

PROTECTION BRIEF II SLOVAKIA

November 2022 – June 2023

Operational Context & Analysis

During the period covered by this Protection Brief II (November 2022 – June 2023), 592,760 individuals crossed the border from Ukraine to Slovakia, bringing the total to nearly 1.5 million since the start of the armed conflict in February 2022. By 30 June 2023, 111,822 refugees fleeing Ukraine held Temporary Protection status in Slovakia.

The Government of Slovakia has continued responding with generosity and solidarity to its largest-ever refugee influx. The initial emergency situation in 2022 has evolved in 2023 toward a situation increasingly characterized by the importance of inclusion of refugees in the national and local public services and, more generally, their socioeconomic inclusion into the host society in Slovakia. This period, detailed in this Protection Brief II, has witnessed both progress and challenges.

UNHCR, through Protection Profiling and Monitoring,¹ Area-Based Assessment,² and focus group discussions with refugees,³ has continually monitored their situation and needs. This Protection Brief II consolidates and analyzes findings related to access to healthcare, employment, and education, complemented by other data sources. It also outlines UNHCR and its partners' response, supporting the Government of Slovakia in addressing the gaps and challenges. Finally, it offers recommendations to strengthen refugees' access to rights and inclusion possibilities.

Key Trends & Figures⁴

 **75%**

of respondents have completed higher education or university

 **2%**

of surveyed households indicated having children who are separated from both parents

 **46%**

of households with school-aged children (5-17) reported at least one child not enrolled in Slovak school

 **61%**

of respondents were employed or self-employed before leaving Ukraine

 **15%**

of surveyed households indicated having at least one family member with specific needs (disability, serious medical condition...)

 **22%**

of respondents in need of healthcare experienced difficulties accessing the healthcare system

 **42%**

of respondents were economically active while in Slovakia

¹ UNHCR, [Regional Protection Profiling and Monitoring: Protection Risks and Needs of Refugees from Ukraine](#); 3,859 Protection Profiling and Monitoring interviews (covering 7,941 household members) were conducted between November 2022 and June 2023. Due to methodological limitations, the results cannot necessarily be extrapolated to the whole population of refugees from Ukraine in Slovakia and are only indicative of their situation.

² UNHCR, REACH (2023), [Area Based Assessment Slovakia: February 2023](#).

³ UNHCR (2023), [Analysis of Focus Group Discussions with Refugees on Social Protection and Cash Assistance: July 2023](#); UNHCR (2023), Analysis of Focus Group Discussions with Refugees in Slovakia: June 2022 – June 2023 [Manuscript in preparation].

⁴ UNHCR, [Regional Protection Profiling and Monitoring: Protection Risks and Needs of Refugees from Ukraine](#).

Protection Concerns

Access to Healthcare

Starting on 1 January 2023, the Government of Slovakia expanded the healthcare coverage for refugee children from “urgent and necessary” to full care.⁵ This included the alignment of reimbursement amounts paid by the public health insurance company to doctors for attending refugee children with the amounts received for attending Slovak children, addressing this previous disincentive for healthcare providers. This expansion represented an important positive step on the longer road toward guaranteeing the right to health of refugees in Slovakia. Additionally, the Government also took commendable steps to simplify the foreign diploma recognition procedure, notably for pediatricians, resulting in the employment of 30 pediatricians from Ukraine by the end of June 2023,⁶ along with nurses.⁷ These measures bolster healthcare system capacities in Slovakia, benefiting both the refugee and Slovak communities.

At the same time, for the general refugee population, healthcare access remained challenging. According to Protection Profiling and Monitoring, 22% of respondents in need of healthcare experienced difficulties accessing the system in Slovakia, with multiple reasons including long waits (56%), affordability (44%), denial of access (29%), language barrier (28%), and unavailability of care (23%). Healthcare was listed as one of the most urgent needs by the respondents and 33% indicated they would need more information on healthcare in Slovakia.⁸ Additionally, 49% of respondents in the Area-Based Assessment lacked or were uncertain about having a general practitioner nearby and 54% were unaware of mental health and psychosocial support services in their area.⁹ In focus group discussions, refugees highlighted saturation of the healthcare system, lack of specialists, high costs, and long waiting times.¹⁰ UNHCR noted with concern that some refugees were forced to make temporary visits to Ukraine to access healthcare due to these challenges. According to the Intentions Survey, 19% of the refugees who temporarily visited Ukraine did so due to healthcare needs.¹¹

A particular matter of attention was access to sexual and reproductive health services in Slovakia. According to specific research “Care in Crisis: Failures to Guarantee the Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights of Refugees from Ukraine in Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia”,¹² temporary visits to Ukraine for these services were common, and refugee women often delayed seeking this time-sensitive medical attention due to access difficulties. The study reports that entire hospitals, especially in Eastern Slovakia, sometimes refuse to provide legal abortion services, resulting in long travel distances and delays. Also, concerns were raised about Roma refugee women from Ukraine facing intersectional discrimination, resulting in more frequent denial of free healthcare or discriminatory attitudes. Additionally, the lack of specialized care for the LGBTIQ+ community, including trans men and women, led LGBTIQ+ refugees to seek care in other European Union (EU) countries.¹³

In response, UNHCR collaborated with partners, including at Blue Dots, to support refugees with access to healthcare through counseling, interpretation services, and further referrals to specialized support. In June 2023, UNHCR engaged in a partnership with local NGOs with expertise in gender-based violence (GBV) to advance and facilitate access to GBV and health services for GBV survivors, along with a helpline for safely obtaining information and referrals to specialized GBV services. Furthermore, in

⁵ Ministry of Health of Slovak Republic, [Určenie rozsahu potrebnej zdravotnej starostlivosti](#); UNHCR welcomes that after the period covered by this Protection Brief (November 2022 – June 2023), as of September 2023, the Government of Slovakia expanded the full healthcare coverage, with the exception of spa treatment, also to adult refugees with Temporary Protection status.

⁶ The News Agency of the Slovak Republic (2023), [Na Slovensku bude pôsobiť 30 pediatrov z Ukrajiny](#).

⁷ The News Agency of the Slovak Republic (2023), [MZ SR: Uznávanie vzdelania ukrajinských sestier sa zjednodušuje](#).

⁸ UNHCR, [Regional Protection Profiling and Monitoring: Protection Risks and Needs of Refugees from Ukraine](#).

⁹ UNHCR, REACH (2023), [Area Based Assessment Slovakia: February 2023](#).

¹⁰ UNHCR, REACH (2023), [Area Based Assessment Slovakia: February 2023](#); UNHCR (2023), Analysis of Focus Group Discussions with Refugees in Slovakia: June 2022 – June 2023 [Manuscript in preparation].

¹¹ UNHCR, [Regional Intentions Survey Results \(3rd & 4th Round\): Intentions and Perspectives of Refugees from Ukraine](#).

¹² Center for Reproductive Rights et al. (2023), [Care in Crisis: Failures to Guarantee the Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights of Refugees from Ukraine in Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia](#).

¹³ Center for Reproductive Rights et al. (2023), [Care in Crisis: Failures to Guarantee the Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights of Refugees from Ukraine in Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia](#).

support of the Slovak Government, UNHCR in collaboration with UNICEF launched the Cash Assistance Programme to support vulnerable refugees, including persons with disabilities, persons with serious medical conditions, or older persons who often faced heightened protection risks, as well as increased medical needs and costs. From its launch on 24 April till the end of June 2023, 6,618 persons received this financial support, and the Programme continued thereafter.

Access to Employment

Ensuring fair and equal access to dignified work is essential for the successful socioeconomic inclusion of refugees in the host society. It is commendable that refugees gain an immediate right to be employed as they obtain Temporary Protection status in Slovakia.¹⁴ According to the Protection Profiling and Monitoring respondents in Slovakia, 42% reported being economically active,¹⁵ while 30% were unemployed at the time of the interview. Key reasons for unemployment included language barrier (42%), lack of employment opportunities (22%), lack of childcare (5%), and challenges related to education recognition (4%).¹⁶ Language barrier was consistently identified as the main obstacle to finding employment, with additional challenges including skills mismatch, health-related reasons,¹⁷ or the temporary nature of the Temporary Protection status *vis a vis* the requirement for longer-term commitment to certain jobs. The urgency of employment as a need was emphasized by 45% of respondents, and 41% expressed a need for more information on job opportunities in Slovakia.¹⁸ Focus group discussions highlighted refugees' strong desire for self-reliance and determination not to rely solely on financial assistance.¹⁹

“Giving cash is a basic type of support, but if you give the chance to someone to work, it will help the person to improve and be productive. All [refugees] here are educated and have experience.”

Refugee in Opatovská Nová Ves²⁰

Some employment sectors, especially healthcare and education, posed obstacles for refugee professionals due to non-acceptance of Ukrainian qualifications, requiring expensive and complex diploma recognition processes.²¹ Notably, earlier data suggested that many refugees have background precisely in occupational sectors that are highly demanded in Slovakia, including education (17%) and healthcare (10%),²² which nevertheless require burdensome qualification recognition. Despite the high level of education (75% with higher education or university degrees) and previous economic activity (61% were employed or self-employed before leaving Ukraine) of the refugee population in Slovakia,²³ many were employed in lower-skilled jobs with strenuous working conditions and decreased salaries since they arrived in Slovakia, resulting in increased economic vulnerability.²⁴ During focus group discussions, many refugees expressed struggles in covering basic needs, including expenses for children, school supplies, transportation, and medical costs.²⁵

Besides the accessibility of adequate employment, addressing different disadvantaging and discriminatory practices in employment – some of which may amount to labor exploitation – is imperative. Concerns include working without contracts, receiving lower pay than Slovak nationals for the same work, not being paid the agreed wages, delays in payment, and long working hours.²⁶ Women, in particular, face challenges combating not only the wage gap between refugees and Slovak nationals but also additional gender-based wage disparities.

¹⁴ Refugees with Temporary Protection status in Slovakia currently cannot engage in self-employment.

¹⁵ 31% were employed in Slovakia, while 10% were employed remotely, and 1% self-employed.

¹⁶ UNHCR, [Regional Protection Profiling and Monitoring: Protection Risks and Needs of Refugees from Ukraine](#).

¹⁷ UNHCR, REACH (2023), [Area Based Assessment Slovakia: February 2023](#).

¹⁸ UNHCR, [Regional Protection Profiling and Monitoring: Protection Risks and Needs of Refugees from Ukraine](#).

¹⁹ UNHCR (2023), [Analysis of Focus Group Discussions with Refugees on Social Protection and Cash Assistance: July 2023](#).

²⁰ UNHCR (2023), [Analysis of Focus Group Discussions with Refugees on Social Protection and Cash Assistance: July 2023](#), p. 8.

²¹ UNHCR, REACH (2023), [Area Based Assessment Slovakia: February 2023](#); UNHCR (2023), [Analysis of Focus Group Discussions with Refugees on Social Protection and Cash Assistance: July 2023](#).

²² UNHCR Slovakia (2022), [Slovakia Protection Profiling & Monitoring: Profiles, Needs & Intentions of Refugees from Ukraine – October 2022](#).

²³ UNHCR, [Regional Protection Profiling and Monitoring: Protection Risks and Needs of Refugees from Ukraine](#).

²⁴ UNHCR, REACH (2023), [Area Based Assessment Slovakia: February 2023](#).

²⁵ UNHCR (2023), [Analysis of Focus Group Discussions with Refugees on Social Protection and Cash Assistance: July 2023](#), p. 8.

²⁶ UNHCR (2023), [Analysis of Focus Group Discussions with Refugees in Slovakia: June 2022 – June 2023](#) [Manuscript in preparation].

In response, UNHCR collaborated with partners, including at Blue Dots, to support refugees' access to dignified employment through information provision, job counseling, assistance with CV preparation, language courses, vocational training, and legal aid. Additionally, in support of the Slovak Government, UNHCR in collaboration with UNICEF provided cash assistance to 40,946 vulnerable refugees between November 2022 and June 2023, minimizing protection risks and negative coping mechanisms, and supporting them to meet their basic needs including those related to winter.

Access to Education

In forced displacement contexts, education often provides children with a sense of stability and normalcy and protects them from major risks such as child labor and sexual exploitation. In Slovakia, refugee children, including those with Temporary Protection, have access to free education. At the same time, the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic (hereinafter “Ministry of Education”) does not consider school attendance compulsory for refugee children with Temporary Protection,²⁷ which has been strongly impacting their enrollment. The main reasons reported through Protection Profiling and Monitoring included a preference for online education in Ukrainian schools (67%), a lack of space in Slovak schools (13%), and language barrier (10%). Additionally, 54% of respondents with infants (0-4) could not access childcare services in Slovakia. The urgency of education as a need was emphasized by 21% of respondents, and 18% expressed a need for more information on education in Slovakia.²⁸

Focus group discussions revealed varied educational approaches of refugee parents and students, with some children attending only online Ukrainian education, some only Slovak in-person education, and some attending both simultaneously. UNHCR noted with concern that children attending only Ukrainian education often lacked necessary equipment to follow the online curriculum and lacked social interactions, while following both education systems simultaneously proved to be very burdensome for the children and their parents.²⁹

UNESCO analyzed different measures in Slovakia to improve access to the national education system for refugee children in Slovakia.³⁰ While the School and Education Act mandates Slovak language classes for non-national students to address the language barrier, a public survey indicated that only 54% and 31% of schools organized these classes in the academic years 2021/22 and 2022/23, respectively.³¹ The Ministry of Education also provides a one-off payment of 200 euros per student with Temporary Protection to cover school supplies and some other expenses. In general, 62% of institutions considered the overall support they received to provide education to refugee students as sufficient.³² Additionally, schools can increase classroom capacities by three students to accommodate refugee students from Ukraine, provided safety conditions are maintained. Guidance from the Ministry obliges directors to place refugee children with Temporary Protection in their schools, with exceptions made only when regional health authorities reject capacity increase.³³

Despite these measures, many schools faced capacity constraints, with 19% of surveyed schools unable to accept refugee applicants, rising to 52% in the Bratislava region.³⁴ Lack of capacities was far more common in urban areas, while in remote areas challenges were faced in terms of transportation to school, as children often had to commute longer distances. Notably, some refugees struggled to find appropriate or inclusive schools for children with disabilities.³⁵ Only 11% of surveyed schools arranged for teaching assistants and 26% would need special pedagogical support (for children with specific needs) in Ukrainian language.³⁶ Finally, concerns were also raised about bullying of refugee children in Slovak schools.³⁷

²⁷ Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic (2022), [Najčastejšie otázky a odpovede v súvislosti so situáciou na Ukrajine z pohľadu školstva](#).

²⁸ UNHCR, [Regional Protection Profiling and Monitoring: Protection Risks and Needs of Refugees from Ukraine](#).

²⁹ UNHCR (2023), Analysis of Focus Group Discussions with Refugees in Slovakia: June 2022 – June 2023 [Manuscript in preparation].

³⁰ UNESCO, [Slovakia's education responses to the influx of Ukrainian refugees](#).

³¹ Public School Inspectorate (2023), [Stav vzdelávania žiakov – odídencom z Ukrajiny: 1. časť – priebežná správa](#).

³² Public School Inspectorate (2023), [Stav vzdelávania žiakov – odídencom z Ukrajiny: 1. časť – priebežná správa](#).

³³ Ministry of Education of Slovak Republic (2022), [Najčastejšie otázky a odpovede v súvislosti so situáciou na Ukrajine z pohľadu školstva](#).

³⁴ Public School Inspectorate (2023), [Stav vzdelávania žiakov – odídencom z Ukrajiny: 1. časť – priebežná správa](#).

³⁵ UNHCR (2023), Analysis of Focus Group Discussions with Refugees in Slovakia: June 2022 – June 2023 [Manuscript in preparation].

³⁶ Public School Inspectorate (2023), [Stav vzdelávania žiakov – odídencom z Ukrajiny: 1. časť – priebežná správa](#).

³⁷ UNHCR, REACH (2023), [Area Based Assessment Slovakia: February 2023](#); UNHCR (2023), Analysis of Focus Group Discussions with Refugees in Slovakia: June 2022 – June 2023 [Manuscript in preparation].

In response, UNHCR collaborated with partners, including at Blue Dots, to support refugees' access to education through information provision, counseling, assistance with placing children in Slovak schools and childcare facilities, support for families with children with specific needs or those suffering from bullying. UNHCR also strengthened its relationship with the Slovak Ministry of Education in key areas such as information and data sharing and advocated for the implementation of measures aiming at increasing national school capacities and providing targeted support to refugee students.

Refugee students have the right to access higher education in Slovakia, but challenges related to knowledge of the Slovak language and socioeconomic inclusion may pose practical barriers, preventing students from enrolling in Slovak universities. UNHCR provided DAFI scholarships to 8 students enrolled in undergraduate study programmes in Slovak universities (Bratislava, Nitra and Košice) for the 2022/23 academic year, supporting them to cover basic expenses such as accommodation, food, local transportation and study materials.

Calls to Action

UNHCR welcomes the ongoing generosity of the Slovak Government and society in responding to the needs of refugees fleeing Ukraine, and the example this sets internationally and within the EU. Even with this commitment and favorable protection environment, some challenges persist. The Slovak Government's openness to proactive engagement with UN agencies and civil society has made it possible to identify and address gaps in national systems, which also exist in other EU countries hosting refugees from Ukraine. In this sense, UNHCR formulates recommendations to the Government of Slovakia, with a view to strengthen refugees' access to rights and inclusion in the areas covered in this Protection Brief II.

Recommendations: Access to Healthcare

UNHCR recommends to the Government of Slovakia to:

- Facilitate practical admission of refugees with Temporary Protection by healthcare practitioners regardless of the "tolerated stay" type of residence that comes with their legal status.
- Strengthen information flow to healthcare practitioners and the public health insurance company and ensure that they are fully aware of refugees' healthcare entitlements.
- Secure publicly provided interpreters when requested by healthcare practitioners.

Recommendations: Access to Employment

UNHCR recommends to the Government of Slovakia to:

- Allow for self-employment of refugees with Temporary Protection status, in line with the EU Temporary Protection Directive and practice in different EU countries.
- Strengthen Slovak language courses through the Offices of Labor, Social Affairs, and Family, extending duration and bolstering specialized courses for professional areas like healthcare, education, economics, law, social work, etc.
- Further alleviate administrative, additional educational, and financial burdens related to foreign qualification recognition, in particular facilitating recognition of foreign diplomas for regulated professions, and actively incorporate refugee professionals into sectors with labor shortages in Slovakia.

Recommendations: Access to Education

UNHCR recommends to the Government of Slovakia to:

- Introduce necessary changes aiming at making school attendance explicitly compulsory for refugee children with Temporary Protection status in Slovakia.

- Increase school and childcare capacities to enable them absorb refugee students, or alternatively support transportation for those unable to enroll in nearby institutions alleviating capacity constraints in urban areas.
- Ensure sufficient Slovak language support classes at schools with refugee students.
- Implement national programmes that address the specific needs of refugee students, tackle discrimination in the school environment, help with adaptation to the new system, and support catching up on missed learning (e.g. preparatory classes, bridging programmes, anti-bullying programmes, etc.).
- Recruit additional teachers, teaching assistants, special-pedagogical assistants, and mental health professionals, including from the refugee communities, to enhance targeted support to refugee learners in schools.
- Organize accredited trainings for teachers and educational staff on issues related to the practical inclusion of refugee learners in the educational process and host community.



For more information:

Richard Koyš | Senior Protection Associate | koys@unhcr.org

Carmen García | Associate Information Management Officer | garcicar@unhcr.org

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Previous publications

Slovakia Protection Brief I

