Bulgaria

January 2024

UNHCR has supported the government to provide essential aid and protection services as **2.2 million refugees from Ukraine** transited through Bulgaria since the start of the full-scale war.

UNHCR has expanded its support to **tens of thousands of refugees from Ukraine**, with assistance and protection, and facilitating their socioeconomic inclusion.

UNHCR assists Bulgaria to strengthen its asylum system in line with international and EU standards, amid **increasing arrivals of Afghan and Syrian asylum-seekers**.

KEY FIGURES

67,769

Ukrainian refugees in Bulgaria with valid registration for temporary protection at 31 December 2023

22,518

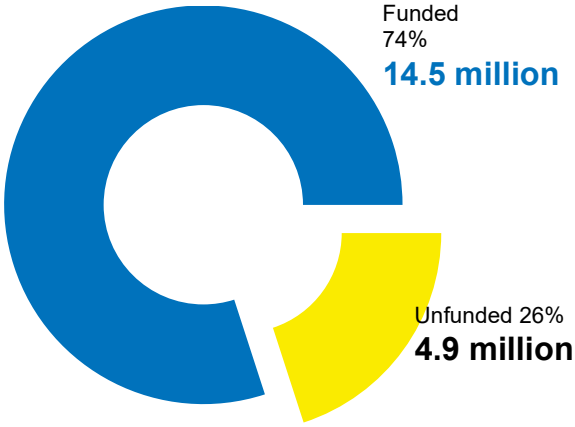
Number of asylum applications in 2023

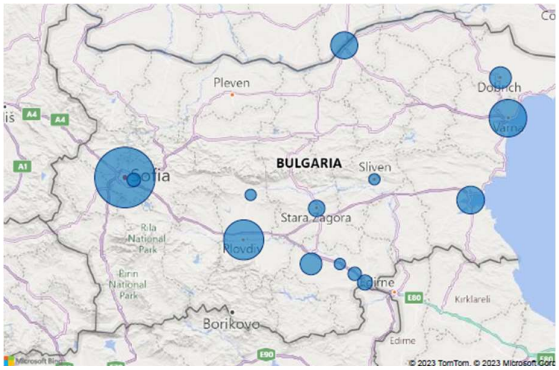
3,843

Number of unaccompanied children seeking asylum in 2023

FUNDING (RECEIVED AS OF 15 DECEMBER FOR 2023)

USD 19.4 million

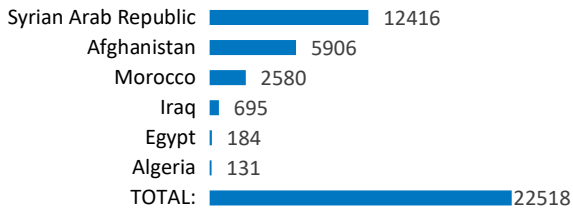




UNHCR and partners' scale of operations across the country by number of staff employed

ASYLUM SEEKERS

Countries of Origin



Asylum applications registered in 2023 (State Agency of Refugees data)

Update On Achievements

Operational Context

UNHCR operations in Bulgaria in 2023 focused on the Ukrainian situation and support to Bulgaria's government amidst increased arrivals of asylum seekers at the country's southern border. UNHCR's efforts have shifted from emergency response for refugees from Ukraine to activities more geared towards the integration and inclusion of all refugees into Bulgarian society. A concerning trend in 2023 was the arrival of nearly 4,000 unaccompanied and separated children seeking asylum, placing Bulgaria among the top EU countries receiving children arriving without parents or caregivers.

Ukrainian Svitlana Kubankova is a speech therapist at the Integriko center in Varna. Since November 2022 she has been consulting children and their parents using games and specially designed software. The Integriko centre is operated by UNHCR partner NRG and there, refugee children receive support for fast integration into Bulgaria's education system. ©UNHCR/Dobrin Kashavelov"

Achievements

In September 2023, UNHCR Bulgaria and global non-profit organization Artolution with 18 artists from Eastern Europe and the Middle East, including refugee artists, and refugee children residing in Bulgaria, painted a large mural for Solidarity with refugees on a local school in in downtown Sofia, Bulgaria. ©UNHCR/Dobrin Kashavelov

In 2023, UNHCR Bulgaria collaborated with nine local NGO partners to offer protection and assistance to forcibly displaced and stateless individuals. The focus areas included socioeconomic inclusion and integration, legal support, humanitarian aid, gender-based violence, child protection, education, and refugee and civil society leaders. The operation successfully established in 2023 memorandums for close cooperation with the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, the State Agency for Refugees, the State Agency for Child Protection, the National Police, the National Institute of Statistics; the municipalities of Sofia, Plovdiv, Varna, Burgas, and Ruse; the New Bulgaria University and the American University in Bulgaria in Blagoevgrad; the United Nations Association; and the German-Bulgarian Bilateral Chamber of Commerce and Industry. The operation also works closely with the Migration Directorate and Border Police.

During the second Global Refugee Forum in Geneva in mid-December 2023, Bulgaria presented nine new pledges across six priority areas. These commitments encompassed up to US$ 100,000 annual financial support for UNHCR's initiatives in Afghanistan, economic inclusion, and social protection with a focus on livelihoods, alternative care for unaccompanied children and a national child database, doubling the annual resettlement

quota to 100, ongoing efforts to end statelessness, and support for the Bulgarian Red Cross within the context of the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus. UNHCR Bulgaria together with the Embassy of Switzerland and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs organized a national pledging meeting in early December with whole-of-society stakeholders, including State authorities, humanitarian organizations, private sector, academia, refugee-led and civil society organizations.

In the first half of 2023, UNHCR with the Bulgarian Red Cross, provided cash for protection to support 8,834 Ukrainian refugees. The second half of the year saw the implementation of a new cash for protection program, benefiting 7,128 Ukrainians. By the second quarter of 2023, UNHCR and funded partners also distributed relief items, including blankets, hygiene kits, and other essentials, to 15,295 refugees from Ukraine located in Blagoevgrad, Sofia, Dobrich, Veliko Tarnovo, Varna, Stara Zagora, Burgas, and Plovdiv.

A Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) network was established, involving funded partners and authorities to prevent and mitigate SEA risks. This initiative aimed to ensure a robust complaints mechanism, establish PSEA focal points, conduct joint risk assessments, build partner capacity, and engage in community outreach on trafficking and SEA risks.

With the support of funded partners, UNHCR reached 9,539 refugees in the delivery of assistance and support towards integration. This included mentorship programs, employment support, technical and vocational training to enhance financial inclusion. The promotion of refugee integration in Bulgaria remained a focal point, with services ranging from Bulgarian language courses, vocational training, counselling, referrals, and assistance in accessing employment.

Furthermore, in 2023, UNHCR with UNICEF and other partners continued to provide support and assistance to refugees through Blue Dots located in Sofia, Burgas, Dobrich, and Varna. These centers served 12,251 refugees by providing child-friendly and family-friendly spaces, offering psychosocial support to 9,366 individuals, and delivering information on education to 8,273 refugees.

PROTECTION

National Refugee Coordination Forum

- **Proposal Writing workshop**: In October, UNHCR inter-agency team facilitated a workshop with RRP partners focused on Proposal Writing and Applications, to

support their efforts for fundraising. The workshop was attended by representatives of nine local civil society organizations.

- **2024 RRP**: Bulgaria's appeal has been submitted for the Global Humanitarian Overview (total US$ 38.5 million, 19 appealing partners).

Achievements and Impact

- In October, UNHCR facilitated two multi-stakeholder roundtables on socio-economic inclusion in Sofia and Plovdiv, bringing together local authorities, businesses, institutions, and civil society organizations. These sessions provided a platform for stakeholders to share ideas and collaborate on supporting sustainable employment solutions for refugees within the Bulgarian labour market.

- UNHCR's partners initiated professional training programs in accounting, hairdressing, cosmetology, Bulgarian sign language interpretation, and welding. These programs benefited 52 refugees in Burgas, Plovdiv, Ruse, Sofia, and Varna, enhancing their skills and employability.

- Responding to the Ministry of Interior's request, UNHCR shared a concept note on the establishment of an independent national monitoring mechanism (INMM). The proposal includes recommendations for an inclusive process in creating the INMM, ensuring alignment with existing monitoring mechanisms, and establishing an Advisory Board with defined terms of reference, work plan, and timeline for monitoring activities.

- In October, a Tripartite Working Group meeting was convened with UNHCR, the Border Police, and the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee under the Tripartite Memorandum of Understanding. Discussions centered on response and referral pathways for signals related to missing persons and individuals in distress, along with border police training.

- In November UNHCR organized together with the Ministry of Health a round table focused on the access to healthcare by asylum seekers, and people with temporary and international protection, and employment of refugee health professionals. The discussion engaged not only authorities, but also medical professional unions and unions of the general practitioners in Bulgaria, as well as civil society organisations. Challenges with the access to healthcare service, the lack of professionals, and the recognition of professional qualifications of medical experts. The participants agreed to continue the dialogue and to work together to provide recommendations to the government.

Identified needs and remaining gaps

- From the inter-agency 2023 Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment for the Ukraine Situation highlight that refugees' top three priority needs are access to health (45

percent), food (39 percent), and accommodation (26 percent). Addressing these needs will be crucial for providing comprehensive support to the refugee population in 2024.

Key Priorities in 2024

- **Access to territory and procedure:** UNHCR and partners regularly monitor borders and immigration detention centres to ensure asylum-seekers can access territory and fair and efficient procedures. Information, legal counselling and assistance are also provided.
- **Asylum procedures:** UNHCR supports Bulgaria in enhancing the quality of asylum procedures through capacity building activities for authorities to ensure fair and efficient asylum procedures. UNHCR monitors asylum decisions, and provides translated guidance materials and summaries of EU and national asylum case law for administrative and judicial authorities.
- **Integration:** UNHCR promotes socio-economic inclusion of refugees and provides technical inputs to state-led integration measures. UNHCR works with local authorities, employers, social partners, and refugees for job-matching, employability, and small business initiatives. UNHCR and the Ministry of Education have developed the first supplementary Bulgarian language textbook for teachers working with refugee children.
- **Child protection:** UNHCR works with institutions to strengthen the national child protection system in early identification, access to adequate reception conditions, comprehensive services, and alternative care arrangements for asylum seeking and refugee children at risk. UNHCR also undertakes trainings for border and national police, social workers on child rights and best interest procedures.
- **Education:** UNHCR will continue to support children in their academic, language and psychosocial transition into the Bulgarian school system. This will include after-school educational support, such as summer language courses, skills development and youth empowerment activities. In coordination with other actors, UNHCR will support the Ministry of Education to promote enrolment in the Bulgarian school system by removing institutional, socio-cultural and economic barriers. UNHCR will also work with authorities and academic institutions to promote access to tertiary education and diploma recognition.
- **GBV**: UNHCR works with State, humanitarian partners, and community members to prevent and mitigate risks, and provide a comprehensive and safe response to gender-based violence (GBV). This includes raising awareness, strengthening referral pathways, and implementing safety audits.
- **Community Based Protection:** UNHCR is advancing its community-based protection programme through participatory planning with refugees, asylum-seekers, partners, and host communities. UNHCR is strengthening outreach and awareness-raising through mapping of communication channels and information needs of communities, to connect them to timely and reliable protection information.

- **Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS):** UNHCR and partners provide MHPSS to asylum-seekers and refugees, ensure referrals to specialized services, expand awareness and access to quality MHPSS services.
- **Working with partners:** UNHCR supports the government to ensure policies and legislation are in line with international standards, and promotes a comprehensive refugee response, grounded in multi-stakeholder, "whole-of-society" approaches that includes refugees, local authorities, international organizations, civil society, private sector, and other stakeholders.

  UNHCR in 2024 works with seven partner NGOs to safeguard the rights and well-being of people forced to flee, deliver assistance, and promote refugees' social protection and access to livelihoods, education and inclusion.
- **Statelessness:** Bulgaria acceded to both the 1954 and 1961 UN Conventions on Statelessness, and introduced a statelessness determination procedure in 2017, granting stateless status to 161 people so far. Following pledges at the High-Level Segment of Statelessness in 2019, the Government has improved the quality of statelessness determination procedure and included stateless people in the 2021 Census. UNHCR and the National Statistical Institute are working to map the stateless population in Bulgaria.
- **External Relations:** UNHCR will work with whole-of-society partners to showcase the hopes, dreams, diverse talents and the positive impact of refugees on their host communities, and to promote solidarity, support, and inclusion for refugees. By sharing stories that highlight the positive impact and resilience of refugees, we aim to create a caring and supportive environment where refugees can not only survive but thrive.

UNHCR Presence in Bulgaria

Staff:	Offices:
21 Local Staff	1 Country Office in Sofia
11 International Staff	

UNHCR is grateful for the support from our top government donors of unearmarked, softly earmarked, and earmarked funding

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UNHCR is also grateful for the generous contributions from the private sector and individuals.

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