from Ukraine, many of whom originate from the Zakarpatska region and face

⁴ Please see announcement on the Government website, [safeinhungary.hu](https://safeinhungary.gov.hu/en/news/news-20240821): <https://safeinhungary.gov.hu/en/news/news-20240821>

marginalization. Additionally, interviews pointed to the dependency created by employers that provide both work and accommodation which further heightens the risk of exploitation.

3. Refugees seek information and support to access legal status

Temporary protection remains the primary legal status utilized by refugees from Ukraine in Hungary. From January through the end of the third quarter of 2024, there were 6,435 new applications for temporary protection, representing a 6% increase from the same period in 2023. There were also 4,800 positive decisions, which represents a 15% decrease in the number of positive decisions, as compared to the same period in 2023. Based on the latest October and November 2024 figures, a higher number of applications and positive decisions are expected for the fourth quarter of 2024 as compared to the same period in 2023.⁵ Interestingly, 8% of respondents have not yet applied for temporary protection or other kinds of residency permits, either because they do not plan to stay in Hungary, or because they are undecided about applying.

While most refugees surveyed are beneficiaries of temporary protection, a small number reported having taken up other legal statuses – mainly residency permits relating to study or work. Eleven percent of refugees surveyed have expressed the need for more information regarding their legal status. Focus group discussions and key informant interviews indicate that uncertainty exists surrounding the rights and benefits of the different legal status currently available to them, and what will happen when temporary protection comes to an end in March 2026. This is particularly important for vulnerable individuals who would not qualify for work or study permits. UNHCR's regional intentions survey from November 2024 reveals that insecurity over legal status can contribute to early return. Among the countries surveyed, a sizable portion of refugees (60%) expressed that they could be compelled to return to their home countries, even if the war persists, particularly due to uncertainty around legal status, lack of work opportunities or lack of adequate accommodation options.⁶

RECOMMENDATIONS

Continue to invest in access to housing for refugees and referral mechanisms to support the most vulnerable: Vulnerable refugees in Hungary continue to require both accommodation assistance programs and financial assistance to secure shelter. UNHCR advocates that refugees and their families have access to suitable accommodation or the means to enable them to obtain housing. This could be facilitated by providing refugees access to existing housing programs and reliable social safety nets. In addition, tailored accommodation programs supporting refugee access to private accommodation could also provide longer-term security and facilitate social inclusion.

Continue to improve access to decent work opportunities, and combat risks of labour exploitation: Survey findings indicate that the refugee population is well-educated overall, with a considerable percentage having been employed before arriving in Hungary, but continue to face challenges finding employment. It is recommended to prioritize language training programs to improve communication skills, as well as to invest in skill recognition and job search support to realize the potential refugees from Ukraine bring to Hungary. Furthermore, to prevent and respond to labor exploitation, UNHCR recommends increasing efforts to raise awareness among refugees regarding labor rights and existing reporting mechanisms for exploitative practices. Additionally, refugees should have access to support for finding decent work.

⁵ NDGAP statistics obtained by UNHCR, as of 31 October 2024.

⁶ UNHCR, 'Lives on Hold: Intentions and Perspectives of Refugees, Refugee Returnees and IDPs from Ukraine' (November 2024); see also UNHCR Position on Voluntary Return to Ukraine <https://www.refworld.org/policy/countrypos/unhcr/2023/en/124299>

Provide comprehensive information and counselling on options to access legal status in Hungary:

To make informed decisions, refugees require reliable, up-to-date, and timely information and access to counselling regarding their legal status. With temporary protection now set to expire in March 2026, this information will become more relevant throughout 2025 as refugees in Hungary and elsewhere in the EU consider plans post-temporary protection. Marginalized refugees, including minorities, persons with disabilities, older persons and those who are not digitally literate, should be provided with accessible information and additional support to ensure they also can make informed decisions.

Acknowledgements

UNHCR is grateful for the support of its partners in data collection for this Protection Monitoring Brief, particularly Menedék, as well as local authorities, civil society actors, international organisations, and donors. Most importantly, UNHCR would like to acknowledge the resilience and strength of refugees from Ukraine, who continue to share their challenges, fears, and hopes.

For more information:

[Ukraine Refugee Situation \(unhcr.org\)](#)

Antonia Haegner, Protection Officer, Email: haegner@unhcr.org

Ferdous Momand, Senior Protection Associate, Email: momandm@unhcr.org

Peter Salgo, Information Management Associate, Email: salgo@unhcr.org