UNHCR The UN Refugee Agency

Operationalizing Community-Based Protection in Europe: insights, innovations and lessons learned

Working with Older Persons in the Ukraine Refugee response. Promising Practices from the Field and Recommendations

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INTRODUCTION

An older person is defined by the United Nations as a person who is over 60 years of age. However, families and communities often use other socio-cultural referents to define age, including family status (grandparents), physical appearance, or age-related health conditions. The psychological and psychosocial toll of traumatic experiences, combined with poor nutrition and exposure to disease, can cause forcibly displaced persons to 'age' faster than settled populations[1].

Emergencies pose a significant threat to older refugees, who often face heightened vulnerability due to their age, health, and mobility limitations and higher dependency on family, social, and financial support networks in daily life[2]. To ensure the protection and well-being of the older persons, it is important to prioritize their unique needs within the response, but at the same time build on their capacities, life experiences and help them be the enablers of their families and communities, rather than being seen as a burden.

The UN emphasizes the importance of fostering independence, participation, care, self-fulfilment, and dignity for older refugees, placing emphasis on the latter[3]. This should allow older refugees to maintain control over their lives, make their own decisions, and participate meaningfully in their communities, eventually promoting a sense of normalcy.

OLDER PERSONS IN UKRAINE REFUGEE RESPONSE

Many reports and analysis recount that the Russia's war of aggression on Ukraine has resulted in the most significant displacement in Europe since the WWII, highlighting unique age and gender character of the crisis – the fact that the majority of refugees are women, children and older persons. In the Ukraine refugee response, UNHCR has been regularly conducting protection monitoring activities, including with the aim to gauge the situation and needs of older refugees from Ukraine.

Thus, based on the information received through **6,837 protection monitoring interviews** conducted between July and October 2024 in 11 countries: Belarus, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia, the following was established:

- Nearly half (49%) of older persons interviewed left Ukraine in the first half of 2024. However, a sizable portion (13%) left in the third quarter of 2024, likely influenced by the deteriorating security situation and ongoing energy crisis.

[1] UNHCR Emergency Handbook – Older Persons
[2] UNHCR's Policy on Older Refugees
[3] United Nations Principles for Older Persons | OHCHR

- 21% of older persons reported having at least one household member with missing documentation, and 24% of these were unable to obtain replacements in their current host country. The barriers include unaffordable fees, long waiting times, and a lack of awareness about the replacement procedures. Additionally, older persons face challenges in accessing civil registration services, primarily due to long waiting times and insufficient information on registration processes.

91%

Older persons interviewed applied for government-provided social protection benefits

- Among those interviewed, 91% of older persons have applied for government-provided social protection benefits, primarily for accommodation subsidies, housing, and health insurance. However, 21% of applicants reported facing challenges in accessing these benefits due to a lack of information, language barriers, and long waiting times.
- The majority of older persons reported living in rented accommodation (38%), with relatives (22%), or in collective housing (20%). Five percent indicated that they would be forced to leave their current accommodation within three months from the date of interview, primarily due to eviction notices, the end of free accommodation programs, and an inability to afford rent. Older individuals in collective shelters face a much higher risk of eviction (16%) compared to those renting (2%) or living with relatives (3%).
- 56% of older refugees surveyed reported having a household member with a serious medical condition, significantly higher than the 22% reported by other groups. Among the 35% of older individuals who traveled back to Ukraine, 23% did so to access healthcare. In contrast, only 12% of the 38% of respondents aged 18-59 who traveled to Ukraine cited healthcare as their primary reason for doing so.
- Additionally, of the 91% of older persons who reported having urgent needs, 56% identified healthcare as their top priority.

Romania. Liudmyla Dobrovolska, 68, a University Professor from Odesa, Ukraine, proudly holds English textbooks she has used to teach her students. © UNHCR/Bogdan Șerban

OVERVIEW OF GOOD PRACTICES

As the Ukraine refugee crisis developed, many operations in Europe undertook programming for older refugees to make sure that their unique needs are not overlooked. A number of initiatives emerged to address the social, emotional, and practical challenges faced by older forcibly displaced persons. Through UNHCR and local partners, targeted programs to foster inclusion, resilience, and well-being among older refugees and IDPs were implemented in Latvia, Estonia, Croatia, Ukraine, the Czech Republic, Austria, Georgia, Romania, and Hungary. These efforts range from community-building activities and language classes to psychological support and access to essential services, highlighting a shared commitment to ensuring that no one is left behind—regardless of age.

In **Austria**, a partner organisation of the City of Vienna developed programmes for elderly refugees from Ukraine, including counselling, intercultural programs, crafts workshops, subsidized excursions, and attending clubs of retirees. Another stakeholder, NGO 'Train of Hope', focused on integration, offering German classes, games and craft workshops, however funding for Train of Hope`s future activities is currently unclear.

In **Croatia**, UNHCR has been regularly engaging with older refugees through participatory assessment exercises and regular monitoring visits. Through these exchanges, older refugees received support through referrals to relevant national services, and could benefit from psychological support, dedicated gatherings and activities for older persons (arts and crafts sessions, culinary workshops), facilitated the exchange between older refugees and members of the host community through dedicated 'living room' activity. Another activity of this kind, called 'Coffee with Croatian', organized through UNHCR partner JRS, helped older refugees to learn the local language at a more adapted pace.

In **Czech Republic**, refugee-led organization (RLO) Dobrovolnicke Centrum in Usti nad Labem region runs a club for elderly refugees from Ukraine, providing space to connect with people with similar backgrounds, provide mutual support, and speak in their native language. The club's activities included: recreational and employment opportunities for elderly refugees; Czech language courses; engagement with a psychologist through group activities; the commemoration of Ukrainian traditions; singing, knitting, cooking and baking; excursions and exploring Czech culture together.

In **Georgia**, NGO "Unite Together" provided counselling on access to pension payments in Ukraine, including for newly enrolled recipients. Participants received detailed and user-friendly instructions regarding the online application process, opening a bank account, and other necessary steps. Unite Together also established a referral system with the embassy of Ukraine to facilitate access to pensions and developed user-friendly step-by-step instructions for receiving the pensions online.

In **Hungary**, in February 2024 RRP stakeholders produced a Refugee Coordination Forum (RCF) note titled 'Cross Sectoral support for older refugees from Ukraine in Hungary'[4], a set of recommendations on inclusion of older refugees, and held a dedicated thematic meeting to discuss the challenges faced by older refugees from Ukraine in accessing essential services in the country.

In **Latvia**, UNHCR partner, NGO 'I want to help refugees' identified that older refugees face isolation and difficulty to participate in the life of host community. In response, working closely with another partner organization Riga Active Seniors Association, promoted activities linked to social inclusion, such as joint tabletop games; cultural awareness activities like day trips and visits to the museums; and community engagement activities, like community gardens where refugees can meet, make food/snacks and share their hobbies. The activities helped older refugees to develop new personal connections with other refugees and with host community members.

[4] Cross Sectoral support for older refugees from Ukraine in Hungary

A similar initiative took place in **Estonia**, where the Estonian Refugee Council, supported by UNHCR, organized Adaptation club to support older refugees' social adaptation in the host community, bringing together older refugees to communicate with each other, promoting their resilience and facilitating participation in day trips. Other activities included organized online seminars to provide essential information for older refugees, as well as joint project for older and young people, both from refugee and host community, to support adaptation and build supportive social links.In **Lithuania**, initiatives support the access of older persons to key government's resources, such as portal 'MIGRIS', counselling has been provided to access health care services and disability assessments, social assistance and pensions. There were also group discussions involving older persons on age-based discrimination and access to rights. Older persons with disabilities could also benefit from cash assistance to cover housingcosts.

In **Moldova**, UNHCR and partners systematically include older persons in protection monitoring, older refugees remain prioritized for cash assistance. UNHCR engages national authorities to promote access to social assistance schemes, extend specialized accommodation services, and facilitate inclusion in local community centres where older persons can gather and participate in different social activities. Through partnerships with NGOs older persons with disabilities receive assistive devices, home-based support, and tailored activities such as digital literacy and intergenerational dialogue, fostering self-sufficiency and social integration for refugees aged 60 and above.

In **Romania**, older refugees have received tailored support, including accompaniment to access services, targeted psycho-social support and case management from UNHCR. In 20242024, 926 older persons received counselling, 1,062 received case management, and 869 benefitted from psychosocial support. Older refugees also received support under UNHCR's Cash Assistance Programme for Refugees with specific needs. This year, UNHCR also conducted information and empowerments sessions for older refugees and persons with disabilities, besides older persons are regularly engaged through Participatory Assessment exercises. UNHCR also supported the creation of community groups for older persons.

In **Ukraine**, where armed conflict continues, UNHCR supports a network of 551 community-based organizations (CBOs), 13 of which are chaired by older persons. Three of these CBOs also participate in local IDP councils (Kyiv, Lviv and Kirovohrad oblasts). A larger number of CBOs aim to support older persons in their activities – close to 160 organizations work with older persons, both from the IDP and war affected populations, many of them received in-kind support from UNHCR to do so. These organizations take forward projects, such as Third Age University, which includes local initiatives to bring older persons together for socializing as well as helping them with build digital literacy skills, engaged in receiving and supporting newly arrived IDPs evacuated from the front line, organize social events for local community and IDPs. In one of the regions of the country, CBO Vysokopilski Lastivky led by older people provides basic social support to older IDPs, providing referrals and social accompaniment. In another example, CBO Suchasna Zhinka (Modern Woman) focuses its activities on supporting IDPs, including older people, people with disabilities as well as local low-income families by providing humanitarian aid and access to educational, psychological, legal, and social services, and runs a referral mechanism with free legal aid centre. Another CBO, 'Vira, Nadiia, Liubov' (Faith, Hope, Love) led by two internally displaced older women from Bakhmut, provides support to newly arrived IDPs evacuated from frontline areas and supports IDPs' integration, organizing social events for local and internally displaced people focused on fostering social cohesion and intergenerational activities.

Moldova. Larisa is a retired teacher who arrived in Moldova from Kyiv in 2022. She is actively involved in the activities of Community Centre 151 in Chisinau and sings in the local choir. © UNHCR/ Eugenia Ciurcă

LESSONS LEARNT AND KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

As indicated by UNHCR's protection monitoring data, cited above, it is critical to recognize the unique vulnerabilities and barriers older refugees face in accessing services. To do so, it is important to adopt inclusive and comprehensive approaches. From the onset of the refugee situation, this should include prioritizing the identification and registration of older refugees, understanding their specific needs, and improving access to specialized services and social protection through advocacy and culturally sensitive, age-appropriate support.

The stakeholders should actively encourage, across all the sectors of the response, the participation of older refugees in the design, implementation and evaluation of the programmes aimed to assist and protect them. They should not be seen solely as the recipients of aid, but as valuable contributors to their communities. With their life experience, knowledge of people and resilience they can help to reweave the social fabric of the community torn apart by the conflict and resulting displacement. They can help build a more comprehensive humanitarian response, taking on different roles as social workers, volunteers and members of the refugee-led organizations. It is essential to actively involve older refugees in AGD related activities, such as participatory assessments, townhall meetings and any other structured consultations with forcibly displaced and stateless persons.

To ensure inclusion of older refugees, particularly in the context of reduced funding, even stronger emphasis must be placed on strong inter-agency coordination and cross-sectoral partnerships. Practically, this requires engaging the stakeholders from the government, civil society and route-based initiatives around the single topic of ageing inclusion. As older refugees often face intersectional challenges, mobilizing stakeholders and building partnerships is key for successful ageing inclusion. Recognizing the unique vulnerabilities and barriers older refugees face in

accessing services, the humanitarian response must adopt a more inclusive and comprehensive approach**.** This includes prioritizing the identification and registration of older refugees, understanding their specific needs, and improving access to specialized services and social protection through advocacy and culturally sensitive, age-appropriate support.

Older refugees should not be seen merely as recipients of aid—they are valuable contributors to their communities. Their participation should be actively encouraged across all aspects of the response. With their wealth of life experience, resilience, and deep community ties, older individuals can serve as mentors, role models, volunteers, paid workers, cultural ambassadors, and community leaders. Their involvement in participatory assessments, consultations, and as social workers is essential to creating a more effective and holistic humanitarian response.

At the Refugee Coordination Forum (RCF) level, implementing these recommendations requires strong partnerships and cross-sectoral collaboration. This means fostering coordination among government bodies, NGOs, and civil society actors. Given the interconnected challenges older refugees face—ranging from protection and health to mental well-being and social inclusion—building robust partnerships with relevant stakeholders is vital to ensuring their well-being and successful integration.

In the reference to UNHCR's Need to Know guidance – Working with older persons in forced displacement[5], the following recommendations could be highlighted, as the most relevant to protection and solutions for older refugees in Ukraine, and further expanded given this particular refugee situation specificity:

RECOGNIZING THE UNIQUE VULNERABILITIES AND BARRIERS OLDER REFUGEES FACE IN ACCESSING SERVICES, THE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE MUST ADOPT A MORE INCLUSIVE AND COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH

Identification, data collection and registration of elderly persons

- Actively facilitate identification of older persons at the points of entry, during protection monitoring exercises, outreach activities conducted by local authorities and civil society.
- Advocate that the government's collected data is disaggregated by age, sex and disability.

Making sure that basic needs of the older refugees are met

- Make sure that protection monitoring activities effectively explore the situation of basic needs of older refugees, within families or living separately.
- Advocate for effective monitoring of the situation with basic needs of the older refugees by national stakeholders of refugee hosting countries.
- Prioritise cash-based interventions to respond to the situations when the basic needs of the older refugees are not met.

Develop a safe, equitable model for providing care and support to older people at home. Strengthen family and community structures and networks

- Consider financial assistance, training and other support to the families providing care to older refugees.
- Identify and map home services on the national and local level made available by the stakeholders and ensure inclusion of older refugees in those services. Consider specialized interventions for older refugees residing separately where national or local services are not available
- As a last resort, where needed, advocate for the extension of residential care options to older refugees, including nursing homes.
- Explore care options, grassroots initiatives potentially available at the community level. Encourage RLOs and community initiatives.

Recognise and support the capacities of older persons to remain self-sufficient. Use technology to promote inclusion, participation, independence and resilience

- Ensure access to basic age-appropriate and adapted IT skills classes.

[5] Need to Know guidance – Working with older persons in forced displacement

- Facilitate access to technology for older refugees.
- Ensure access to national social assistance schemes and benefits for older people that older refugees can benefit from. Map available options available on national and local levels, including all forms of financial assistance and benefits.
- Work with national and local business communities to identify employment opportunities that would match the experience and capacities of older refugees.
- Support the development of other livelihood opportunities that can help older refugees be self-sufficient.

Strengthen accountability mechanisms for older persons

- Ensure that complaints and feedback mechanisms are available for older persons, as well as targeted efforts to raise awareness among older refugees about their availability.
- Systematically include older refugees in Age, Gender and Diversity initiatives and other participatory interactions with the persons we work with.

Prevent and respond to abuse and exploitation of older persons

- Make sure older refugees are aware, and can access national systems and mechanisms to prevent and respond to abuse and exploitation.
- Where applicable, include older refugees into the protection case management system.
- Make sure that protection monitoring system allows to recognize the signs of abuse and exploitation of older persons, allows an effective and safe referral, and provides safe spaces for disclosure if necessary.