2024 PARTICIPATORY ASSESSMENT REPORT

REPUBLIC OF BELARUS

UNHCR BELARUS

2025

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report is based on the insights gathered during the Participatory Assessment (PA), including series of focus group discussions and key informant interviews, conducted by UNHCR Representation in the Republic of Belarus (UNHCR Belarus) in September-November 2024. The assessment involved refugees[1] and asylum-seekers in the Republic of Belarus. UNHCR expresses gratitude for the extensive involvement and support provided by the UNHCR NGO partner BMMW's project Refugee Counselling Service (RCS), and local and state asylum/migration authorities in organization of focus group discussions. UNHCR acknowledges the enduring resilience and strength of forcibly displaced and stateless people in the Republic of Belarus and is committed to supporting them to build their lives, integrating, and creating and seizing opportunities within host communities.

UNHCR Belarus is also thankful for the cooperation of Belarusian authorities at all levels, and UN sister agencies.

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COVER PHOTOGRAPH:

A focus group discussion conducted with Ukrainians (including elderlies) in Brest
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[1] For purposes of this report, the term "refugees" includes displaced persons who have been granted refugee status and complementary protection in Belarus.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations Higher Commissioner of Refugees of Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
DCM	Department of Citizenship and Migration
RCS	Refugee Counselling Service
PA	Participatory Assessment
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
AGD	Age, Gender and Diversity
TAC	Temporary Accommodation Center
PPR	Permit for Permanent Residence
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
EU	European Union

INTRODUCTION

A focus group discussion conducted with asylum-seekers residing in Temporary Accommodation Centre in Vitebsk.

UNHCR's mandated role and responsibility as provided by its Statute[2] and its explicit commitment to protect the human rights of forcibly displaced and stateless persons, as well as its Community-Based approach and humanitarian principles, are mirrored by the accountabilities of UNHCR and its staff within the UN system, accountabilities towards its donors – and first and foremost accountabilities to of the people UNHCR serves[3].

In all of its endeavours, designing and implementing its programs and projects, UNHCR aims to ensure that the rights of individuals under the UNHCR mandate are respected, protected, and provided without discrimination. To effectively pursue this aim and its mandated functions and design its programs and activities to prioritize resources, UNHCR seeks to understand the situation and needs of forcibly displaced populations, emphasizing those at risk of being marginalized. This requires a structured and systematic outreach to consultations with the forcibly displaced and stateless people, so that their voices, concerns, and proposed solutions are heard and considered.

Upholding the rights of forcibly displaced people of all ages, genders, diverse backgrounds and taking all the possible steps to ensure that they can participate meaningfully and effectively in decisions that affect their lives, families, and communities is central to the UNHCR commitment to "putting people first." While the scope and activities of assessments may depend on the specific context of each situation, participatory and Community-Based approaches are standard practices in all UNHCR programs. In essence, a multi-stakeholder approach to programming with the continuous participation of displaced persons in decision-making is fundamental for effective and accountable humanitarian response and inclusion strategies.

UNHCR Belarus, in its daily work, reaches out and monitors displacement and the protection situation of displaced populations. Organization of participatory assessment complements the ongoing efforts of UNHCR, serves as a valuable check and balance component, and helps to pay particular attention to the most vulnerable among forcibly displaced people.

[2] UN General Assembly, Statute of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, A/RES/428(V),14 December 1950, https://www.refworld.org/legal/constinstr/unga/1950/en/72586

[3] "Refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced persons (IDPs), [refugee and/or IDP] returnees, and stateless persons

This report is the outcome of opinions, concerns, and recommendations shared by forcibly displaced and stateless people, as well as service providers regarding the international protection situation in Belarus and UNHCR Belarus assistance programs. The findings complement the results of the UNHCR protection monitoring as well as feedback provided by forcibly displaced and stateless people through the UNHCR Helpline, other channels for feedback and response, as well as regular interaction with forcibly displaced and stateless people by UNHCR and its partner for deeper understanding of the protection environment. All findings of the report aim to contribute to the UNHCR 2025 planning process and guide UNHCR and its partners in implementing various protection activities and assistance programs in the upcoming year(s).

Statistical information

39,896 **Ukrainian citizens,** unable to return to their home country, have not applied for asylum but regularized their stay in Belarus through permits for permanent or temporary residence [1]

5,506 **Stateless persons** residing in Belarus[2]

3,372 **Refugees*** residing in Belarus (including **331** (10%) non-Ukrainians)[3]

2,255 **Persons applied for asylum** in 2024 (including **156** (7%) non-Ukrainians)[4]

1,239 **Pending asylum decisions** (including **40** (3%) non-Ukrainians)[5]

As part of its ongoing commitment to actively engage with forcibly displaced people UNHCR conducted Participatory Assessment (PA), series of focus group discussions (FGD) and home-visits during September to November 2024 to gain deeper insights into the protection risks faced by these communities. 13 focus group discussions were conducted throughout the country, with 170 participants (including 110 displaced), in addition to key-informant interviews with service providers.

The assessment sought to understand the local capacities, gather feedback and explore potential solutions to the challenges identified. The initiative involved in person focus group discussions with a variety of people in need of international protection, including women, men, girls and boys from various backgrounds. UNHCR is grateful to all state and municipal and non-governmental partners, UN agencies and forcibly displaced people who contributed to the organization and/or participated in the PA exercise. Their active participation and joint identification of key issues and solutions have assured a thorough evaluation of the needs and challenges experiences by forcibly displaced people residing in Belarus.

*For purposes of this report, the term "refugees" includes displaced persons who have been granted refugee status and complementary protection in Belarus.

Data sources:
1. Department of Citizenship and Migration, as of 1 January 2025
2. UNHCR Mid-Year Statistical Report 2024
3. UNHCR Mid-Year Statistical Report 2024
4. Department of Citizenship and Migration, as of 1 January 2025
5. Department of Citizenship and Migration, as of 1 January 2025

The aim of the Participatory Assessment was to gain an in-depth understanding of the levels of local integration and inclusion of refugees, and asylum-seekers in Belarus, as well as to identify barriers for integration and the opportunities to overcome them, as identified by the affected communities themselves.

Of the 110 displaced participants, **61%** were female and **39%** were male. The discussions were held in all regions of Belarus, with participants living in both urban and rural settings, Temporary Accommodation Centres for asylum-seekers (TAC), private accommodation, and host families. Each target group consisted of 7-20 women, men, girls and boys with different legal statuses, backgrounds, vulnerabilities, and countries of origin (see the chart below for more details). The interpretation service was provided whenever possible.

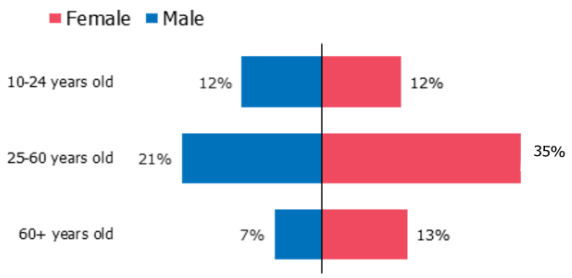
TARGET GROUPS:

- Asylum-seekers
- Older people (Single elderlies or older couples)
- Adolescents and youth
- Households with persons with disabilities and/or medical vulnerabilities
- Families with children (multi-children households, single parent headed households)
- Single women / women at risk
- Forcibly displaced population (recently recognized refugees) facing difficulties in income generation and/or insufficient income to cover basic needs.

DEMOGRAPHICS:

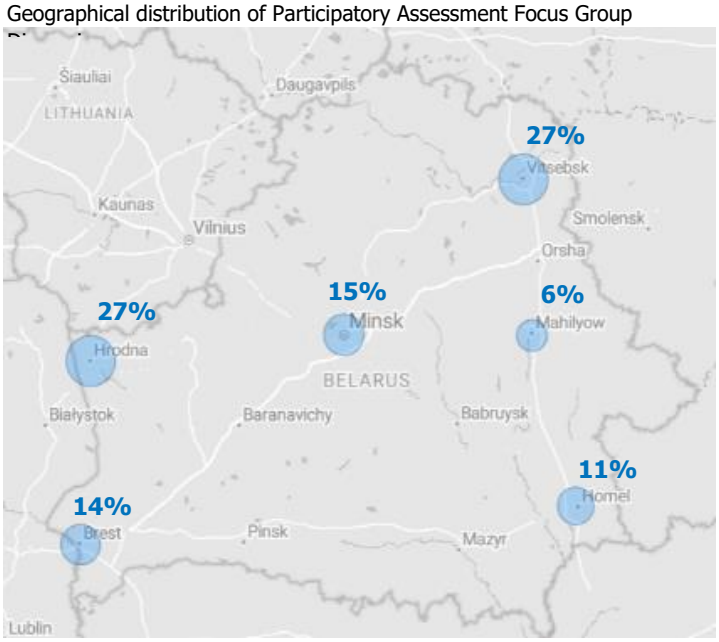
Gender Representation: 61% female and 39% male participants ensuring gender diversity.

Age Segregation: 24% adolescents and youth, 56% adults, and 20% older persons



Gender and age disaggregation of FGD participants

Geographical distribution of Participatory Assessment Focus Group



MAIN FINDINGS

Ukrainians and non-Ukrainians in the asylum system

MAIN POINTS RAISED

- Delays in accessing asylum process
- Need for support to gain employment
- Lack of national ID documentation
- Basic needs of TAC residents
- Need for integration and socialization

FGD conducted with asylum-seekers in Grodno

In 2024, 2,255 persons applied for asylum in Belarus. Out of this number, 93% were citizens of Ukraine and some 7% (156) were from countries other than Ukraine. There were some 1,239 asylum seekers awaiting decisions as of end 2024. Asylum-seekers from countries other than Ukraine were from a range of countries. Largest represented nationalities included Yemen, Afghanistan, Latvia and Syria. Those granted refugee status or complementary protection in Belarus were primarily from Ukraine, followed by Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, State of Palestine and Latvia.

ACCESS TO ASYLUM

FGD participants shared varied experiences with the asylum application process in Belarus. While some navigated the process smoothly and were granted complementary protection, others encountered significant challenges. Reports indicate extensive waiting times for submitting asylum applications, ranging from three to four months, as well as substantial delays in the review and processing of asylum claims across the country. The unprecedented increase in asylum applications has strained the capacity of government asylum authorities, which are only able to process a limited number of applications daily. This has led to incidents where citizens of Ukraine exceeded their legal 90-day stay before being able to file their asylum applications, placing them at risk of remaining in Belarus with an irregular status which in turn hinders access to secure accommodation as well as employment opportunities. Additionally, delays have been reported in the processing of asylum cases themselves. In some instances, asylum-seekers have experiences processing times that exceed the normal six-month legal timeframe, as observed in cases involving Ukrainian nationals who sought asylum after non-admission to Russian Federation, and whose profiles allegedly contain elements concerning state security considerations. Although Belarusian law allows for an extension of an asylum claim's review for up to additional six months – three months at the regional level and three months at the central level – such delays underscore overstretched state asylum system, primarily lack of capacity to handle current number of asylum applications with the existing resources, including available labor force. These systematic delays, coupled with the unofficial requirement to have a registered address to schedule an appointment to apply for asylum, further complicate the process. Some individuals reported being unable to find accommodation options willing to register them due to their status, effectively preventing them from accessing the asylum procedure.

PARTICIPANTS RECOMMENDATION:

- **Remove or Adjust Registration Requirements**: Eliminate the requirement for registration address prior to accepting an asylum claim, or at a minimum, make it a mandatory requirement only by the date of the asylum interview to ensure unimpeded access to the asylum system.
- **Enhance Information Dissemination**: Provide comprehensive, multilingual information that are in appropriate formats on asylum and appeal procedures to ensure asylum-seekers are well-informed about their rights and the steps involved in the process.
- **Implement Expedited Processing for Vulnerable Cases:** Establish a system to promptly identify and fast-track asylum applications for vulnerable individuals, ensuring they receive timely protection and support.
- **Enhance Processing Capacity:** Increase the resources and staffing in offices processing asylum claims to reduce waiting times and efficiently manage the growing number of asylum applications.

EMPLOYMENT AND LIVELIHOODS

Many non-Ukrainian participants reported being unaware of job opportunities and facing significant challenges in securing employment. These challenges included a reluctance of employers to hire asylum-seekers due to language barriers, biased attitudes, unfamiliarity with asylum-seeker identity documents, and the short validity period of asylum-seeker certificates. Some asylum-seekers, with the support of social workers, were able to find unskilled labour and menial tasks with informal daily paid jobs to generate some income. Meanwhile, those residing in TACs reported enrolling in UNHCR-provided Russian language courses to improve their employment prospects.

Many Ukrainian participants were aware of job opportunities but reported difficulties in securing decently remunerated employment. Some asylum-seekers described experiencing biased treatment from employers who expressed concerns that Ukrainian job seekers might not remain in Belarus long-term.

In certain cases, Ukrainians were offered lower salaries due to these perceptions of instability. Additionally, Ukrainians faced challenges in securing employment within their qualified professions, either due to the limited availability of such positions in Belarus or the requirement for formal recognition of their qualifications (e.g., diplomas). Belarusian legislation permits employers to require verified translations of documents, and many employers enforce this requirement, adding a financial barrier for Ukrainians seeking specific jobs. Participants noted that some Belarusian employers often perceive complementary protection or asylum-seeker status as an indication that the individual's stay in the country is temporary, leading to reluctance in hiring them.

Despite these challenges, some Ukrainians expressed overall satisfaction with the State Employment Agency's job placement and referral services. This was particularly highlighted in Vitebsk, where the agency was commended by Ukrainian asylum-seekers and refugees.

PARTICIPANTS RECOMMENDATION:

- **Enhance Employment Support for Asylum-Seekers**: Develop targeted employment support programs, including job placement services and employer engagement initiatives, to address biased attitudes, and unfamiliarity with asylum-seeker identity documents as well as language barriers. These programs should include promoting awareness among employers about hiring asylum-seekers and refugees.
- **Expand Vocational Training and Skills Development**: Establish vocational training programs tailored to the needs of asylum-seekers and refugees to help them acquire marketable skills and improve their employment prospects. These programs should include practical training in sectors with high demand for skilled labour.
- **Disseminate Employment-Related Information**: Conduct information awareness campaigns to educate asylum-seekers and refugees about their employment rights, job prospects, and available opportunities. These campaigns should use multiple formats and languages to ensure accessibility for diverse audiences.

DOCUMENTATION

Many Ukrainians reported challenges in obtaining or renewing essential ID documents. Participants noted that they were unable to access consular services in Belarus, either online or in person. Consequently, obtaining or renewing essential documents, such as biometric passports, has become unfeasible. The issue is especially concerning for families with children, as children require ID documentation upon reaching 18 years old, and for those whose ID documents have either expired or are nearing expiration.

Similarly, some non-Ukrainian asylum-seekers, including those with cases pending in court, reported not possessing a national ID document. This absence of documentation generates considerable uncertainty and anxiety about their legal status and future in Belarus, particularly considering the possibility that their asylum applications may be rejected.

ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Both Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian FGD participants reported gathering information from various sources, with social media playing a significant role. Ukrainians cited Telegram channels as their primary source of information, particularly for details on existing support programs, such as cash assistance from humanitarian organizations. Asylum-seekers denied entry to Russia also mentioned relying on Telegram groups as their sole source of information before applying for asylum in Belarus, as well as for gathering information on their rights and opportunities. This gap highlights the need for targeted outreach and information dissemination for non-Ukrainian asylum-seekers.

Ukrainians additionally expressed concerns about the potential risks of using the Ukrainian Diia governmental portal while in Belarus. This portal provides access to 14 digital documents and 21 services in Ukraine. Participants feared that accessing the website from a Belarusian IP address might lead to suspension of certain benefits, with one participant reporting receiving a notification that their pension was suspended due to accessing the system from Belarus.

PARTICIPANTS RECOMMENDATION:

- **Enhance Information Dissemination for All Asylum-Seekers**: Conduct regular outreach campaigns through trusted social media platforms and Community-Based outreach events to ensure both Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian asylum-seekers have access to updated information on legal processes, support programs, and available resources. Ukrainian asylum-seekers specifically expressed a desire for a dedicated UNHCR Telegram channel, like UNICEF's existing channel, to receive regular updates about available assistance programs.

ACCOMMODATION

Only a small number of asylum-seekers from Ukraine have been accommodated in the TACs for asylum-seekers, due to the limited overall capacity of 76 persons across the three premises designated for this purpose in Belarus. Most participants reported living in rented apartments or rooms and struggling with high rental costs. A significant portion of their family income is spent on accommodation, including rent, utilities, and taxes. Additionally, some landlords are unwilling to rent to Ukrainians, often increasing the rent or refusing to assist with registration, further complicating their housing situation. Some Ukrainian families reported receiving accommodation from their employers, such as housing on agricultural farms or in dormitories. However, they continue to struggle with improving their living conditions due to their low income.

Most of non-Ukrainian FGD participants were living in the TACs for asylum-seekers in Gomel, Vitebsk and Slavgorod.

RESIDENTS OF TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION CENTER

Living conditions in the Temporary Accommodation Centers (TACs) for asylum-seekers were generally considered satisfactory by Focus Group Discussion (FGD) participants. However, some single mothers with children and single elderly residents sharing rooms with others expressed a need for more personal space. Although the TAC administrations provide regular laundry services for towels and bed linens, residents reported a significant need for hygiene items and laundry products for personal use, which are not supplied by the administration. The lack of financial means to afford seasonal clothing and footwear posed a significant challenge for residents of the TACs. Food was highlighted as one of the most pressing basic needs, as TACs only provide access to collective kitchens but do not supply food. This poses a financial burden on residents, who often lack income and rely solely on humanitarian assistance. In the Mogilev region, food parcels are sometimes distributed by the local community or Red Cross volunteers, but these often fail to meet dietary requirements or provide diversity in meals that align with religious and cultural practices.

Families with children attending nearby schools generally expressed satisfaction with living at the TAC and wished to remain there if possible. Their primary concern, however, was the need for continued accommodation after being granted complementary protection or refugee status in Belarus.

Residents of Slavgorod TAC (Mogilev region), reported lack of stable mobile network coverage and requested provision of Wi-Fi connectivity to ensure access to information and participation in digital language classes.

In the TAC located in the Vitebsk region, a need for mental health screening prior to relocation was reported. Unlike the TAC in Gomel, the Vitebsk facility lacks a Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) staff member or psychologist. The absence of specialized mental health support has led to deteriorating conditions for some residents, which may create challenges for social cohesion. There were three reported cases of individuals being transferred to psychiatric facilities, primarily involving those who had experienced violence at the EU – Belarus border, including physical injuries or amputations.

PARTICIPANTS RECOMMENDATION:

Vouchers for food and hygiene items for TAC residents: Provide assistance to TAC residents through vouchers for essential food and hygiene items.

- **Permanent psychologist assigned to TAC:** Assign a permanent psychologist to TACs to serve as both a case manager and a dedicated Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) specialist, rather than relying solely on visiting professionals.

COMMUNITY COHESION AND PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE

Non-Ukrainian asylum-seekers generally reported positive interactions with the local community, with no conflicts mentioned. They appreciated the generous support provided by TAC administrative staff and suggested organizing events to strengthen relationships with the host community. However, they highlighted challenges in communication due to limited Russian language proficiency, which also impacted their ability to access information about local events and opportunities. Overall, there was a strong interest in engaging more with local Belarusians and participating in cultural exchanges with the host community. Similarly, Ukrainian respondents described their interactions with the local community as generally positive and smooth.

"Before arriving in Belarus, I faced many struggles and am still trying to recover from trauma. Thanks to the generous support and care from the staff at the center, I am slowly finding my way toward integration. I have started Russian language classes and now try to interact using basic Russian words. There are days when I break down and cry, sometimes for hours, but they are always there to listen, support me, and give me hope that everything will be okay. I feel loved here; they treat me like family, and for that, I am forever grateful."
Female resident of the Gomel TAC

Older persons

MAIN POINTS RAISED

- Lack of Social and Financial Support
- No access to pensions
- Challenges in Housing and Livelihoods
- Health and Psychosocial Needs
- Social Integration and Community Engagement

FGD conducted with Ukrainian elderlies in Grodno.

The government does not report data on the number of Ukrainian arrivals in the country broken down by age and gender. That said, of those receiving UNHCR cash assistance, **20%** are older persons, with almost **71%** of them women. The needs and capacities of displaced people in this demographic category, of course are not homogenous. Of those receiving UNHCR cash assistance, most (65%) are below 69 years old, followed by 25% between the ages 70-79 and 10% are aged 80 or above. At the same time, the results of the Protection Profiling and Monitoring sample survey of refugees from Ukraine showed a significant proportion of refugees of retirement and older age - 17% of refugees aged 60+, of whom those aged 60-69 are 54%, 70-79 are 34%, and 80 years and over are 13%. It is also worth noting that 37% of households have at least one elderly member

ACCOMMODATION

Older refugees who participated in the PA (mostly single elderlies or older couples) reported a variety of living arrangements. A few resided in temporary accommodation centers designated for asylum-seekers, while others rented apartments or rooms, or stayed with host families or relatives. Securing stable and suitable housing remains a significant challenge, as many older refugees live in collective sites or with relatives, which may not adequately meet their specific needs.

Those renting accommodations expressed concerns about the rising costs of rent and utilities, which they viewed as an ongoing challenge. Additionally, some older individuals reported living in collective accommodations, such as dormitories or hostels, as a more affordable option. Some participants also reported being dependent on remittances from relatives or family members, primarily from Russia, to cover the cost of rent and basic needs. This dependency is heightened by the lack of access to pensions in Belarus and the absence of any accommodation programs.

PARTICIPANTS RECOMMENDATION:

- **Develop Targeted Housing Support Programs**: Establish and fund targeted housing assistance initiatives for elderly refugees, including subsidies for rent and utilities, to alleviate the financial burden on those renting accommodations. Expand access to affordable and stable housing options by creating designated support programs, such as low-cost collective housing tailored to needs of single elderlies and older couples.

ACCESS TO SOCIAL SERVICES

Except for two participants who held a Permit for Permanent Residency (PPR), the remaining participants reported that they did not receive any social assistance from the Government of Belarus. While many confirmed receiving pensions from Ukrainian authorities, they noted being unable to access these pensions in Belarus. This was primarily due to the termination of the legal framework that previously regulated the receipt of Ukrainian pensions in Belarus, combined with the sanction's regime against Belarus, which disrupted bank transfers and access to bank accounts.

In the past, some workarounds were used to bypass these barriers. For instance, participants mentioned relying on relatives traveling from Belarus to the EU to access their bank accounts and withdraw funds on their behalf. However, in 2024, these options became increasingly challenging.

The tightening of sanctions rendered such travel less feasible due to higher ticket prices and extended border crossing times. Some participants also reported that their bank cards had expired, further complicating their ability to access their accounts and pensions, even when outside Belarus.

Some older people reported possessing disability certificates issued in Ukraine; however, these certificates were not recognized in Belarus. Without a Permit for Permanent Residence (PPR), older persons with disabilities are ineligible for disability pensions in Belarus. Essential assistive devices, such as wheelchairs and hearing aids are only available at full price for elderlies without PPR, creating a significant financial burden for many. The lack of access to pensions or disability subsidies exacerbates the financial and medical vulnerabilities of older persons with disabilities, leaving them with limited resources to address their needs.

ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE

Older refugees participating in the FGDs sought medical assistance shared both positive and negative experiences. In some instances, healthcare institutions refused to provide free medical services due to a lack of awareness among staff about relevant legal provisions. These issues were resolved in reported cases through the intervention of legal counsellors from the RCS or by obtaining a note from the Ministry of Health.

Participants with chronic illnesses or underlying health conditions emphasized that the cost of medications constitutes a significant financial burden, as these expenses are not covered by state assistance schemes. Without PPR in Belarus, free medications are generally only provided during treatment at medical facilities, leaving many older persons without adequate support for ongoing medical needs. It should be noted that only 2 elderlies participating in the FGDs had PPR.

Older refugees often have specific health requirements, including the management of chronic conditions and disabilities. Ensuring they have access to appropriate medical services is vital for maintaining their health and quality of life.

FGD conducted with Ukrainian elderlies, Grodno.

"When I was denied entry to Russia to reunite with my family, I felt devastated. For nearly a week, I was consumed by anxiety, spending my days in bed. It hurts to realise that last years of my life I may live alone, far from my children. I have heart issues, and it frightens me to think that if something happens with me, I have no one here to rely on. For now, I am just living with the hope that tomorrow might be a better day."

Ukrainian older refugee, Grodno.

MHPSS

Older Ukrainian refugees in Belarus face significant mental health and psychosocial challenges arising from the trauma of displacement. The upheaval of fleeing their homes under dire circumstances has had a profound psychological impact. Many struggle with the stress of adapting to new environments while being separated from their families, exacerbating feelings of isolation and anxiety.

Referrals to state-run psychiatric outpatient clinics or psychoneurological dispensaries, as well as non-state MHPSS specialized entities are often ineffective due to staff shortages and long waiting times. Due to Russia's policy of not admitting Ukrainians, many families have been separated, leaving refugees stranded in Belarus and unable to reunite with relatives in Russia. This separation has caused considerable emotional distress, particularly for older refugees who depend on family support for both emotional and practical needs. Anxiety is further heightened for those awaiting the outcomes of their asylum applications in Belarus, as they are uncertain whether they will be granted complementary protection. Those who have already been granted complementary protection, often after being denied entry to Russia, remain unsure if their status will be extended in Belarus. In Belarus, the maximum duration of complementary protection is 12 months, with the possibility of renewal for additional 12-month periods on a rolling basis. However, some Ukrainians—particularly those rejected at Sheremetyevo—have reported receiving complementary protection for only six months. This shorter duration contributes to their heightened sense of insecurity.

PARTICIPANTS RECOMMENDATION:

- **Establish Peer Support Groups and Regular Mental Health Sessions**: Participants suggested the creation of peer support groups and the organization of regular group meetings with mental health professionals. These initiatives could greatly enhance their ability to cope with challenging circumstances, foster resilience, and provide a sense of stability amidst ongoing uncertainty.
- **Information Awareness Sessions**: Conduct sessions to inform older persons about available Community-Based services and assistance programs, while offering opportunities to develop new skills and competencies, such as digital literacy, computer skills, and crafts, to support their integration needs.

LIVELIHOODS AND SOCIAL COHESION

FGD participants were generally not employed full-time due to their age and/or health conditions. They reported relying on cash assistance and, for some, remittances from relatives (primarily from Russia). Some elderly individuals from Ukraine, unable to access their pensions in Belarus, have resorted to negative coping mechanisms, such as incurring debt or engaging in physically demanding labor, including night shifts or working despite serious health issues (e.g., a 70-year-old woman with cancer working night shifts) in low-income jobs to make ends meet.

The reduction or discontinuation of humanitarian assistance was reported to have had a negative impact on families' ability to cover basic needs. FGD participants also spoke of the friendliness and mutual assistance they experienced with their Belarusian neighbors. They expressed gratitude for the support provided by Belarusians, including help with navigating life in the new country, food provisions, and other forms of assistance. The overall sentiment was one of cooperation and support, with no reported conflicts or misunderstandings with the host community.

"I am a 75-year-old man. I couldn't reunite with my son's family in Russia, and now I'm here, far away from them, all alone. I am renting a room in the house of one of my son's friends. For over a year, my days have begun and ended with a video call to my children. A few weeks ago, my son visited me from Russia with my grandchildren, and I cried like a child just to be able to hug them. I'm grateful to speak to you today because, on most days, the only people I talk to are my family through video calls."

PARTICIPANTS RECOMMENDATION:

- **Promote Social and Cultural Engagement**: Elderly respondents expressed a strong interest in participating in social and cultural activities, such as celebrations, excursions, theatre performances, and culinary workshops (which significantly were reduced after suspension of cooperation between UNHCR and Belarusian Red Cross as implementing partner).
- **Establish Formalized Community Support Programs**: Participants recommended creating structured community support programs, including local volunteer initiatives for food distribution, assistance with navigating services, and providing practical support to elderly refugees.
- **Strengthen Financial Assistance Programs**: Increase and sustain targeted financial assistance for elderly refugees who are unable to work due to age or health conditions. This support should prioritize those who are ineligible for pensions or disability subsidies, helping to mitigate the reliance on negative coping mechanisms.

Persons with Disabilities and/or Serious medical condition

MAIN POINTS RAISED

- Awareness gap among healthcare providers
- Non-Ukrainian Asylum-seekers struggle to access healthcare services
- Disability benefits accessible only to PPR (Permit for Permanent Residency) holders

FGD conducted with asylum-seekers in Vitebsk.

ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE AND LEGAL STATUS

Comprehensive statistics on the number of refugees living with disabilities in Belarus is not available. UNHCR's Protection Profiling and Monitoring conducted in 2024 (as of December 1, 2024) indicated that **23%** of Ukrainian households interviewed reported having at least one person in the family with a disability and/or serious illness. It is therefore estimated that the proportion of refugees with disabilities within the population is significant, highlighting the need for targeted operational and policy responses to address their specific needs.

There is a strong correlation between the legal status of displaced persons in Belarus and their access to healthcare. For instance, Ukrainian nationals who do not yet have a temporary or permanent residence permit in Belarus are entitled to healthcare services equivalent to those provided to Belarusian citizens, as regulated by Edict 420. In contrast, adult asylum-seekers from other countries of origin and Ukrainian nationals, that are holding TPR or PPR, are not entitled to free planned medical assistance, except for the mandatory medical examination required by the Department of Citizenship and Migration (DCM) within the state asylum procedure. Regardless of their country of origin, emergency medical assistance, as well as the diagnosis and treatment of HIV and socially dangerous diseases[4], is provided free of charge to asylum-seekers, complementary protection holders, and refugee status holders. Importantly, children asylum-seekers are entitled to all types of medical treatment on a par with citizens: free of charge if a citizen receives particular medical treatment free of charge.

Belarusian legislation provides certain social welfare benefits for people living with disabilities, including children, who hold a Permit for Permanent Residency (PPR). These benefits include access to medical products and technical equipment for social rehabilitation, allowances, treatment in sanatoriums, and free public transportation. However, none of the PA participants with disability reported holding a PPR, thereby excluding them from access to any social protection schemes available for persons with disabilities under Belarusian law.

[4] Socially dangerous diseases include acute pulmonary tuberculosis, plague, cholera, anthrax, haemorrhagic fevers.

UKRAINIAN CASELOAD:

FGD participants shared varying experiences and opinions regarding access to healthcare. Regardless of location, none of the participants reported being denied emergency medical assistance. When discussing planned medical assistance, some participants reported instances where healthcare institutions refused to provide free medical services to Ukrainians due to staff being unaware of relevant legal provisions. In one case, a participant was denied a free medical examination. However, in several instances, the RCS intervened by contacting the healthcare facility to confirm the individual's entitlement to free healthcare, resolving the issue. Many participants were unaware of their rights to healthcare. Some even perceived that holding complementary protection status would improve their access to healthcare, indicating a need for better information dissemination. Families with children with disabilities noted that, although healthcare is free for children, long queues and difficulties registering for medical appointments often pose significant challenges. This issue is particularly acute for dental and ophthalmological services, prompting many families to turn to private healthcare providers, as they cannot wait. Participants living in urban areas generally reported positive experiences when accessing healthcare. In contrast, those residing in rural areas highlighted some specialized services are either unavailable in their communities or are of poor quality. As a result, they often travel to nearby larger cities to access these services, which imposes an additional financial burden on many displaced households, similar to local population.

PARTICIPANTS RECOMMENDATION:

- **Raise Awareness Among Healthcare Facility Staff**: Conduct targeted training sessions and awareness campaigns for healthcare facility staff and legal counsellors to ensure they are familiar with the legal provisions guaranteeing healthcare access for displaced Ukrainians. This will help prevent instances of denied services due to a lack of understanding of applicable laws.
- **Enhance Information Dissemination to Displaced Ukrainians**: Develop and distribute accessible informational materials, such as brochures, posters, and online guides, to raise awareness among displaced Ukrainians about their rights to healthcare, including details about planned medical assistance and emergency services. Focus on reaching vulnerable groups, such as families with children with disabilities and those in rural areas.
- **Improve Access to Specialized Services in Rural Areas**: Establish mobile healthcare units or increase outreach services in rural areas to provide specialized medical assistance locally. Additionally, consider subsidizing travel costs for displaced persons who need to commute to larger cities for essential healthcare services.
- **Address Long Queues for Pediatric and Specialized Care**: Increase the availability of pediatric and specialized services, such as dental and ophthalmological care, through partnerships with public and private healthcare providers. Prioritize reducing wait times by expanding staff capacity or introducing appointment scheduling systems to ensure timely access for families with children with disabilities.

"When we first arrived in Belarus, we didn't know anyone and spent our first night sleeping at the train station. Early the next morning, representatives from the Belarusian Red Cross welcomed us and provided some information, including a referral to the State Employment Service. However, since we didn't have registration, my mom couldn't find a job, and I began looking for work to support her and my brother, who has a disability. Unfortunately, we weren't informed about the registration requirements and didn't register within 30 days, which resulted in a fine. For the first two months, we had no income at all and were entirely dependent on humanitarian assistance and donations from community volunteers."
17-year-old Ukrainian refugee, Brest

NON-UKRAINIAN CASELOAD

Access to healthcare remains a significant challenge for non-Ukrainian asylum-seekers with disabilities and/or serious medical conditions, as these services are not free. This issue was particularly highlighted in Vitebsk, where the TAC for asylum-seekers often hosts individuals with injuries or disabilities. Three such individuals emphasized that the costs associated with their medical needs are a major challenge, citing the need for medication vouchers and transportation cards. These asylum-seekers often lack income to meet basic needs and face difficulties walking long distances or using public transportation to access healthcare facilities.

Additionally, some non-Ukrainian asylum-seekers with diabetes reported an urgent need for insulin, highlighting the lack of affordable access to essential medications. Several participants also reported experiencing biased attitudes from healthcare providers, which they attributed to their nationality or ethnicity. Language barriers were mentioned as another significant challenge when communicating with primary healthcare workers, further complicating access to necessary medical care.

PARTICIPANTS RECOMMENDATION:

- **Ensure Equal Access to Planned Medical Assistance for All Asylum-Seekers**: Advocate for policy changes to provide free planned medical assistance to all asylum-seekers, regardless of country of origin. This includes offering essential services such as medications for chronic conditions (e.g., insulin) and access to rehabilitation for persons with disabilities. Equal access to healthcare is critical to addressing the vulnerabilities of all asylum-seekers and fostering inclusive support systems.

Refugees facing difficulties with income generation (including Families with children)

MAIN POINTS RAISED

- Limited affordable housing
- Limited financial inclusion without PPR
- Need for awareness raising and community outreach events among refugees

FGD conducted with refugees in Grodno

Ukrainian families with complimentary protection, regardless of their living arrangement or geographic locations, expressed overall satisfaction with their current living conditions in Belarus. Some families shared a desire to return to Ukraine in the future, emphasizing the importance of a resolution to the conflict for their potential return. Alternatively, some participants are aware that their houses in Ukraine have been destroyed leading them to consider remaining in Belarus even after end of hostilities.

ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Most FGD participants stated that they actively sought information on available assistance and legal advice through Telegram groups and regional offices of RCS. Despite this, many participants continued to report a lack of information about available assistance offered by organizations as well as UNHCR services. Participants proposed establishing dedicated channels to facilitate access to updated information and suggested establishing comprehensive guidelines outlining their rights to healthcare, education, and employment. Some participants also expressed interest in starting small businesses but noted a lack of familiarity with the business environment in Belarus. Families in the Brest region reported being unaware of toll fines and vehicle admission rules in Belarus. Many Ukrainians are unaware of the requirements to comply with vehicle admission regulations, such as the temporary admission period. Some resort to crossing the Belarusian border to reset the temporary admission period for vehicles with Ukrainian plates, while others lack knowledge of the rules for declaring vehicles for personal use. Participants also highlighted the need for information on how to appeal fines and other penalties. People reported instances of vehicle confiscations and fines reaching the equivalent of up to €1,300.00.

PARTICIPANTS RECOMMENDATION:

- **Enhancing Refugee Awareness and Access to Services**: To address the identified awareness gaps, participants suggested UNHCR, jointly with Migration authorities to organize regular awareness-raising sessions and develop multilingual, user-friendly materials covering topics such as asylum procedures, refugees' rights and obligations, access to healthcare, education, and employment, as well as vehicle admission rules and business registration. Dedicated communication channel could be established to provide real-time updates on support programs as well as for dissemination of information materials and guidelines.

ACCOMMODATION

Participants reported diverse living arrangements, including staying with relatives, being hosted by local families, or receiving accommodation through their employers (e.g., Agro farms). However, housing provided by employer very often requires significant improvement, as some accommodations are reported to be damp or unfurnished, creating financial challenges for families. Families with multiple children frequently described issues of overcrowding, especially when living with extended family members and noted difficulties in finding affordable housing. A significant portion of their income is spent on accommodation costs, including rent, utilities, and taxes. Rental fees in Grodno and Minsk were reported to be notably high.

Additionally, some landlords are unwilling to rent to Ukrainians, either by increasing rent or refusing to assist with registration, even when families have complementary protection status and employment in Belarus. Many Ukrainian families are also required to pay deposits to secure rental housing, which is a common practice in the country, forcing some to move into less favorable conditions or reduce spending on basic needs to cover accommodation expenses.

> "We spent our lifetime savings to buy an apartment in Ukraine in 2021, but just a few months later, we had to leave with only a small backpack. Now, we can't even afford to rent a small studio apartment in Vitebsk. I have no access to my pension, and there's no affordable housing or assistance with food or cash like there was last year. With my grandchildren in school, our household expenses have grown significantly, and we even had to take on debt to cover school-related costs earlier this September."
> 62 years old Ukrainian refugee, Vitebsk

EMPLOYMENT AND LIVELIHOODS

Some refugees from Ukraine reported challenges in securing employment aligned with their professional qualifications due limited availability in Belarus or the inability to provide formal verification of their qualifications, such as copies of diplomas or employment records.

Translation costs for documentation were also cited as a barrier. While a few individuals with complementary protection perceived negative attitudes or unwillingness from employers to hire them, many reported positive experiences, with National Employment authorities assisting them in finding jobs.

However, families identified themselves as low-income, struggling to cover basic needs, as their income is often insufficient to cover the high cost of food and accommodation. Holders of complementary protection with temporary residence permits noted that they cannot register as individual entrepreneurs without a permit for permanent residence. Some expressed interest in vocational training and requested information on regularizing their status to initiate businesses. Ukrainian families without PPR do not have access to loans or mortgages, and starting a business remains complicated without this permit, further limiting their ability to generate income despite having complementary protection status.

PARTICIPANTS RECOMMENDATION:

- **Enhance Support for Business Initiation and Financial Inclusion of Ukrainian refugees**: Advocate for policy adjustments allowing complementary protection holders with temporary residence permits to register as individual entrepreneurs and access financial services, including loans or microcredit schemes. Simultaneously, create targeted informational campaigns to guide refugees on the process of regularizing their status and starting small businesses, thereby enhancing their ability to generate sustainable income.

FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN

Families with children, including single-parent households, reported overall satisfaction with their children's integration in Belarus. Some single parents noted that their primary reason for relocating to Belarus was the better integration prospects for their children, citing the lack of a language barrier and the cultural and social similarities. Upon relocating, many families enrolled their children in local schools, transitioning from online education. However, families with children often face financial challenges related to education expenses. These include costs for extracurricular activities (approximately 30 BYN per child per month), which may include Belarusian language classes and access to a school therapist or speech therapist. Additionally, families must cover the cost of meals during extended study periods, adding to the financial strain on households with school-aged children. A few incidents (three) have been identified where children aged 16-17 were working to support their families with household income.

Adolescents and youth

MAIN POINTS RAISED

- Barriers for higher education for Ukrainian youth
- Limited integration and employment opportunities for non-Ukrainian youth
- Financial constraints for youth skills development

FGD conducted with asylum-seekers in Mogilev.

UKRAINIAN

As with other Ukrainian refugees, adolescent, and youth participants in the discussions reported that their families chose to live in Belarus due to its proximity to Ukraine, similar cultural and social similarities, and affordable cost of living. While education is available free of charge for children holding any protection status, enrolment in specialized secondary or higher educational institutions for Ukrainians remains unattainable. Ukrainians may enroll in such education institutions during the general admission campaign with all foreign citizens, and are not required to pass any entrance exams, but must pay tuition fees which are significantly higher than those for Belarusian citizens. Edict 420 also allows access for Ukrainians to free and paid (with the same rates as for Belarusians) higher, vocational, and specialized secondary education, however Ukrainians may benefit from it only if vacant slots are available in the educational institution after the general admission period. Utilizing the vacant slots scheme remains the only viable way for access to higher education for Ukrainian families, as their income cannot cover the tuition fees for foreign citizens. Some families (seven reported cases) stated that their children were unable to enroll in colleges or universities after completing school education as there were a no vacant slots available. Some young people reported having skills and interests, such as painting or graphic design, but lacked the financial means to cover the costs of materials or courses needed to pursue them.

NON-UKRAINIAN

For non-Ukrainian adolescents and youth, the most significant reported challenges were language barriers and limited employment opportunities, which are often inter-related. Those with complementary protection status highlighted insufficient income to cover rental costs and a lack of information about available jobs. It is worth noting that most non-Ukrainian youth in the discussions had already registered for UNHCR-funded Russian language courses and expressed a strong interest in expediting their language skills. Some participants also perceived biased attitudes towards them.

PARTICIPANTS RECOMMENDATION:

- **Support for integration of non-Ukrainian youth:** Expand the availability of UNHCR-funded language courses and include additional support, such as mentorship programs, to help non-Ukrainian youth overcome language barriers and improve their integration prospects.
- **Improve Awareness of Employment Opportunities**: Develop and disseminate targeted information on employment opportunities for youth with complementary protection status. This could include job fairs, partnerships with local employers, and career counselling sessions to address the lack of job-related information.
- **Introduce Skill Development Programs**: Develop and fund vocational training and extracurricular programs tailored to young people's interests and skills, such as painting, graphic design, or other creative fields, to support their personal and professional growth.
- **Expand access to higher education for Ukrainian refugees and Strengthen Partnerships with Educational Institutions**: Advocate for increased availability of budget slots in specialized secondary and higher educational institutions for Ukrainian refugees. Partner with higher education and vocational training institutions to create reserved slots or alternative pathways for refugee students, ensuring they are not excluded due to admission timing or financial constraints.

PARTICIPATORY ASSESSMENT REPORT 2024

REPUBLIC OF BELARUS

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