UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

Voices of Refugees in Bulgaria – AGD Participatory Assessment 2024

September 2025

Glossary

AGD – Age, Gender, Diversity

BHC – Bulgarian Helsinki Committee

BRC – Bulgarian Red Cross

CBI – Cash-Based Interventions

CRWB – Council for Refugee Women in Bulgaria

FAR – Foundation for Access to Rights

FGD – Focus Group Discussion

NRG – Energy Association

RRP – Regional Refugee Response Plan

RSD – Refugee Status Determination

UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

USRF – Ukraine Support and Renovation Foundation

COVER PHOTOGRAPH

Ukrainian refugees participating in a discussion with a social worker in the UNHCR funded Protection and Inclusion Center in Varna, part of the "COMPASS" Bulgaria Network. © UNHCR/Nikolay Stoykov

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Foreword

The UNHCR's commitment to protecting and assisting forcibly displaced people in Bulgaria is at the heart of our mission. This latest Participatory Assessment, conducted in December 2024, is a vital tool for us and our partners. It allows us to move beyond assumptions and to directly hear the voices of refugees and asylum-seekers themselves.

The findings in this report reveal both successes and critical areas for improvement. It is clear that while Ukrainian beneficiaries of temporary protection have benefited from a relatively smoother integration process, refugees and asylum seekers from other countries, such as Syria and Afghanistan, face significant and persistent barriers. The assessment highlights that trust is not a given; it is built through direct, empathetic, and tangible service delivery on the ground.

By listening to the experiences shared in these discussions, we have a clear roadmap for action. We must enhance our communication strategies, ensuring they are tailored to the distinct digital habits of each population while also strengthening in-person outreach to build trust. We need to expand essential services, particularly in areas of access to healthcare, employment, and legal aid, and address the logistical and structural barriers that prevent vulnerable individuals from accessing them.

Most importantly, we must use these findings to inform our advocacy and policy design, ensuring that initiatives are always responsive to the lived experiences of those we serve. Our goal is not simply to provide basic support, but to empower refugees and asylum-seekers to navigate a complex system and build a stable, dignified future for themselves in Bulgaria.

We extend our deepest gratitude to our partners, including Caritas, the Ukraine Support and Renovation Foundation (USRF), the Bulgarian Red Cross (BRC), the Energy Association (NRG), and the Council of Refugee Women in Bulgaria (CRWB), for their invaluable support in this assessment. Your dedication on the ground is what makes our work possible.

We also want to express our sincere appreciation to the refugees and asylum-seekers who generously shared their time and experiences with us. Your courage and candor are the foundation of this report, and your voices will guide our efforts moving forward.

Finally, we thank the government of Bulgaria for its crucial role in facilitating the participation of groups in registration and reception centers, as well as in detention facilities. Your cooperation has been instrumental in ensuring that this assessment provides a comprehensive and accurate reflection of the realities faced by all communities we serve. By working together with our partners and the refugee community, we can foster better integration, improve well-being, and advocate more effectively on their behalf.

Seda Kuzucu
Representative
UNHCR Bulgaria

Background

Since the full-scale escalation of the conflict in Ukraine in February 2022, Bulgaria has played a crucial role as an external EU border, receiving significant numbers of displaced persons. Over 2.3 million refugees from Ukraine were admitted to Bulgaria. By the end of February 2025, the Bulgarian Government had granted temporary protection to more than 204,000 refugees fleeing Ukraine, the majority of whom are women and children.

Despite many refugees moving onward, Bulgaria hosted approximately 75,250 Ukrainian refugees under temporary protection as of February 2025. This figure represents a slight rise from 67,000 in 2022 and 72,000 in February 2024, indicating continued population shifts and an increasing number of individuals opting to stay in the country in various forms of residence, with over 2,579 temporary protection holders from Ukraine acquiring Bulgarian nationality in 2024. Others, meanwhile, gradually transitioned to other forms of legal stay, moved to another EU country, or returned to safer areas of Ukraine.

In addition to the Ukrainian crisis, Bulgaria remains a crucial entry point for asylum seekers from other conflict-affected regions. According to the State Agency for Refugees (SAR), Bulgaria registered 12,250 asylum seekers in 2024, a notable decrease from the approximately 22,500 registrations in the previous year. Most of these individuals were from Syria and Afghanistan.

The presence of Syrian nationals, in particular, has been a long-term trend. Syria has been a significant country of origin for asylum seekers in Bulgaria since the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011. Over the past decade, 55,385 Syrians have sought protection in the country, with 34,260 of them being granted international protection. Despite these numbers, many Syrian nationals do not stay in Bulgaria, primarily due to a lack of integration prospects and significant barriers to socio-economic inclusion. Afghan asylum-seekers also tend to continue their journey elsewhere due to the low rate of international protection granted to Afghans in Bulgaria—with only 11% of applications being recognized of all applications that were processed until the end of 2023. While current figures for the total number of Syrian and Afghan refugees who remain in Bulgaria are fluid, their continued presence, however, highlights Bulgaria's ongoing role in broader European refugee protection efforts.

UNHCR's Mandate and Priorities

Addressing the protection risks that forcibly displaced people face in Bulgaria is central to UNHCR's strategy and programming, in support of the national protection and reception framework. UNHCR supports government-led efforts to provide essential protection services — including legal assistance, information about available services, access to education, and psychosocial support — while also fostering the inclusion and long-term integration of refugees into Bulgarian society. UNHCR's priority protection interventions encompass ensuring safe access to territory and asylum procedures; facilitating the inclusion of refugees in state-led programmes, in coordination with stakeholders within the Refugee Coordination Model and the regional Refugee Response Plan (RRP); and collaborating with its partners within the Bulgaria Network of Compass Protection and Inclusion Centers.

Participatory Assessments

UNHCR Bulgaria regularly conducts Participatory Assessments with refugees and asylum seekers, using them as a primary evidence base for its strategic planning and advocacy. These assessments are vital for our understanding of refugees' current situation and challenges and for our ability to propose solutions.

2023 Voices of Refugee Assessment

The 2023 Voices of Refugees assessment exposes a two-tiered system of refugee integration in Bulgaria:

- Ukrainian refugees, benefitting from the Temporary Protection, experienced relatively higher chances of access to employment, housing, healthcare, and education.
- Refugees and asylum seekers from Syria, Afghanistan, and other countries faced structural exclusion, compounded by feeling of being discriminated, legal uncertainty and service inaccessibility.

Whether refugees ultimately choose to stay in Bulgaria is uncertain and influenced by a range of social and economic factors. The assessment found that refugees' decisions are largely shaped by their ability to access housing, employment, healthcare, and other essential services. However, these experiences are far from uniform, with stark contrasts between refugees from Ukraine and those from other countries, such as Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

Based on the 2023 findings, a significant portion of asylum seekers and refugees from Syria and other non-European countries were hesitant to stay in Bulgaria. Only a small fraction—just over 11 per cent—expressed a long-term intention to remain regardless of the reception conditions and administrative barriers, while 36 per cent were undecided. Their hesitations were closely tied to the significant barriers they faced in integrating into Bulgarian society, specifically whether they could find work, secure stable accommodation, and access reliable healthcare, education, and social support for their families.

In contrast, over half of the Ukrainian refugees interviewed during the 2023 Participatory Assessment, said they intended to stay in Bulgaria. Only 15 per cent had made the decision to leave, and around one-third were still uncertain. For these individuals, access to accommodation was the most influential factor, followed closely by the availability of employment or self-employment opportunities. Ukrainian refugees, though not without challenges, seemed to feel a stronger sense of possibility when it came to building a life in Bulgaria. Yet despite these differing levels of optimism, both groups cited similar reasons for considering leaving Bulgaria: hopes for better job prospects elsewhere in Europe, the desire to reunite with family members in other countries, and the perception of better healthcare in other EU states.

Healthcare access proved to be a critical concern across all refugee groups, but especially among non-Ukrainians. While many Ukrainian refugees reported that they could rely on their general practitioners, hospitals, or family networks when in need of medical care, refugees from other countries described a very different reality. Only 32 per cent of non-Ukrainian refugees reported having health insurance, compared to 77 per cent of Ukrainians. Many found it difficult, sometimes impossible, to see a doctor — particularly specialists like dermatologists or dentists

— while staying in reception centers. The reasons for this gap ranged from not having a general practitioner, to lacking information about how to get insured (for those already granted international protection), to feeling discriminated against or unable to navigate the system due to language barriers. In both cases, the absence of clear, consistent healthcare access undermined refugees' sense of stability. Many cited barriers such as doctors refusing to treat them, unhelpful staff, lack of available medication, and challenges in physically reaching healthcare facilities.

Access to financial services emerged as another major obstacle to socio-economic inclusion. Refugees, particularly those from outside Ukraine, reported being unable to open bank accounts. In fact, all asylum seekers and refugees from countries outside Ukraine said that banks had refused them service. This is largely due to banks' risk-based interpretation and implementation of Bulgaria's 2018 Law on Measures against Money Laundering. Even among Ukrainian refugees, 40 per cent had experienced similar issues in 2023. The process of opening a bank account had become more bureaucratic and restrictive, with banks now demanding foreign identity documents, work and rental contracts — conditions that were not enforced during the initial influx in 2022. These practices have effectively treated refugees as economic migrants, rather than as individuals with protected rights, further alienating them from full participation in society.

When it came to employment, most refugees had been skilled professionals in their countries of origin. In Bulgaria, experiences were varied. While a limited few were able to continue working in their trained professions — such as teaching or psychology due to language barriers— many found themselves doing informal or unskilled labor, often disconnected from their qualifications. Asylum seekers were particularly disadvantaged. In addition to having fewer opportunities for education due to prolonged displacement from countries like Syria and Afghanistan, many asylum seekers faced significant barriers to employment. Some were still awaiting decisions on their international protection status, which delayed or restricted their right to work. Others were unaware that they had the right to seek employment at all, further limiting their prospects.

Language proved to be a central barrier to economic participation. Ukrainian refugees again held a relative advantage here, with 76 per cent participating in Bulgarian language courses, compared to just 25 per cent for non-Ukrainian refugees. Language education programmes were not equally available to all, with some citing a lack of courses in their regions or technical issues preventing online access. Regardless of nationality, refugees recognized that learning Bulgarian was essential to managing their lives and gaining independence in the country.

Housing, too, played a major role in shaping refugees' plans for the future. While access to accommodation encouraged many Ukrainians to remain, for others, especially non-Ukrainians, housing insecurity combined with weak access to social assistance made staying in Bulgaria feel increasingly untenable.

Response to the Recommendations

In response to the recommendations emerging from the responses of the participants in the 2023 Participatory Assessment, UNHCR and its partners in Bulgaria took targeted action to

improve refugees' access to information and socio-economic opportunities. A key step in this direction was the strengthening of the Bulgaria Network of Compass Protection and Inclusion Centers, which became an essential platform for addressing the pressing needs voiced by refugees. The assessment made it clear that many refugees lacked vital information about their rights and entitlements — particularly concerning employment, education, and healthcare. Participants expressed a strong desire to better understand what they were legally allowed to do in Bulgaria and what support was available to them. This included access to job opportunities, vocational training, recognition of diplomas and qualifications, entrepreneurship support, and employment-related social benefits such as health insurance.

Recognizing this critical gap, UNHCR collaborated closely with partner organizations through the Compass Protection and Inclusion Centers to deliver targeted outreach and counselling, with the goal of gradually extending these services to all forcibly displaced and stateless populations. The focus was on expanding access to tailored vocational training, providing free language courses, and offering clear guidance on the recognition of foreign qualifications — all of which are vital for meaningful integration.

Through this expanded network of support, UNHCR and its partners began addressing the foundational barriers to inclusion and empowerment, aiming to ensure that refugees — regardless of origin — are equipped with the tools, knowledge, and opportunities to rebuild their lives in dignity while in Bulgaria.

The needs of young asylum-seekers participating in the 2023 Voices of Refugee Children in Bulgaria were particularly acute. Many were spending extended periods in reception centers with little to no structured activities. They voiced feelings of restlessness and anxiety, largely due to the lack of educational or vocational engagement during this time. In response to these needs, efforts were made to plan and develop enhanced youth-focused programming, including technical training, mentorship, and job-preparedness activities. However, these initiatives have not yet been fully implemented due to the global financial situation, leaving many young people with continued idle time.

2024 Participatory Assessments

Building on insights from previous assessments, particularly the needs highlighted in 2023, UNHCR completed a new round of participatory assessment in December, which forms an important part of the 2024 participatory assessment cycle. Due to the dynamic nature of displacement and inclusion, this yearly exercise provides a continuous feedback loop. This ensures that UNHCR's responses to refugee situations remain relevant, effective, and adaptive to the changing realities on the ground, ultimately supporting more tailored and impactful assistance.

Methodology

Participatory assessment is a process of building partnerships with refugee women and men of all ages and backgrounds by promoting meaningful participation through structured dialogue. It includes holding discussions with small groups to gather accurate information on the specific

protection risks they face and the underlying causes, to understand their capacities, and to hear their proposed solutions.

These focus group discussions (FGDs) with refugees constitute an essential tool for shaping the protection and inclusion programs of UNHCR and its partners. FGDs allow for a direct dialogue between protection actors and refugees. By shedding light on refugees' perspectives through FGDs, UNHCR aims to promote an environment of trust and accountability. This analysis aims to harness the power of collaborative dialogue and pave the way for a more responsive, tailored, and efficient system of social protection for refugees and asylum seekers in Bulgaria.

The qualitative nature of the FGDs means the findings reflect a rich array of personal experiences and perspectives, which are explored to reveal a deeper layer of understanding about the effectiveness of protection and integration response in the country. The findings presented herein are not generalizable statistical facts but rather representative qualitative experiences. The statistics reported throughout the text are based on the number of people who chose to answer each question aggregated across all focus groups.

In December 2024, the UNHCR and partners in Bulgaria conducted focus group discussions with 340 refugees and asylum seekers. The event was organized by the UNHCR, with valuable support from Caritas, the Ukraine Support and Renovation Foundation (USRF), Bulgarian Red Cross (BRC), Energy Association (NRG), and the Council of Refugee Women in Bulgaria (CRWB). A total of 38 FGDs were conducted, involving 208 females and 176 males. Participants originated from eleven countries, primarily Ukraine (72 males and 147 females), and with additional representation from Syria, Afghanistan, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Ecuador, Gambia, Iraq, Tajikistan, including Palestinian refugees (104 males, 61 females). These focus groups were held in eight locations across Bulgaria, in the capital, Sofia, as well as in Varna, Dobrich, Ruse, Burgas, Plovdiv, Haskovo and Banya. Each group comprised of an average of eight participants each.

Regarding participants' protection status, Ukrainian refugees under temporary protection[1] constituted 57 per cent of participants. The remainder were asylum-seekers or beneficiaries of international protection.[2]

As to the participant demographics:

- Across the groups, participant age varied notably: 27 groups included individuals aged between 30 and 50 years, 13 groups featured participants over 50, while 21 groups comprised individuals aged 18 to 29.
- The discussions included more women than men (54% women to 46% men), reflecting the distribution across all participants.
- Most participants were able-bodied.
- Most of the focus groups were conducted in the participants' native languages using the interpreters which ensured that participants could express themselves comfortably.

[1] See: UNHCR Bulgaria, *Protection Brief: Implementation of TP Directive (July-December 2024)*, February 2025.
[2] See: UNHCR Bulgaria, *Protection Brief: International Protection Procedures*, January 2025.

Lastly, due to logistical constraints, some of the FGDs relied on the facilitation, notetaking and interpretation support provided by our partner social workers. While their assistance was invaluable and contribute to trust and rapport, it is acknowledged that their existing relationships with the participants may have introduced a degree of bias. We have taken this into account during our analysis, and these limitations should be considered when reviewing the findings.

Summary of Findings

The findings reveal a nuanced picture of experiences, with distinct patterns emerging between Ukrainian beneficiaries of temporary protection and other non-Ukrainian asylum-seekers and refugees holding international protection status.

Key Findings for Refugees from Ukraine under Temporary Protection:

- **Positive Perception of Partners:** All groups of refugees from Ukraine were highly familiar with UNHCR's partner organizations, particularly BRC and Caritas. The overwhelming majority expressed satisfaction with the responses received when approaching UNHCR and its partners. Similarly, nearly all respondent groups highlighted the reliability and quality of the services received as well as the professionalism and empathy of the staff.
- **Information Gaps and Communication Preferences:** A significant number of participants lacked familiarity with UNHCR itself, including those receiving assistance under UNHCR programs with partners. The main challenges for accessing information on available services consisted of lack of information and language barrier. Participants expressed a strong need for more information on critical topics like **healthcare, education, employment and legal aid**. Social media, especially **Viber and Telegram**, **as well as community centers** were identified as the most effective communication channels for receiving information from UNHCR.
- **High Utilization of Compass Centers:** Participants showed very high familiarity with and utilization of the UNHCR-led Compass Centers, citing services such as legal and psychological support, as well as educational and recreational activities. Participants most frequently cited cultural events as activities they wished the Compass Center would organize. Key areas for improvement for the centers included location, an increase in mobile services for neighboring cities, and an expansion of opening hours, such as on weekends.
- **Challenges in Accessibility:** While satisfied with the services, participants pointed to barriers in accessing centers, primarily due to **transportation costs** and the **distance for those in smaller towns.**

Key Findings for Non-Ukrainian Asylum-Seekers and Refugees:

- **Limited Awareness of UNHCR and its Partners:** These groups showed a concerning lack of familiarity with UNHCR. Fewer than two-thirds were able to positively identify any of UNHCR's partner organizations, though BRC and Caritas were the most frequently

mentioned. Most of the focus groups also lacked familiarity with Compass centers or the services they provided. Several groups did not respond when asked about their satisfaction with the responses received when approaching UNHCR and its partners and the quality and reliability of services. Where feedback was given, they were all positive although ratings were noticeably lower than those expressed by Ukrainian groups.

- **Access to Information, Information Gaps, and Communication Preferences:** Over half of the participants did not respond when asked about their main challenges in accessing information. Those who did primarily cited a lack of information, language barriers, and detention. A pervasive theme was the absence of clear information on asylum procedures and legal rights, particularly regarding family reunification. Participants expressed a strong need for more information on critical topics like **employment, education, healthcare, accommodation, and legal aid**. The most effective communication channels identified were social media, especially **WhatsApp and Facebook groups, as well as in-person meetings and information sessions.**
- **Emotional Impact of Separation:** The emotional and psychological toll of family separation was a significant issue. Many participants expressed feelings of helplessness and anxiety, with little information on how to be reunited with loved ones.
- **Challenges in the Asylum Process:** Participants reported a range of experiences, with some finding the asylum application process easy with legal counselling and assistance, while others cited language barriers, long waiting times, and a lack of information on the interview protocol. Many had received rejections and were in the process of appealing their decisions.
- **Critical Needs in Detention:** The two detained groups highlighted dire living conditions, including poor hygiene and overcrowding. A lack of access to legal counselling, information on asylum procedures, and recreational activities were cited as major concerns.

In conclusion, while the overall feedback points to a foundation of effective support from UNHCR and its partners, there are clear and urgent areas for improvement. Recommendations will focus on enhancing communication, expanding key services to address specific needs, and advocating for clearer, more humane legal and living conditions for all asylum-seekers and refugees in Bulgaria.

Main Findings

The main topics discussed across the FGDs were:

- Perceptions of UNHCR and partners
- Compass Community Centers
- Family reunification
- RSD
- Conditions in detention centers

Due to their specific circumstances, detained asylum-seekers were not asked about topics such as Compass Community Centers and their services, family reunification, or RSD.

Section 1: Findings for Ukrainian Beneficiaries of Temporary Protection

1.1 Perceptions of UNHCR and Partner Organizations

Familiarity with UNHCR and Partner Organizations

The level of familiarity with UNHCR varied among Ukrainian participants. Out of 20 FGD groups, only six (30%) had heard of the agency often and two (10%) very often. A significant proportion, ten groups (50%), had heard about the agency rarely, and two groups (10%) were hearing about it for the first time, including those benefiting from UNHCR programs. Some mentioned that their familiarity came from social media, or from the CBI cash assistance program.

In stark contrast, all Ukrainian FGD groups were familiar with UNHCR's partner organizations. The BRC was universally known, mentioned by every single group. Caritas was also widely recognized with 16 mentions (80%). Other partners were known to a lesser extent: FAR (7 mentions, 35%), NRG (5 mentions, 25%), the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (4 mentions, 20%), URSF (3 mentions, 15%), and CRWB (1 mention, 5%).

Comfort and Trust in Organizations

A large majority of participants (18 out of 20 groups, or 90%) expressed that they felt comfortable addressing their needs and concerns with UNHCR and its partners. In fact, seven of these groups shared positive experiences with the empathy and responsiveness of the partners' staff. Two groups, however, noted that while they were treated well by partner organizations, they did not receive the same level of treatment from state institutions and small businesses.

When asked about past experiences influencing their trust, six of the 20 groups (30%) offered no response, and many had no prior experience with the organizations before arriving in Bulgaria. However, four groups (20%) had a positive and long-standing familiarity with the work of organizations like UNHCR, UNICEF, the Red Cross, and Doctors without Borders from their time in Ukraine. They stated that receiving financial, humanitarian, and medical assistance from these organizations in Ukraine had built a strong foundation of trust. The data suggests that pre-arrival information about partners' activities could not only build trust but also significantly lower the costs and difficulty of accessing useful information upon initial settlement.

The perception of reliability and quality of services was overwhelmingly positive. Eighteen Ukrainian groups provided feedback, with responses falling into the "very good" (10 groups, 50%) or "good" (six groups, 30%) categories. Two groups did not respond, and only one group rated the services as "bad," while another rated them "neutral," though the participants in the latter group still expressed gratitude for the services they had received.

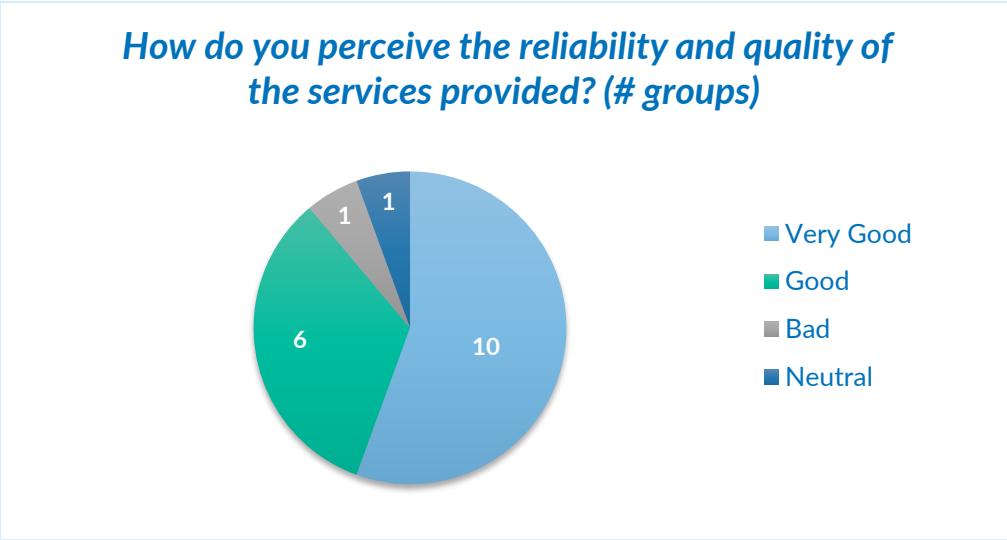

Figure 1. *Ukrainian focus groups' perception of reliability and quality of services.*

Access to Information and Communication

Challenges and Gaps

Many groups did not directly answer the question about challenges in accessing information. Thirty-five percent of groups mentioned they faced no such challenges, and 20 per cent did not provide an answer. For those who did, the main barriers cited were:

- **Information not being available:** Mentioned by five groups (25%).
- **Language barriers:** Mentioned by four groups (20%).
- **Digital literacy:** One group noted that not everyone is digitally savvy enough to access information online.

Participants expressed a strong desire for more information on several specific topics:

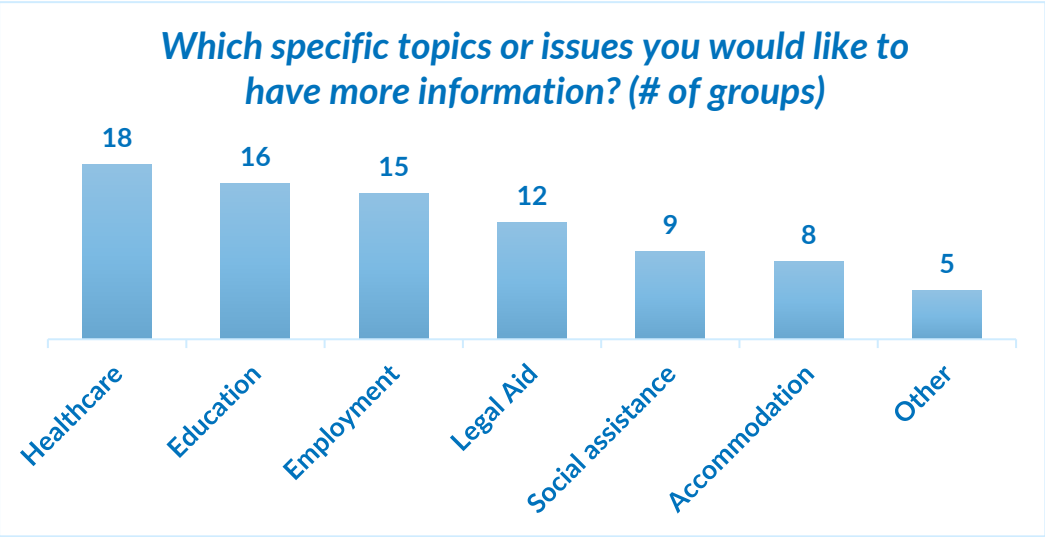

Figure 2. *Main topics of interest most frequently mentioned by Ukrainian focus groups.*

Other areas of specific interest included **WHO-funded medication and reimbursement, Bulgarian language courses, legalization of Ukrainian educational qualifications, and paths to Bulgarian citizenship and permanent residency**. Ukrainian pensioners noted a particular interest in these topics, as their homes had been destroyed, and they had nothing to return to. They also raised the challenge of finding employment due to age and the risk of losing state-funded accommodation if they were to start working.

"Please, just do not forget about us."

Ivan, Refugee from Ukraine

Effective Communication Channels

FGD findings highlight the **critical role of the internet and social media for information dissemination.** Up to 80 per cent of focus groups mentioned Viber as the most effective channel for receiving information from UNHCR and its partners, followed closely by Telegram. Facebook groups and WhatsApp were also mentioned but were far less popular, which mirrors the regional popularity of these apps. Community Centers were mentioned by 11 groups (55%), while SMS was mentioned by two (10%). Several participants also noted that they received information from other community members and preferred direct communication with UNHCR and its partners.

Suggestions to improve communication included a strong and consistent **preference for direct, personal methods like information sessions and visits from UNHCR staff.** The use of modern digital tools was also encouraged. However, a specific Compass website was deemed to have very low value. One focus group recommended that information on social media be double-checked for accuracy, while another suggested more frequent visits from mobile teams or the use of posters in state accommodations.

1.2 Compass Protection and Inclusion Centers

Familiarity and Utilization

Familiarity with Compass Centers was extremely high among participants. Only three individuals in one group had not heard of them. The majority learned about the centers through word of mouth from friends and acquaintances (50% of groups), the BRC (35%), and social media (30%). Six groups (30%) also mentioned learning about the centers from volunteers and social workers from other organizations like Caritas and Second Home in Plovdiv.

The vast majority of participants used the services provided by the Compass Centers, demonstrating high utilization. The most frequently mentioned services were:

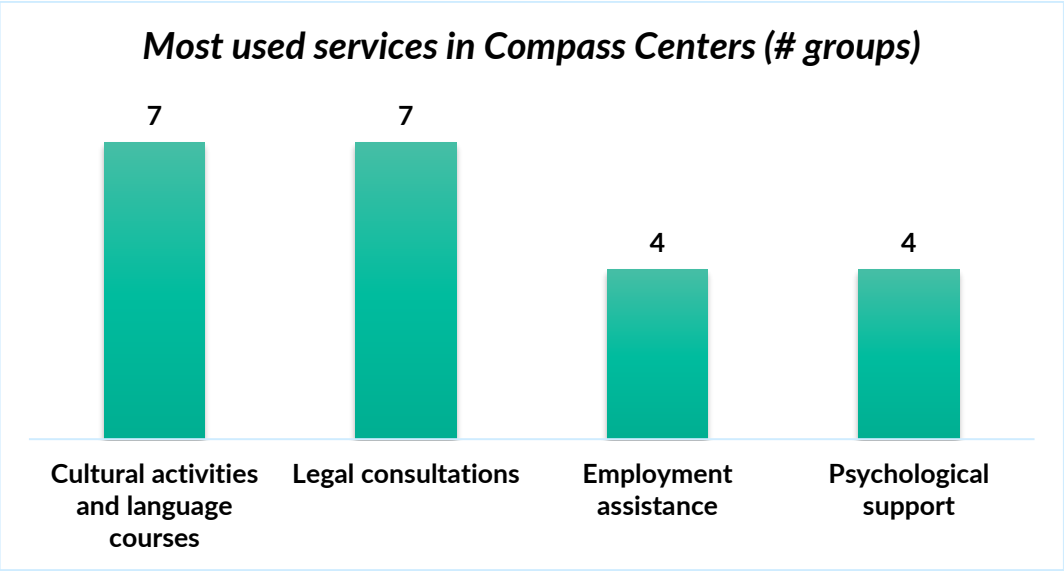

Figure 3. *The most used services in Compass Centers mentioned by Ukrainian focus groups.*

While utilization was high, several focus groups revealed that their knowledge of and experience with the centers was limited to their immediate location, indicating ***a lack of awareness of Compass as a broader network of centers.***

Service Quality, Satisfaction, and Suggestions

Overall, satisfaction with the quality of services was high, with 17 groups (85%) responding positively. They expressed gratitude and appreciation, highlighting the staff's friendliness, attentiveness, empathy, and competence.
Suggestions for new or improved services included:

- ✓ Medical assistance: Including medication reimbursement and help with disability documents.
- ✓ Cash and voucher assistance.
- ✓ Recognition of educational qualifications.
- ✓ Excursions within Bulgaria.
- ✓ Assistance with finding employment and professional training courses.
- ✓ Activities for children and mothers.
- ✓ A pensioner's club: Requested by a group in Ravda.
- ✓ Slower-paced language courses (two days a week, ideally in the evenings) and courses for children in kindergarten and teenagers not attending Bulgarian schools.

One group in Burgas requested improved facilities, noting the (previous) Compass Center was too small and that children's activity rooms needed renovation.

Challenges and Barriers to Access

While most participants were satisfied with the location and hours of the centers, **challenges were reported by a notable minority.** Eight groups stated they faced no barriers. However, the most prominent issue was transportation, cited by five groups. Three of these groups requested

that transportation costs be reimbursed. Other barriers included the physical size of the building (two groups), the distance to the center (two groups), long waiting times, and difficulties related to managing work and childcare. A specific group requested that centers operate on holidays and weekends to accommodate employed individuals. Another group requested mobile teams to visit people in neighboring villages and small towns, citing the needs of pensioners who are incapable of inter-city travel.

Section 2: Findings for Asylum-Seekers and Refugees

This section of the report details the findings from **FGDs with non-Ukrainian asylum-seekers and refugees, predominantly from Syria and Afghanistan.** The discussions focused on three key areas: family reunification, perceptions of UNHCR and its partners, and experiences with the asylum application process, including conditions in detention centers.

2.1 Family Reunification

Only non-Ukrainian groups were asked about family reunification, with responses from 16 out of 18 groups. Ten groups (63%) reported that they did not have all their direct family members with them, while seven groups (44%) had all family members present. Two groups consisting of detained individuals were not asked these questions.

Location and Procedures

Out of the 12 groups who provided details on their families' location, six said their families had remained in their home country. Two groups had family members in non-EU countries, while others had relatives in EU member states. Two groups were actively trying to bring their families to Bulgaria. One of these groups expressed a desire to begin the process but had received no information on the necessary steps.

This lack of information on family reunification procedures was a widespread issue. While 31 per cent of groups did not address their awareness of the process, 64 per cent of the 11 groups that did, had no knowledge of what the procedure entailed. Only three Syrian groups and one Afghan group were familiar with the process, and some had even used it. Most groups (56%) did not explain what "family reunification" meant to them, but those who did generally saw it as a way to bring all family members—including spouses, parents, and children—to Bulgaria. One group hoped to pursue reunification after gaining asylum status, while another felt it was not an option because their asylum applications had been rejected. One group described the process as "long and difficult."

"What is our situation now? Are we waiting for documents? Are we waiting for our families? They say it is safe now in Syria, and in Syria it is not safe"

Omar, Refugee from Syria

Application and Barriers

The response rate for questions about applying for family reunification was very low, with only three groups (19%) sharing their experiences. All three groups reported negative outcomes, specifically rejections. One person in a group was asked for significant sums of money to bring each of his family members but provided no further details.

Emotional Impact and Integration
A high number of groups (9 out of 16) did not answer questions about the emotional effects of family separation. Those who did, however, said they were significantly affected. Many felt that reunification would help their integration into Bulgarian society. Participants spoke of "emotional fatigue" and a sense of "helplessness." They had often spent significant resources to come to Bulgaria only to face rejected asylum applications and, in some cases, detention. Two groups wondered how they could return to a country they had fled and had nothing to return to. Another two groups questioned how the situation in Syria could be considered safe for everyone.

Two groups felt neutral about reunification, stating that they knew there were no channels for it, they couldn't afford to support arriving family members, or that their family members had died.

Registration and Support
Six of the 16 groups mentioned talking about their family members during their registration interview. However, one group said they had not, and nine groups did not respond to the question. Six groups offered suggestions for how UNHCR and partners could help with the emotional and social needs of separated families. They emphasized **the need for security and clear legal guidance** to address the uncertainty of their status and employment. **They also suggested mental health support, recreational and educational activities for children, and assistance for families voluntarily choosing to return to Syria**.

2.2 Perceptions of UNHCR and Partners

There was a **notable lack of familiarity with UNHCR among these groups**. Nine out of 15 groups reported only rarely hearing about UNHCR Bulgaria, and three groups said the FGD was the first time they had heard of the organization at all, including those assisted under UNHCR programs.

In contrast, 11 groups (69%) were familiar with UNHCR's partner organizations. The BRC was the most well-known, named by 10 of the 18 groups. Caritas came in second with seven mentions; two groups highlighted their comfort with Caritas staff, describing them as "kind, welcoming, and helpful with securing employment." The BHC and CRWB each received five mentions.

Communication and Feedback to UNHCR and its Partners
Most groups (78%) felt **comfortable communicating their needs to UNHCR and its partners,** with a few groups specifically highlighting their positive experiences with Caritas. Feedback was generally constructive and open, with 11 of 18 focus groups offering suggestions for improving communication.

Key Suggestions for Communication:

- **Direct communication:** The most common request (72% of groups) was for more frequent visits from UNHCR representatives and direct channels to receive information and answers to their questions.
- **Information materials:** Two groups recommended distributing leaflets and posters with information about available services and office locations.
- **Anonymous feedback:** One group requested an anonymous complaint box, which would allow them to share feedback without fear of negative consequences.

Preferred Communication Channels

Social media was the most effective way to communicate with participants. The majority of groups (59%) used WhatsApp, while others mentioned Facebook groups (29%), Viber (12%), and Telegram (12%). Two groups also noted the importance of **in-person communication and community centers.**

Service Quality and Gaps

Participants were most in need of information on topics essential for survival and long-term integration. The most requested topics were **employment, education, healthcare, legal aid, and accommodation.** Other needs included Bulgarian language courses, help with establishing legal addresses, and information on asylum application rejections and citizenship.

Of the 12 groups that commented on service quality, most rated it as "good" or "very good." Many participants expressed appreciation for the staff, especially the BRC for their help with navigating state institutions. However, there were some key areas of concern:

- **Lack of basic services**: Two groups highlighted their lack of access to schooling and healthcare, noting that the language barrier at hospitals made it difficult to receive adequate care.
- **Poor living conditions:** Detained individuals and new arrivals at reception centers complained about unsanitary conditions, including the presence of bedbugs and a lack of information about their rights.
- **Concerns over dignity:** Some groups expressed that the packaged food was unfamiliar and that receiving second-hand clothes from the BRC was an affront to their dignity. One group mentioned preferring food vouchers to food boxes offered by BRC.

Challenges and Service Gaps

Only nine groups (50%) addressed the challenges they faced in accessing services. Three groups cited a lack of information, and two mentioned language barriers. Two groups, consisting of detained individuals, noted that their confinement was the primary barrier. A Syrian group, whose asylum applications had been rejected, felt they were in a "prison" and had no knowledge of their rights or available services.

Trust and Participatory Processes

There was limited feedback on specific experiences that had built or eroded trust in the organizations. A few negative experiences were mentioned, such as a student feeling discouraged in a language course, and one group not receiving help from the CRWB. Conversely, another group shared that the CRWB had helped them the most.

Only six groups offered suggestions for improving participatory processes. The most common requests were for more frequent visits from UNHCR and its partners, increased follow-up on feedback, and more activities. One group again requested an anonymous complaint box.

Overall, the feedback from participants shows **a clear desire to be more engaged and have their specific needs addressed.** Many were also interested in long-term solutions, such as Bulgarian language courses offered after work hours and advice on obtaining citizenship, while others highlighted the financial and security challenges that they face in rebuilding their lives.

2.3 Compass Centers

Not all non-Ukrainian groups were asked about their familiarity with the Compass Protection and Inclusion Centers; specifically, the two detained groups were not included. Among those who were asked, the majority (13 focus groups) were not familiar with the centers. Of these groups, four requested additional services, such as assistance with the Bulgarian healthcare system and vocational courses. Only two groups were familiar with the centers. They had learned about them through Caritas and friends. One of these groups had successfully used the centers' services for official document translation, health insurance, and opening a bank account. The other group, while aware of the centers, requested additional services and information sessions in Arabic.

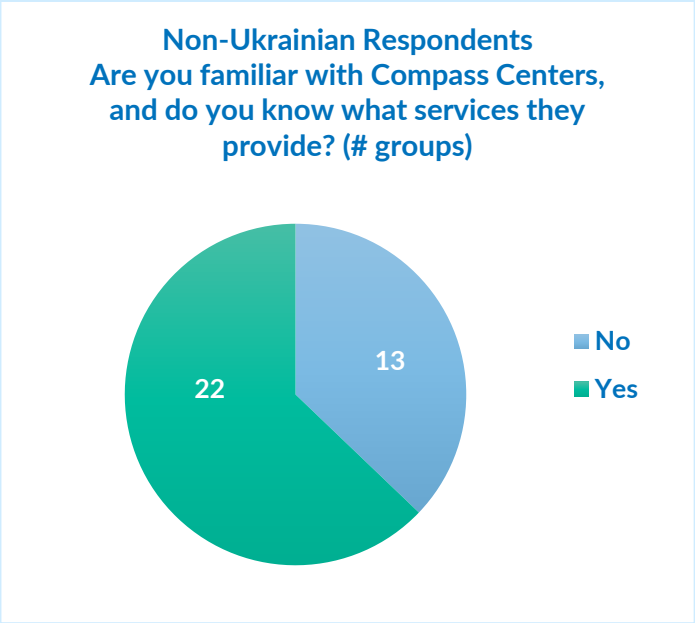

Figure 4. *Non-Ukrainian focus groups' familiarity with Compass Centers and their services.*

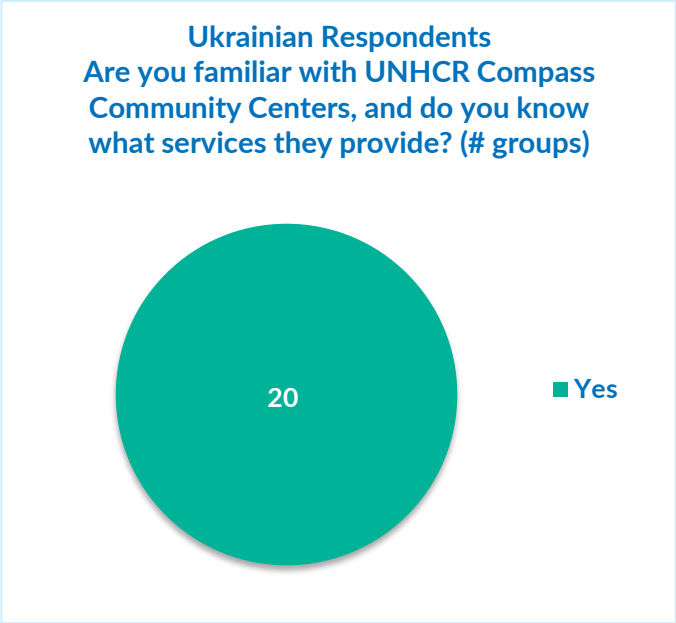

Figure 5. *Ukrainian focus groups' familiarity with Compass Centers and their services.*

2.4 Refugee Status Determination (RSD) Process

Thirteen groups shared their experiences with the asylum application process. Five had applied between three and six months prior, three more than a year prior, and four less than three months prior.

Application and Interview

Nine of the 13 groups reported no challenges during the application process, while one group mentioned the language barrier. Two groups found the process "easy," and one of these had received assistance from the BHC. One refugee noted that the 10-month wait for a decision caused significant anxiety. Eight groups had already had their asylum interviews, though details on the timing and location were scarce. Four groups reported that the interview protocol was not explained to them, and three felt the explanation they received was rushed. There was a mix of experiences regarding availability of same-sex interpreters, and while seven of the eight groups were satisfied with their interpreters, one felt the interview was rushed and the translation was inaccurate. Three groups had legal assistance from the BHC while the other four that answered this question did not. Despite the varied experiences, seven of the eight groups that had already had their interviews felt they had been able to freely present their accounts and all relevant details. Only one group shared a negative experience.

Post-Interview Experiences

Experiences after the interview varied widely, making it difficult to generalize. Seventeen per cent of the 12 groups who had already had interviews had not received a decision. Of the eight groups that had received a decision:

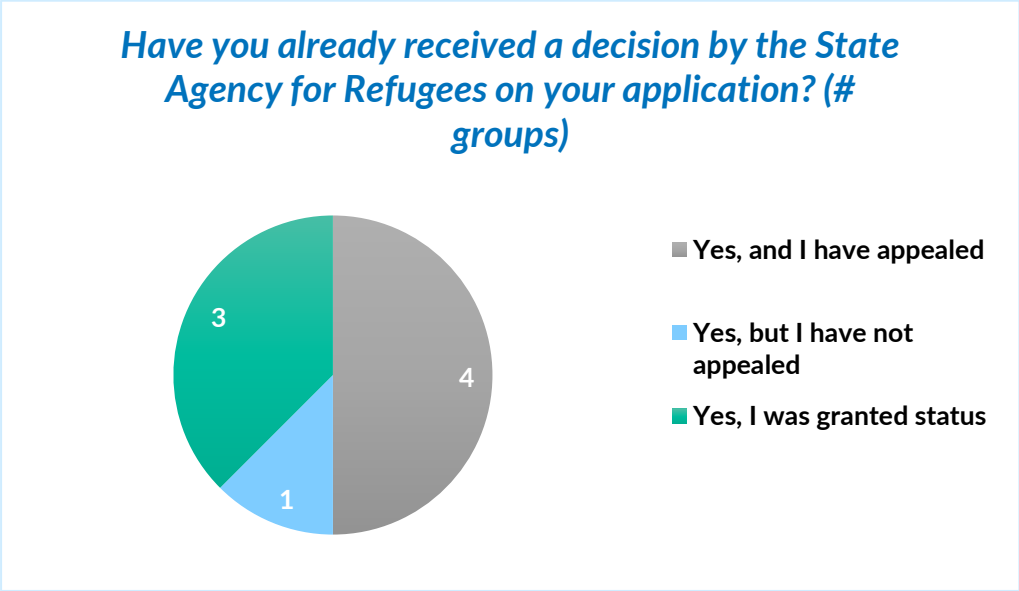

Figure 6. Status of asylum applications of non-Ukrainian participants.

This means that four groups were awaiting the outcome of their appeals. Three of these groups had received legal aid from the BHC.

"I would like to stay here. I do not want to go back to Syria. Maybe Syria is now a safe place for people who are already there, but not for those who are outside. Are they really returning Syrians from Bulgaria? If they return us, it will be worse."

Hala, Asylum-seeker from Syria

2.5 Conditions in Detention Centers

Two of the FGDs took place in detention centers, one with five women and one with seven men, all of whom had been detained for five days.

Accommodation and Hygiene
The women, who were held in a shared room, felt the conditions were "okay" and found the hygiene to be good. The men, however, were held in a room with over 30 people and complained of bedbugs and dirty sheets. While everyone had access to toilets and hygiene products, the men's bathroom was missing its door (repair underway).

Access and Communication
The women were allowed outside twice a day for fresh air, while the men had only been let out once in five days. Both groups had difficulty communicating with guards—the women relied on gestures and English, while the men relied solely on gestures. Both groups reported being treated well and received regular food and water. However, the men sometimes purchased their own food because they disliked what they received.

Services and Rights
Some respondents from women focus group who arrived recently shared that they had not been informed about their right to apply for asylum and did not know what asylum was. In contrast, the men shared that they had been informed during their registration interviews. Neither group knew what rights they had during the asylum procedure. They requested clarity on the process, and the women specifically asked why they were being held in detention. The men were able to make calls twice a week, while the women stated that they could only make one call per week. Neither group had access to the internet or a prayer room, though they were able to practice their religion freely.

"Don't I have the right as a refugee to be included in Bulgarian society? How can I be if there is no support for integration, such as employment and language? I have been here for two years, and I am not integrated at all. I do not want constant support, but we need support at the beginning to settle down."

Ahmad, Refugee from Syria

Section 3: Cross-Cutting and Comparative Analysis

Perceptions of UNHCR and Partner Organizations

- A consistent finding across all focus groups was **the discrepancy between participants' low familiarity with UNHCR as an agency and their positive perception of its partners and the broader humanitarian response.** This is unsurprising, given that UNHCR Bulgaria primarily delivers services and assistance through partners, while its direct implementation focuses mainly on advocacy, policy, and capacity support for state and partner organizations. These findings suggest that UNHCR and its partners can improve their visibility and direct interaction with forcibly displaced people.
- Findings from the focus groups suggest that **trust is earned at the local, on-the-ground level through consistent, empathetic, and reliable service delivery.** By delivering on the promise of tangible support via a trusted local network, the overall system earns credibility and goodwill, even if refugees are not fully aware of the organization coordinating the effort.
- The level of awareness of UNHCR is similarly low for both non-Ukrainian and Ukrainian refugees. When it comes to UNHCR's partners, however, a significant difference exists: 100 per cent of Ukrainian refugees are aware of them, while only 61 per cent of non-Ukrainian refugees and asylum-seekers are. This **persistent communication gap is primarily due to a general lack of information and language difficulties**. These challenges are particularly pronounced for individuals in detention centers, where access to information and the internet is often limited or non-existent.
- The analysis of findings from both groups speaks to the importance of human dignity in aid delivery. This is highlighted by some beneficiaries' aversion to second-hand clothes or the way they are delivered, and the frustration with being treated differently by state institutions. This suggests that **a successful protection and integration response must address not only basic needs but also the psychological and social well-being of the beneficiaries.**

Communication and Information Needs

- **The analysis of communication preferences for all groups reveals a sophisticated and nuanced digital landscape.** While a significant majority of groups identified social media applications as the most effective channel for receiving information, several groups expressed a strong preference for direct, personal communication methods, such as information sessions, mobile team visits, and traditional print materials. This indicates that a one-size-fits-all digital strategy would fail to reach a significant portion of the population, particularly older persons, detainees without access to the mobile phone, those who had limited educational opportunities, including in their mother tongue, or those without reliable internet access.
- To ensure equitable access to information, **a hybrid communication model is necessary. It must leverage the high reach of popular platforms like Viber and Telegram for broad dissemination of critical updates, while simultaneously maintaining and expanding in-person channels.** This includes providing regular in-person briefings, disseminating informational material, and ensuring mobile teams visit remote areas and those in detention or closed centers amounting to detention.

- Ukrainian refugees overwhelmingly rely on Viber and Telegram, reflecting their regional digital habits, while non-Ukrainians primarily use WhatsApp and Facebook. This highlights **the necessity of a segmented and tailored communication strategy that is sensitive to these distinct digital landscapes.**
- **Furthermore, while both populations express high satisfaction with services, the underlying mechanism of trust differs.** For Ukrainians, trust is built on personal network as well as a high-functioning, visible partner network that provides tangible, on-the-ground services. For other groups, trust is often built from a starting point of zero awareness and must be earned through positive, in-person interactions in a context of profound vulnerability and uncertainty. However, high rejection rates and deteriorating reception conditions are compelling many asylum seekers, such as those from Afghanistan, to abscond from reception centers. Reaching these groups now requires innovative new methods.

Many non-Ukrainians arrive without pre-existing knowledge of the system and their initial contact with it occurs in high-stress, information-scarce environments. This creates a vicious cycle where a lack of information prevents them from building awareness of available services, which in turn hinders them from seeking the very resources they desperately need. Addressing this requires a robust, multi-channel communication strategy targeting new arrivals immediately, using both printed, multilingual materials and in-person briefings to establish a foundation of trust and awareness.

Engagement with Compass Centers

- **The Compass Centers are a cornerstone of the humanitarian response for Ukrainian beneficiaries, enjoying very high familiarity and utilization among the focus group participants**. The most common way participants learned about these centers was through word-of-mouth, with 50% of the groups hearing about them from friends and acquaintances who had already used the services. This reliance on community networks and personal recommendations underscores the power of social capital and peer-to-peer information sharing within the Ukrainian population group.
- While Ukrainian participants were overwhelmingly satisfied with the quality of services and the attitudes of the staff, they also highlighted logistical and structural challenges. Several groups mentioned the distance to the centers and the prohibitive cost of transportation as significant barriers, particularly for those living in smaller towns like Ravda and Primorsko. Others suggested that the centers' opening hours did not align with the needs of employed individuals. These observations indicate **a "last-mile" problem: while the services are effective, their physical and temporal accessibility remains a challenge for the most vulnerable or for those who are already trying to establish a livelihood.** The solution is not necessarily to build more centers but to increase their reach through mobile teams and by piloting extended hours, which would ensure that all members of the community can benefit from the support offered.
- There is a striking contrast in the experiences of non-Ukrainian refugees and asylum-seekers. **Most of the focus groups were not familiar with the Compass Centers**, which shows a clear need to raise awareness and encourage these groups to use the support

available to them, and to ensure that the staff in the centers have the necessary background and knowledge, including linguistic, to provide quality services to them as well.

- Finally, **the power of community networks is a common thread.** For Ukrainians, word-of-mouth was the most common source of information about the Compass Centers, while for non-Ukrainians, community members were often the only source of information on legal processes. This highlights a powerful opportunity to empower community leaders and networks as official partners in information dissemination.

Unique Vulnerabilities and Challenges

- FGDs reveal several specific vulnerabilities that underscore the need for a more nuanced, targeted protection and integration response. A particularly poignant finding relates to **Ukrainian pensioners,** many of whom noted that their homes had been destroyed and expressed a desire for permanent residency or citizenship in Bulgaria. However, they face a significant structural disincentive to seeking employment, as their age is a deterrent for employers and taking a job could result in the loss of their state-funded accommodation. This creates **a policy-level "catch-22"** where seeking economic self-sufficiency is penalized by the system designed to support them.
- Other individual cases highlight the limitations of existing programs. A single mother, for instance, mentioned falling outside a cash assistance program's scope despite her clear need for assistance, while a parent spoke of a perception of discrimination when their request for child benefits from Agency for Social Assistance was rejected, a common experience among Ukrainian beneficiaries of temporary protection. These cases, while not universal, reveal that a broad-based protection response, however effective at a macro level, may not be agile enough to address the complex, multi-layered challenges of specific subgroups. This suggests **the need for policy-level advocacy and the development of specialized programs tailored to the unique needs of vulnerable populations.**

Navigating Family Reunification

- For non-Ukrainian asylum seekers, the issue of family reunification is not a logistical challenge but a primary source of profound psychological and emotional distress. The focus groups identified a pervasive lack of information, with 64 per cent of groups that discussed the topic reporting they had no knowledge of the reunification process. A few groups that responded to questions about the emotional impact of family separation shared feelings of emotional fatigue and helplessness. The psychological toll of family separation is not merely a consequence of physical distance but is continuously exacerbated by the prolonged, opaque legal and asylum processes.
- The data strongly indicates that **providing legal clarity and proactive, consistent communication about reunification procedures is not just a technical service but a critical intervention for the mental and emotional health of this population.** Family reunification is also crucial for **building trust with authorities** and the **rule of law**.

Furthermore, it is essential for the **successful adaptation and integration** of families and for promoting **social cohesion.**

Experiences with the Refugee Status Determination (RSD) Process

- **The RSD process is widely perceived by many participants as an opaque, anxiety-inducing procedure where their agency is diminished.** Half of the groups who had asylum interviews reported the procedure was not explained to them, and others felt the explanation was rushed and incomplete. This lack of clarity, coupled with a high rate of rejections —50 per cent of the eight groups that had received a decision—suggests a significant level of dissatisfaction and a lack of trust in the initial process. The situation is compounded by the fact that only a few groups reported having legal representation during their interviews. To restore a sense of fairness and dignity, the RSD process must be demystified. This could be achieved by providing comprehensive, pre-interview briefings, ensuring access to quality legal representation, and making the reasoning behind decisions transparent.

Section 4: Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings from these FGDs with refugees, asylum-seekers, and beneficiaries of temporary protection in Bulgaria reveal a complex landscape of successes, challenges, opportunities and critical needs. While many participants expressed gratitude and satisfaction with the support provided by UNHCR and its partners, their testimonies also highlight **significant gaps in service delivery, communication, and overall well-being.**

The FGD findings identify several **key areas proposed by refugees and asylum-seekers** for improvement to enhance the protection, support, and integration of these communities:

Increasing Footprint and Strengthening Communication

- **Enhancing Footprint:** A more robust on-the-ground presence for UNHCR and its partners is needed, while noting decreasing resources to do so. The desire for more direct and frequent contact is a recurring theme across all focus groups. Despite limited resources, increasing the frequency of mobile team visits to smaller towns and detention centers can help build trust and ensure equitable access to information and services.
- **Community-based Approach:** The power of existing community networks should be formalized. Empowering trusted community members as outreach volunteers can create a reliable cascade of information and feedback that supplements official communication channels.
- **Strengthened Communication:** A targeted communication strategy is essential to address the distinct needs and digital habits of each population. For **Ukrainian beneficiaries**, this means leveraging the high reach of platforms like **Viber** and **Telegram** for mass dissemination while also maintaining in-person and print channels for those who are digitally excluded. For **non-Ukrainian asylum seekers**, using platforms such as

WhatsApp and **Facebook** can help reach more people, while a greater emphasis on direct, in-person contact is crucial for building trust.

Enhancing Service Delivery and Accessibility

While participants are largely satisfied with the quality of services, there are clear opportunities for improvement and expansion.

- **Expand Critical Services:** The Compass Centers are highly utilized, increasingly also by non-Ukrainian refugees, particularly where staff speak the languages of the beneficiaries. Notwithstanding, there is a high demand for information and assistance with fundamental needs for long term integration, such as **healthcare, employment, education, accommodation and legal aid.** Participants recommended expanding services related to medical assistance, professional training, more advanced language classes, and dedicated support for the legalization of educational qualifications and securing long-term employment.
- **Improve Physical Accessibility:** Transportation costs and the distance to community centers remain significant barriers particularly for those living in locations outside of the main cities where Compass Centers are located. Addressing logistical barriers, such as expanding the reach of mobile services, piloting weekend or evening hours and exploring transportation reimbursement programs, would further enhance their accessibility. For centers with physical space constraints, like the one in Burgas, renovations or relocation could improve the quality of service.
- **Address Specific Needs of Vulnerable Groups:** The challenges faced by pensioners, individuals with disabilities, and families with young children highlight the need for specialized services. Among the requests made by the participants are a pensioners' club, activities for children and mothers, and support for navigating a medical system.

Legal and Procedural Support

- **Improved Information Access:** To improve legal and procedural support for non-Ukrainians, it is crucial to demystify the Refugee Status Determination and family reunification processes. This can be achieved by providing clear, multilingual briefings before all legal procedures and ensuring access to robust legal representation. Offering proactive, consistent communication about the status of their applications can also help alleviate the profound emotional distress caused by bureaucratic uncertainty. The EU Asylum Agency's support to the State Agency for Refugees to establish and improve such services provides a solid basis to do so.

Addressing Emotional and Legal Uncertainty

The emotional toll of family separation and legal uncertainty is immense. Many asylum-seekers described feeling helpless and anxious, with rejected asylum applications and detention adding to their distress.

- **Provide Timely and Clear Legal Guidance:** The lack of information about asylum and family reunification procedures is a significant source of anxiety. Clear communication of rights, procedures, and timelines is essential. Legal aid from organizations like the BHC is highly valued and should be expanded.

- **Address Emotional and Social Needs:** Providing mental health support, as well as recreational and educational opportunities, can help separated families cope. For those in detention, improving living conditions and providing access to information and legal counsel are critical first steps toward upholding their dignity and rights.

In conclusion, the Participatory Assessment revealed distinct experiences and needs among Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian refugee and asylum-seeker populations, underscoring the necessity of two separate, robust strategies. The findings highlight that trust is built through direct, empathetic, and tangible service delivery, and that leveraging community networks is crucial for effective communication and outreach. These insights must directly inform future policy and program design, ensuring that initiatives are more responsive to the lived experiences and expressed needs of refugees and asylum-seekers in Bulgaria.

By listening to and acting on this feedback, UNHCR and its partners can advocate for and support the Government of Bulgaria to improve reception conditions, asylum procedures, and foster better integration. These findings can also help all involved stakeholders recalibrate their programs and innovate to mitigate protection gaps and risks amid an environment of legal and financial uncertainties.