VOICES OF REFUGEES IN BULGARIA

Participatory Assement 2025

MAY 2026

UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

Glossary:

BRC – Bulgarian Red Cross

EU – European Union

FAR – Foundation for Access to Rights

FGD – Focus Group Discussion

MENA - Middle East, North Africa

NGO – Non-Governmental Organizations

NRA – National Revenue Agency

PA - Participatory Assessment

RLO – Refugee-Led Organizations

RRC - Reception and Registration Centres

SAR - State Agency for Refugees

TP – Temporary Protection

UASC - Unaccompanied and Separated Children

UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1. DISTRIBUTION OF PARTICIPANTS BY PLACE OF RESIDENCE. 11
FIGURE 2. THEMATIC AREAS OF THE FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS. 12
FIGURE 3. GENDER DISTRIBUTION OF PARTICIPANTS BY COUNTRY OF ORIGIN 14
FIGURE 4. DISTRIBUTION OF PARTICIPANTS BY LEGAL STATUS 15
FIGURE 5. KEY FINDINGS FROM MENA FGDS 16
FIGURE 6. KEY FINDINGS FROM UKRAINIAN FGDS 30
FIGURE 7. COMPARISON ACROSS THE TOP FIVE MENTIONED ISSUES IN THE MENA (IP) AND UKRAINIAN (TP) GROUPS 42

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 1. NUMBER OF CHILDREN AND ADULT PARTICIPANTS BY COUNTRY OF ORIGIN AND GENDER 14

CONTENT

Foreword....6
Background....7
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' Mandate and Priorities....7
Participatory Assessments....8
2024 Participatory Assessment....9
Response to the Recommendations in 2024 Participatory Assessment by UNHCR and partners...10
2025 Participatory Assessment....11
Methodology....11
Caveats and Limitations....12
Population Breakdown....13
Voices of Refugees and Asylum-seekers from Middle East and North Africa....16
Access to Territory....16
Reception conditions....18
Detention conditions....18
International Protection Procedure....19
Family reunification....20
Inclusion and integration....20
Language barriers....21
Accommodation....22
Livelihoods....22
Access to assistance and information....23
Social isolation and community resilience....23
Mental health and psycho-social support....24
Experiences of Children and Adolescents....25
Access to territory....25
Reception conditions....26
International protection procedures....27
Inclusion and integration....28
Mental health and psychosocial support....28
Challenges and children's resilience....29
Ukrainian Refugees Under Temporary Protection....30
Access to territory and documentation....30
Refugee Inclusion....33
Child Development and Education....35

Healthcare (services, accessibility and costs)....36
Refugees with Disabilities....37
Housing and Accommodation....38
Livelihoods and Social Protection....39
Comparative Analysis....42
Enhancing Protection, Integration and Inclusion of Refugees in Bulgaria: Other Responses....43
Stakeholder recommendations....44

Foreword

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UNHCR REPRESENTATIVE IN BULGARIA

At UNHCR, we believe that effective protection begins with listening. This Participatory Assessment reflects our continued commitment to placing the voices of forcibly displaced and stateless people at the centre of our work in Bulgaria.

The perspectives shared through this assessment highlight both the resilience of refugees and asylum-seekers and the challenges they continue to face in rebuilding their lives. Participants including beneficiaries of international and temporary protection, asylum-seekers, and unaccompanied children spoke of the safety they have found in Bulgaria after experiences of conflict and displacement. At the same time, they described persistent barriers related to legal certainty, family unity, access to procedures, reception conditions, language acquisition, housing, and opportunities for sustainable livelihoods.

These experiences underline an important reality: while safety is a fundamental first step, it must be accompanied by meaningful opportunities for inclusion and self-reliance. Without this, many remain at risk of poverty, insecurity, and exploitation, limiting their ability to contribute fully to the communities that host them.

Importantly, this assessment not only captures challenges, but also reflects the practical solutions proposed by refugees themselves. Their recommendations point to key areas for continued attention, including strengthening access to fair and efficient procedures, safeguarding family reunification, enhancing reception conditions and alternatives to detention, ensuring effective protection for unaccompanied children, and expanding access to education, employment, and social services. For those under temporary protection, greater clarity on future legal pathways remains essential for long-term planning and stability, while for others, sustained support for integration is critical to reducing vulnerability and fostering inclusion.

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to the women, men, and children who shared their experiences, perspectives, and aspirations. Their willingness to engage openly is the foundation of this report. I also extend my gratitude to the Government of Bulgaria, civil society partners, academic institutions, and experts who contributed to the consultations. Their engagement reflects a shared commitment to addressing challenges, strengthening protection systems, and promoting inclusive and sustainable responses.

UNHCR remains committed to working in close partnership with national and local authorities, civil society, and refugee communities to translate these insights into concrete action. Through continued dialogue, advocacy, and capacity-building, we will support efforts to strengthen protection frameworks and expand opportunities for inclusion. Our shared objective is clear: to ensure that those who have found safety in Bulgaria are also able to rebuild their lives with dignity, stability, and hope for the future.

Background

As an external border of the European Union (EU), Bulgaria serves as a critical entry and transit point at its southeastern frontier. Its strategic position makes it a key country for mixed and onward movements of forcibly displaced and stateless people into Europe.

Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, more than 224,000 refugees from Ukraine were granted Temporary Protection (TP), of which 82,432 are valid as of the end of 2025. TP registrations continue to rise, increasing from 72,000 in February 2024 to over 82,000 in the same period.

As of December 2025, the Ukrainian refugee population in Bulgaria is predominantly composed of women and children, who together account for 61% of the 82,432 valid temporary protection registrations. Adult women represent the largest demographic at 42%, with the 35–60 age bracket being the most significant, while children under the age of 18 make up an additional 20% of the total. In contrast, adult men and older persons (60+) constitute a much smaller portion of the population.

Due to ongoing safety concerns and the fragility of potential ends to the war, UNHCR maintains that conditions in Ukraine do not yet support safe returns. Most refugees are unlikely to return soon;[1] therefore, legal protection must remain in place until a thorough security assessment and progress toward a lasting peace settlement are achieved.[2]

Individuals from countries such as Syria and Afghanistan, and others continue to seek asylum in Bulgaria. However, as of the end of December 2025, only 3,895 applications have been registered, according to the State Agency for Refugees (SAR). This marks a sharp decline compared to 12,250 applications in 2024 and a more significant drop from approximately 22,500 registrations in 2023, highlighting a downward trend in arrivals in Bulgaria and lodging of new asylum claims.[3]

Syrian nationals remain a consistent presence among asylum-seekers, a trend that has persisted since the onset of the Syrian civil war in 2011. As of the end of 2025, 42 Syrians have been recognized as refugees and 851 have been granted humanitarian status. However, many Syrians, including unaccompanied children, do not remain in Bulgaria due to family reunification concerns, limited integration opportunities, socio-economic barriers, and a lack of prospects to reestablish their lives in Bulgaria. Additionally, the granting of international protection for Syrians, and Afghans has decreased. For unaccompanied children, their claims for international protection have been more likely to be rejected, and family reunification has become increasingly difficult, further driving onward movement.

In 2025, UNHCR maintains its advice to the states to suspend the issuance of negative decisions for Syrian asylum-seekers until the security and human rights situation under the new administration is more clearly understood. It maintains a moratorium on forced returns, urging states to uphold the principle of non-refoulement and to ensure access to territory for those still fleeing.[4]

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' Mandate and Priorities

UNHCR's mandate underpins the commitment to safeguarding the rights of refugees as established by its Statute adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1950, and through subsequent resolutions, those of stateless and other forcibly displaced persons. UNHCR' role is firmly embedded in international refugee law, notably the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. In particular, Article 35 of the 1951

[1] UNHCR Regional Bureau for Europe and UNHCR Ukraine, *Lives on hold: Intentions and Perspective of Refugees, Refugee Returnees and IDPs from Ukraine #6 Summary Findings*., November 2024
[2] UNHCR Bulgaria, *Protection Brief, Bulgaria: Implementation of the Temporary Protection Directive*, October 2025.
[3] UNHCR Bulgaria, *Refugee Status Determination: Applications*, as of December 9, 2025.
[4] UNHCR, *Position on Returns to the Syrian Arab Republic*, December 2024.

Convention entrusts UNHCR with a supervisory role to ensure the application of the Convention's provisions by States Parties, which agree to provide the High Commissioner with *"information and statistical data requested concerning: (a) The condition of refugees, (b) The implementation of this Convention, and; (c) Laws, regulations and decrees which are, or may hereafter be, in force relating to refugees"*.[5]

UNHCR Bulgaria's programmes and activities are guided by this mandate and aligned with the EU law such as the Temporary Protection Directive of the European Union (Council Directive 2001/55/EC) in response to the displacement caused by the war in Ukraine. The agency works in close partnership with national and local authorities, as well as civil society organisations, to ensure that the rights of individuals falling under its mandate are upheld and protected.

UNHCR supports the Bulgarian government in strengthening its asylum system to align with international and EU standards, in complementarity with the EU Migration and Asylum Pact and support provided by the EU Asylum Agency (EUAA) under its mandate.

In Bulgaria, UNHCR's main protection priorities focus on these key areas:

1. **Access to territory and procedures:** Monitoring and advocating access to territory in line with international and national law, monitoring detention and ensuring access to legal aid, and promoting fair, efficient asylum procedures for all persons seeking international protection and temporary protection.

2. **Protection from abuse and exploitation:** Mainstreaming risk mitigation, prevention and response to violence against children, women, persons with disabilities, older persons and LGBTIQ+ persons, and sexual abuse and exploitation, trafficking in persons, labour exploitation and ill-treatment.

3. **Child Protection:** Advocating to end child detention and promote a child rights-based approach for the implementation of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, while advocating for inclusion of unaccompanied and separated children in Bulgaria's child protection system, ensuring qualified guardianship for unaccompanied children, and supporting family reunification alongside improved coordination for timely identification and response.

4. **Community-empowerment:** Incorporating community engagement across all phases of the operational response, building trust, amplifying refugee voices, and promoting community-led protection and solutions through strengthened refugee-led organizations, inclusive services, and participatory feedback mechanisms.

5. **Inclusion and Integration Support:** supporting the inclusion of refugees in national systems, such as education, healthcare, and employment, by coordinating efforts under the Refugee Coordination Model and the Regional Refugee Response Plan. These frameworks facilitate joint planning, resource mobilization, and a whole-of-society approach with government, civil society, and other partners, which is essential for long-term integration. UNHCR also coordinates the Bulgaria Network of Compass Protection and Inclusion Centres (referred to in this document as "Compass Centres" or "Compass Network"). These multi-purpose centres across the country provide direct assistance and support to refugees, including legal aid, psychosocial support, Bulgarian language courses, and livelihood counselling, while advocating for the removal of structural barriers to accessing public services.

Participatory Assessments

UNHCR consistently prioritizes participatory and community-based approaches in its operations. This commitment is reflected in UNHCR's 2018 Policy on Age, Gender and Diversity, which emphasizes the objective

[5] UNHCR, *The 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees*

that "*women, men, girls, and boys of diverse backgrounds are able to engage meaningfully and are consulted on protection, assistance, and solutions*". Furthermore, it states that forcibly displaced and stateless people "*have the right to be informed about decisions that affect their lives*".[6]

In line with these principles, UNHCR Bulgaria conducts participatory assessments to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the situation, protection risks, the specific needs and priorities of displaced communities, as well as their capacities and recommendations. These assessments create opportunities for individuals to voice concerns, share experiences, and actively contribute to shaping solutions. Importantly, they also foster direct dialogue between protection actors and refugees, strengthening trust and collaboration.

2024 Participatory Assessment

The findings from last year's focus group discussions (FGDs) with refugees, asylum-seekers, and beneficiaries of temporary protection in Bulgaria revealed a complex landscape of successes, challenges, opportunities and critical needs.

When speaking with refugees from Ukraine under temporary protection, it became evident that while many had successfully accessed essential services, challenges in communication and information sharing persisted.

Participants from Ukraine reported frequent use of the Compass Centres and demonstrated a strong familiarity with UNHCR's partner organizations, particularly the Bulgarian Red Cross (BRC) and Caritas, and locally USRF in Plovdiv and Energy Association in Varna. Overall, refugees expressed high levels of satisfaction with the quality and reliability of services provided, highlighting the professionalism, empathy, and responsiveness of staff. Legal and psychological support were among the most frequently utilised services at the Compass Centres, while educational and recreational activities also attracted significant participation. Cultural events were identified as the most requested type of activity.

Refugees frequently relied on informal networks and social media groups to obtain information, underscoring the importance of ensuring that communication materials are accessible, multilingual, and disseminated through familiar channels such as Viber and Telegram. While participants expressed appreciation for the support received, many emphasized the need for clearer and more comprehensive guidance on their rights and available assistance.

Those residing in smaller or remote towns emphasized the need to reduce transportation costs and the introduction of mobile outreach services, as distance often limited their access to Compass Centres. Moreover, refugees from Ukraine highlighted the need to establish centres in more accessible locations, and to extend opening hours to include weekends.

Findings show that asylum-seekers and beneficiaries of international protection, primarily from Syria and Afghanistan, had limited awareness of services available to them. BRC and Caritas were the most frequently recognized organisations. Among those who had interacted with these partners, feedback was generally positive.

Information gaps were widespread among people seeking or benefiting from international protection. Many participants did not clearly identify their main challenges in accessing information, but those who did, pointed to insufficient guidance, language barriers, and legal aid in detention. A lack of clarity on asylum procedures, legal rights, and information on family reunification procedures was a widespread issue. Participants also stressed the need for reliable information on employment, education, healthcare, housing, and legal aid.

Most refugees who applied for family reunification reported negative outcomes, specifically rejections. Participants emphasized that family reunification would significantly support their integration in Bulgaria. However, many were coping with rejected applications or prolonged family reunification procedures, in particular the challenges of accessing Bulgarian consulates, which had a profound emotional impact. Feelings of fatigue,

[6] UNHCR, *Policy on Age, Gender and Diversity Accountability*, 2018.

helplessness, and uncertainty were common, further intensified by unclear procedures and pathways for reunification.

Experiences with the asylum process varied widely. Some found it manageable when legal assistance was available. Others encountered major challenges, including language barriers, prolonged delays, and limited understanding of interview protocols.

Conditions in detention were particularly concerning. Participants reported overcrowding, poor hygiene, and limited access to legal counselling, information on asylum procedures, and recreational activities. These factors heightened stress and uncertainty, underscoring the need for better support and clearer information in detention settings.

Response to the Recommendations in 2024 Participatory Assessment by UNHCR and partners

In response to the recommendations gathered from the 2024 PA and its FGDs, UNHCR and its partners implemented targeted actions to address identified gaps, enhance existing activities, and strengthen overall support for refugees.

Compass Network

A key step in this effort was strengthening the Bulgaria Network of Compass Protection and Inclusion Centres. These centres serve as a primary point of contact between refugees, UNHCR, and its partners. They provide essential services such as legal assistance, social counselling, interpretation and accompaniment, protection referrals, language courses and mental health and psychosocial support; host activities for both adults and children and act as a central hub for integration and inclusion support. In 2025, UNHCR and partners used Compass Network coordination mechanisms to improve the extent, scope and efficiency of the services, and new partners such as the Animus Association participated in the network.

Refugee-Led Organisations

In 2025, UNHCR significantly increased its focus on community-based approaches. The most notable change was the direct support provided to Refugee-Led Organisations (RLOs). UNHCR provided funding, technical support and capacity building to three RLOs: Aid for Ukraine, Dreamhouse, and Taekwondo School. While mapping community-based initiatives and refugee-led organisations in Bulgaria, UNHCR also provided capacity-building support to such initiatives and organisations, including guidance on fundraising.

This strategic increase places refugees at the centre of decision-making, ensuring that assistance and protection programmes reflect the real needs and priorities of the community because RLOs are managed and driven by refugees themselves. Furthermore, RLOs strengthen resilience by building social networks and acting as a crucial, trusted link between humanitarian actors and refugee communities.

Help Page

A significant improvement since the last PA has been the enhancement of the UNHCR Help Page. While the platform already provided essential information, recent upgrades have made it more comprehensive and user-friendly. It now offers expanded details on refugees' rights and entitlements, more frequent updates, and additional posts about activities and events. Furthermore, a new Feedback and Complaint Mechanism has been introduced, enabling refugees to share concerns, provide feedback, and raise issues with UNHCR directly.

Integration Handbook

In the 2024 PA, non-Ukrainian refugees and asylum-seekers were identified as being 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. In response to that, an integration handbook[7] has been developed. The handbook aims to provide essential information for newly recognised refugees and individuals with humanitarian status addressing significant information gaps by offering practical guidance on obtaining identity documents, navigating the Bulgarian education system-including higher education opportunities, access to employment, securing accommodation, understanding the healthcare system, family reunification procedures, social assistance, and other key topics. A handbook focusing on the same information for Ukrainian beneficiaries of TP is also developed.

2025 Participatory Assessment

Building on previous assessments, particularly the 2024 PA, UNHCR conducted a new round of FGDs with refugees and asylum-seekers from across the country between October and mid-November. These exercises strengthened UNHCR's communication with refugees, enabling it to respond to evolving circumstances and improve the effectiveness of its programmes.

Methodology

In UNHCR, Participatory Assessment is a collaborative process aimed at building partnerships between UNHCR and refugee women and men of all ages and backgrounds through fostering meaningful engagement via structured dialogue. It involves small-group discussions to collect reliable and actionable information on the specific protection risks they face, the root causes of these risks, their capacities, and their proposed solutions.

FGDs with refugees are a key tool for shaping UNHCR and partner programs on protection and inclusion. FGDs create a direct channel of two-way communication between refugees and protection actors, helping to build trust and accountability, and ensuring refugee involvement in the decisions concerning them. By amplifying refugees' perspectives, UNHCR seeks to promote more responsive, tailored, and effective protection systems and solutions for forcibly displaced and stateless people in Bulgaria.

The 2025 PA involved 31 FGDs and 2 key-informant interviews with 216 participants across 12 locations, including Sofia, Plovdiv, Varna, Burgas, Ruse, Dobrich, Sunny Beach, Pomorie, Primorsko, Harmanli, Lyubimets, Zlatograd. Discussions were held in native languages with interpreters and included diverse groups: older persons, parents of children with disabilities, single mothers, youth, and detained asylum-seekers.

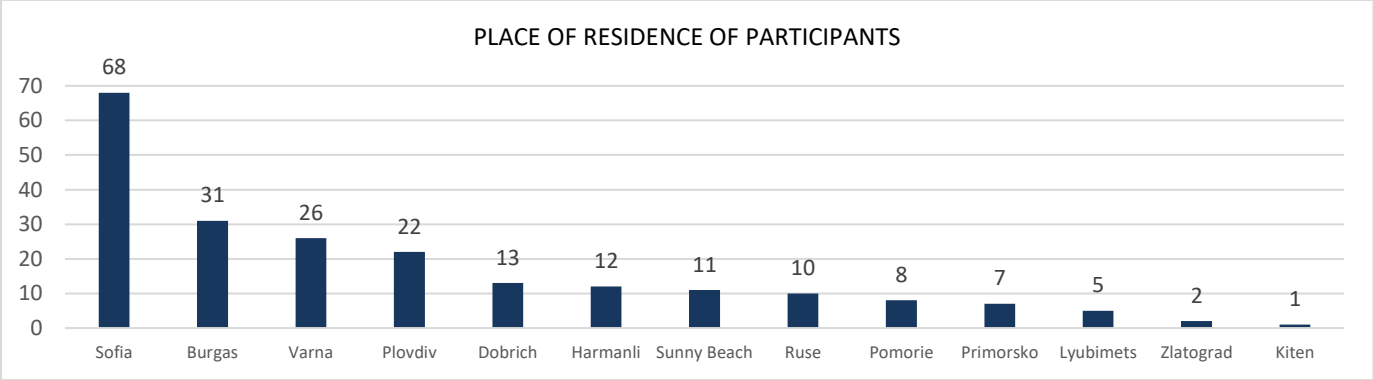

Figure 1. Distribution of participants by place of residence.

To structure the insights gathered during the FGDs, the findings are organized according to high-level thematic pillars, ranging from ensuring immediate protection and covering basic needs to fostering long-term self-reliance and community empowerment. By presenting the FGD evidence through this lens, we can better understand

[7] UNHCR Bulgaria, UNHCR. (n.d.). *Какво правим: Integration*. Retrieved May 1, 2026.

how participants' feedback and daily realities connect directly to the broader, holistic objectives of safety, dignity, and solutions that we aim to achieve.

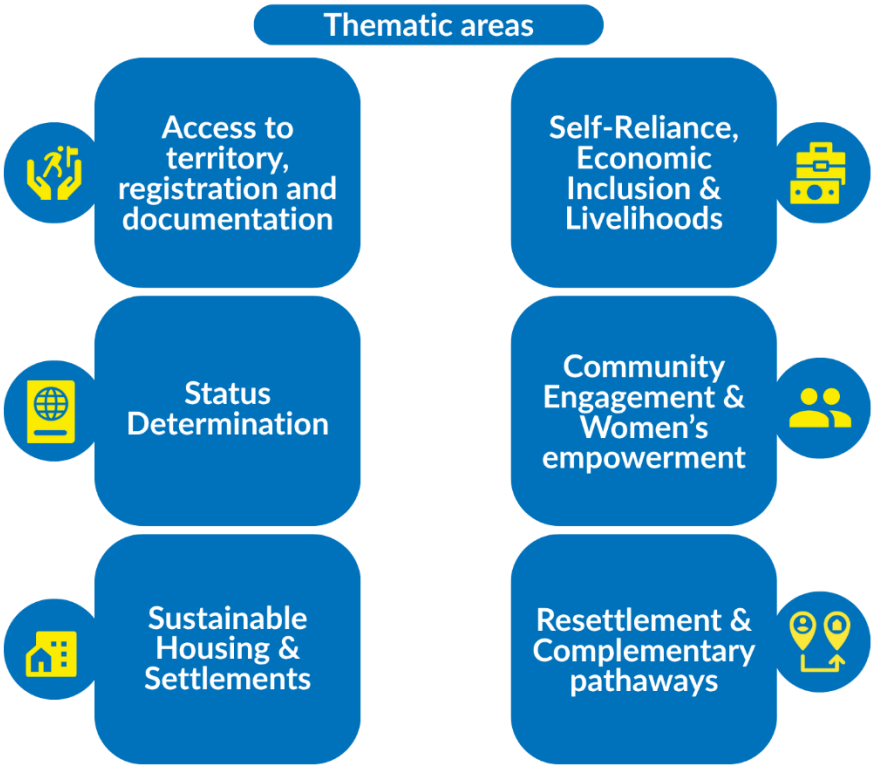

Figure 2. Thematic areas of the focus group discussions.

Caveats and Limitations

The findings presented in this report should be considered in light of several methodological limitations, particularly concerning the discussion format structure and the heterogeneity of the participant groups, which may have introduced biases regarding the frequency and salience of discussed topics.

The sequential nature of the discussion sessions introduces a considerable risk of ordering bias (or primacy effect), which may skew the reported frequency and prominence of early agenda items.

Despite having a lower reported frequency in the discussion notes, later-listed topics, including housing, education of children, and cash assistance needs, were nonetheless explicitly raised by refugees as issues they wished to discuss in greater depth than it was possible during this exercise.

Asylum-seekers undergoing international protection procedures expressed an overwhelming focus on their procedures and legal matters such as family reunification. Their primary concern was frequently summarized as achieving status (*"everything is great here; we just want status"*). This acute focus drove the high frequency of discussion around these themes with people who have not yet been granted international protection.

In contrast, those who have already secured international protection shifted their focus toward high-impact experiences and immediate integration challenges, such as navigating instances of violence or accessing social services. Similarly, because Ukrainian refugees are granted temporary protection almost automatically, they

swiftly benefit from a relatively secure residency in Bulgaria. With procedural hurdles largely removed, they have been focusing on long-term needs and socio-economic integration over administrative concerns.

In summary, the high incidence of discussion regarding status determination and border issues accurately reflects the acute needs of the asylum-seeking population. While recognised refugees did relate to some of the issues shared by asylum-seekers, specifically the challenges during the procedure and at the border, such as poor interpretation, anxiety over the outcome and ill-treatment when reaching the country, their current needs and focus were more related to inclusion, integration and their future in Bulgaria.

There are some additional considerations that should be taken into account:

- FGDs were held in Compass Protection and Inclusion Centres (in Sofia, Harmanli, Plovdiv, Dobrich, Varna, Burgas), funded by UNHCR and managed by UNHCR partners. Additional sessions took place in reception and registration centres (RRCs) operated by SAR, accommodation sites for displaced persons from Ukraine, the Special Centres for Temporary Accommodation of Foreigners (in Busmantsi and Lyubimets), and residential care services for unaccompanied and separated children (UASC).
- UNHCR received support from partner staff, SAR, and residential care staff in recruiting participants for the FGDs.
- In some FGDs, partner staff were present; in one case, a SAR representative attended; and in another, the director, social workers, and interpreter from a residential care facility were also present during the discussions and provided inputs.
- Due to logistical constraints, interpretation for some FGDs was provided by partner social workers.

While the support of partner staff and SAR was crucial for fostering trust and rapport, UNHCR acknowledges that their prior relationships with participants may have introduced a degree of bias. This limitation was carefully accounted for during the analysis and should be kept in mind when interpreting the findings. Crucially, the insights gathered reflect significant participant-raised challenges and should not be dismissed despite the circumstances of the FGDs. Importantly, UNHCR ensured that participants had opportunities to share information privately after the FGDs when needed, and they were made aware of the anonymous feedback and complaint mechanism.

It should also be remembered that the qualitative nature of FGDs provides a rich collection of personal experiences and perspectives, offering deeper insights into the effectiveness of protection and integration efforts in Bulgaria. These findings are not statistically generalizable but represent qualitative experiences. Reported statistics reflect the number of groups that responded to each question.

Population Breakdown

Forty-nine percent (105) of the participants were Ukrainian, while the remaining 51% were from Syria (79), Afghanistan (13), Iran (8), Morocco (6), Iraq (5), and Tajikistan (1).

Forty-four percent (95) of the participants were aged between 25 to 59 years old. The second largest age group were participants below 24 years old (79), with 60 children and 19 young adults (between 18 to 24 years old) and the smallest group (41 participants) was over the age of 60. Participants from Middle East, North Africa (MENA) and Central Asia made up the majority (82%) of the children and young adult representation. Participants over 60 years old were solely of Ukrainian nationality.

CHILDREN

CoO	Sex	No. of participants
Afghanistan	F/M	2/5
Iran	F/M	2/3
Iraq	M	1
Morocco	M	1
Syria	M	38
Ukraine	F/M	3/5
Total		60

ADULTS

CoO	Sex	No. of participants
Afghanistan	F/M	3/3
Iran	F	3
Iraq	F/M	1/3
Morocco	M	5
Syria	F/M	11/29
Tajikistan	F	1
Ukraine	F/M	75/22
Total		156

Table 1. Number of children and adult participants by country of origin and gender

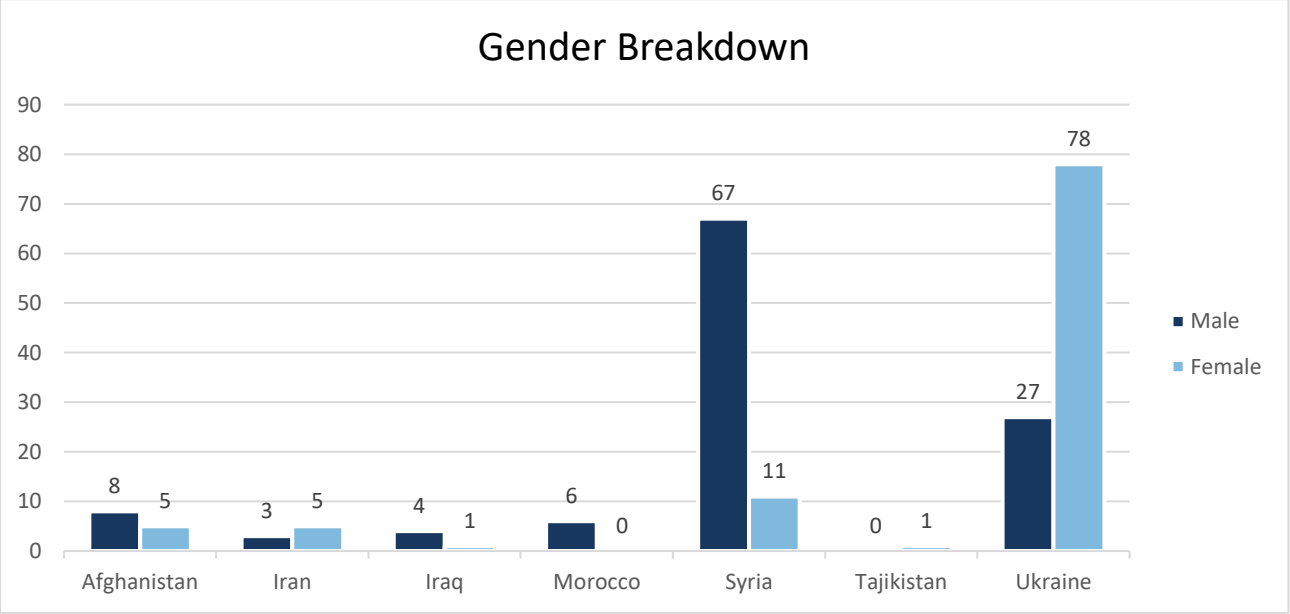

Figure 3. Gender distribution of participants by country of origin

Forty-six percent (101) of the participants were female, with 77% (78) of them being of Ukrainian nationality. Forty-eight percent of the participants were beneficiaries of TP, 32% were asylum-seekers (including 3% rejected by SAR and/or returned under Dublin procedures and their cases have not yet been reopened), 20% were beneficiaries of international protection (13% humanitarian status, and 7% holders of refugee status).

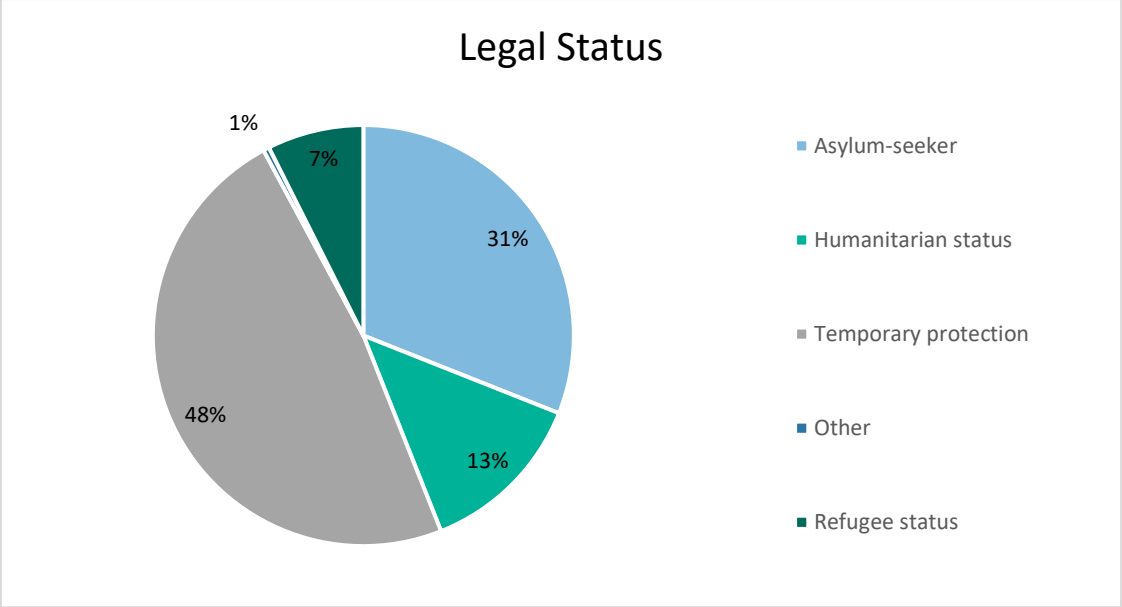

Figure 4. Distribution of participants by legal status

Sixty-six percent of the participants, the majority of whom are of Ukrainian nationality (94 out of the 142), live in Bulgaria with their immediate family members.

Most of the participants (102) have been in Bulgaria for 2 to 5 years.

Underrepresented groups include MENA and Central Asian female youth, older people from MENA and young adults from Central Asia and Ukraine.

Voices of Refugees and Asylum-seekers from Middle East and North Africa

In this section, the data reflects the proportion of the 18 MENA (and one participant from Tajikistan) focus groups that raised each issue at least once. Results are aggregated by group, not by individual participants.

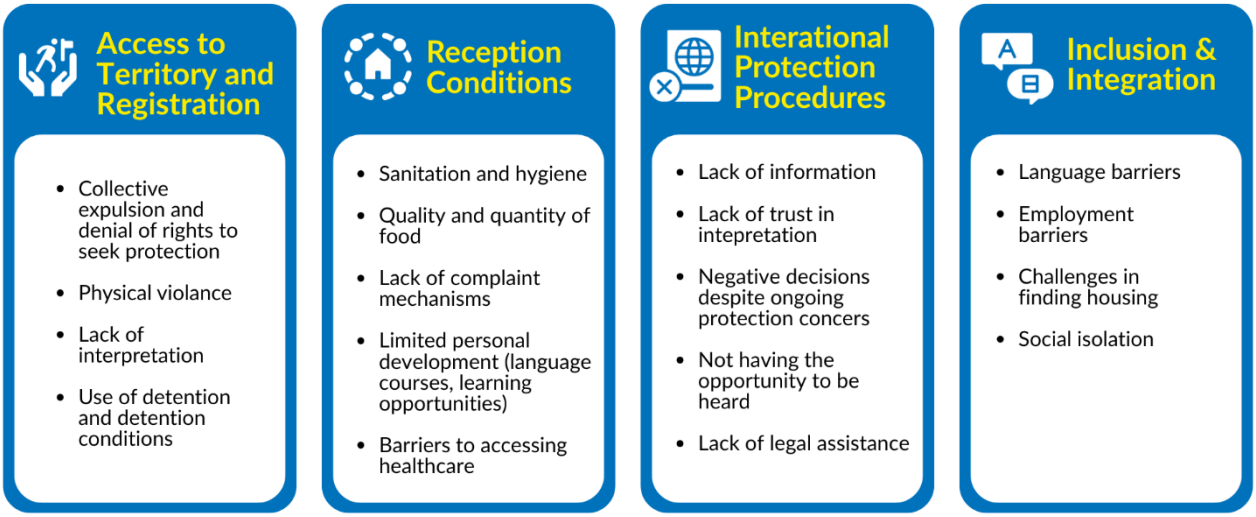

Figure 5. Key Findings from MENA FGDs

Access to Territory

Topics related to Access to territory were mentioned by 83% of the groups, with experiences at the border and detention being the primary concerns.

Unlike the experience of Ukrainian refugees, for whom admission is a more structured administrative process, the testimonies shared by refugees and asylum-seekers from other countries regarding the Bulgaria–Türkiye border specifically present a wide range of experiences. Accounts consistently present a difficult journey that involves days of walking in the forests in cold weather, and no access to food, multiple failed entry attempts and concerning border management practices.

Participants risked their health and well-being while undertaking the journey. As described by one asylum-seeker: *"Our journey was also very difficult, during it I broke my leg, and my child was also extremely exhausted"*, and another asylum-seeker, who was pregnant when crossing the border, shared a similar experience: *"It was very difficult and cold, my child got sick, I also got sick".* A participant in Plovdiv shared that he had tried 12 times to cross the border.

While very concerning practices related to border apprehension remain, it is notable that more asylum-seekers and refugees are reporting adequate treatment by border authorities. Some participants (mostly women) did not share any experiences of violence at the border or while in police custody. Another participant who had been detained shared: *"when the police brought us back here, they treated us well, however in the police station, they brought us in a basement where it was cold and there wasn't enough food."*

In Sofia, women asylum-seekers described their encounters with border police as professional. There were similar accounts from a male participant in the Ovcha Kupel RRC, who was treated well after he was apprehended at the border and was provided essential support, such as food, by officers. In Dobrich, the refugees shared that they were treated normally by the border police.

Nevertheless, this is not the case for all participants in the FGDs. Many single male participants entering Bulgaria prior to 2025 stated that they either witnessed violence during their journey, or experienced violence themselves, specifically when caught at the border.

"When they caught us, our 'guide' ran away. The police held a gun, and they didn't treat us well. When they arrested us, they beat us. They beat all of us."

Afghan asylum-seeker in Busmantsi.

There was a number of accounts that included instances of confiscation of property, severe beatings, pushbacks and intentional attacks by dogs released from the border police staff.

"They took our clothes, took away the trousers even. They sent us back to the Türkiye border. Even there they took our phone and money, both sides did the same and then they let the dogs on us."

Syrian refugee, residing in Sofia for more than 1 year

A significant number of participants reported having no information at all during the border crossing phase in 2025 or before. This issue was exacerbated by the language barriers that in some cases prevent participants from learning about their rights efficiently. These accounts consistently suggest that the journey is managed almost exclusively by smuggling networks, although there are exceptions. Arrangements are made either by the participants themselves or by family members. This, however, comes with all risks associated with smugglers; for example, one male asylum-seeker from Sofia recounted witnessing someone losing their life during the crossing. One group discouraged anyone considering undertaking this journey, citing how dangerous it was.

"When you decide to leave with the help of a trafficker, you need to understand that your life is at their hands".

Afghan asylum-seeker

Some participants shared that they had some information passed down from relatives and friends already in Europe, so they had certain expectations regarding their stay in Bulgaria. A female participant in Harmanli noted they were told it was *"very good here and you could receive protection."* However, among the participants there was no one who had concrete and specific information regarding Bulgaria and the asylum procedure during their journey.

Naturally, participants feel forced to undertake such dangerous journeys, because they are left with no other choice, since legal entry points are effectively inaccessible to them. When asked what they would change in this process, participants suggested having legal entry options to seek asylum that would not require them to enter the country irregularly. One participant suggested having a humanitarian visa and to have the freedom to choose where to apply for asylum. They also appealed to border authorities to adjust practices to ensure respect for their human rights.

Reception conditions

"There is not much more we can ask for, back in Syria we did not have electricity or water, here we have those and safety."

Syrian asylum-seeker

In terms of facility management and infrastructure, despite serious concerns regarding living conditions, participants noted some positive developments.

In RRC Vrazhdebna, residents themselves were engaged in the recent improvements by assisting with the painting of the walls of the centre. One participant shared that they were being provided with new beds, and he noted expectations for further positive changes. In RRC Voenna Rampa, residents were able to share positive outcomes after reaching out to RRC management with specific complaints. They were able to negotiate the establishment of a cleaning schedule, where they could clean their spaces (while they wished to be provided with appropriate cleaning supplies). Complaints regarding the misbehaviour of staff members were also addressed, and participants noted improvements following their reports.

However, not much progress could be reported on the material conditions of the centres. Issues across the different RRCs were similar, with participants often citing poor living conditions. Bad hygiene, bedbugs and cockroaches, dirty bedsheets, only cold water being available, broken washing machines to which they have limited access and no heating were among the examples that were shared. One participant in Harmanli noted that she has a bed, but no mattress. Participants were severely affected by bedbugs in the reception centres and during the focus group discussion, they showed visible bites on their children and themselves.

A prevalent complaint among participants accommodated in reception centres was the food. One participant also highlighted an issue related to mealtimes. Her children were recently enrolled in school and were starting soon, however, she has no income to provide food or school supplies for them. Breakfast is served at 9 AM, but children will have to leave earlier for school. Dinner is served at 4 PM, but children will be returning later, and food cannot be taken into rooms, leaving her unsure how she will be able to feed them. The mealtimes are similar across centres which together with the low quality of the food provided, as reported by the participants, posed a challenge towards the proper nourishment of the RRC residents. Some participants shared that it is very inconvenient to have dinner at 16:00, especially if they are working until later hours or cannot bring back the food to their room to eat later.

Detention conditions

Accounts from individuals in Special Centres for Temporary Accommodation of Foreigners (SCTAF) also indicate significant challenges regarding the maintenance of living standards and facility infrastructure. Participants reported that high occupancy levels in shared rooms have placed a strain on sanitation systems, leading to persistent issues with hygiene and odours in common areas and sleeping quarters. Furthermore, there is no consistent supply of hot water or consistent access to laundry services. While basic nutritional needs are being met through scheduled food deliveries, participants once again expressed low satisfaction with the quality and variety of the meals provided.

Security measures, such as the overnight locking of rooms for security reasons, were noted as a barrier to accessing basic sanitation facilities during late hours. Participants emphasized the need for the replacement of aging bedding materials to address reports of pest infestations and to improve overall hygiene standards.

While medical staff are present in both RRCs and SCTAFs, support is often perceived as *"superficial"*, as there were repeated accounts of doctors not providing the necessary care. In Busmantsi, multiple detainees reported that

doctors do not conduct thorough examinations. One man with a medical condition affecting his eye and another who was sick were simply given *"a pill for a headache*," while another with knee pain was offered cream but refused thorough medical examination, including an X-ray.

Among the solutions, proposed by the participants, besides the numerous mentions of renovations, were to have a cleaning schedule and to have residents themselves employed to clean. In order to deal with potential tensions within the centres, especially in SCTAFs, participants found that separation of the different groups would be beneficial to prevent interpersonal conflicts. They also deemed necessary to have stricter rules and consequences for those that do not adhere to them.

International Protection Procedure

"Yes, war may have finished, but there are many terrorists in Syria. If I go back, I will die. My parents told me not to come back to Syria. There is no water, no electricity. Nothing. There is nothing for me to do there."

Syrian asylum-seeker

The international protection procedure was the second most discussed topic. Among the interviewed asylum-seekers, a great majority already had a negative decision issued by SAR on their asylum application and were awaiting the outcome of their appeal in front of either the Administrative Court or the Supreme Administrative Court. There were reports that even when the Administrative Courts ruled in their favour and returned the case to SAR to address gaps or shortfalls in the decision-making process, they would still receive a "rejection" (negative decision on their application as an outcome of the re-examination of their case based on the court ruling). Many expressed a sense of helplessness, feeling that their stories were not being heard or accurately conveyed, and a sense of dread from being forced to return to their country of origin, despite the fear of harm when returned.

The quality of interpretation remains a significant determinant of a fair interview. There were some participants who described their interpreters as professional and helpful, while others were more neutral in their assessment, claiming that there was no way for them to know if their story was properly conveyed, but did not share any specific complaints.

There were also complaints regarding inaccurate or hostile interpretation. In RRC Harmanli, a participant shared that she was unhappy with the interpreter in her interview because the person did not translate her statements properly, which directly affected her claim. She discovered upon receiving her rejection that certain information had not been reflected in the documented claim. Another participant, now with refugee status, also shared a similar negative experience with the interpreter. She also discovered that not everything she shared during the interview was presented and she believed that the interpreter and his incorrect representation of her story is the reason behind the years-long issues her family is facing with receiving status. In RRC Vrazhdebna, a participant reported that while he spoke emotionally for approximately 10 minutes, the interpreter condensed and translated the entire statement in just one minute. This was noted as a common experience by others as well.

"The translator was working against us."

Syrian refugee

Fear and misinformation frequently prevented full disclosure during interviews. A male participant in Harmanli admitted he did not share his full story regarding his time in Türkiye or the threats he faced in Syria because he feared immediate deportation if he revealed he had passed through a country that SAR considers as a "safe third country". Indeed, monitoring of the international protection procedures indicates that transit through Türkiye leads to a presumption that the individual had or has the opportunity to receive protection there. Such decisions can be made without due consideration of individual circumstances or experiences, or of the question of whether the individual can be returned to the presumed "safe third country".

Access to legal aid appeared inconsistent. Those who had the financial means would hire lawyers, hoping this would improve their chances, but there is heavy reliance on NGOs for legal information, with UNHCR partners Bulgarian Helsinki Committee and Foundation Access to Rights – FAR being cited frequently. There were several instances where it seemed like the participants themselves were not exactly sure on what stage their claim was. In some FGDs, one participant indicated that they are awaiting a decision from the Administrative Court, but the other participants would correct them, telling them that they are actually waiting for the decision of the Supreme Administrative Court. This is significant, as it highlights that there is a gap of legal information. The reason behind this could be either that the participants do not receive sufficient information on their case, or the way the information presented is not clear and accessible to them.

Family reunification

Family reunification is a central and emotionally charged theme across all demographic groups. For many refugees, the presence or absence of family is the primary determinant of their mental health, their willingness to stay and reestablish their lives in Bulgaria, and their long-term integration prospects. Some participants were able to successfully reunite with their families (one group in Plovdiv was solely composed of refugee women who came to Bulgaria through the family reunification procedure). However, the majority of participants described the process as *"torturous,"* opaque, and beset by administrative disconnects.

Frequently cited as a *"painful subject,"* the process for those who have been granted family reunification is defined by visa denials, extreme delays, and limited consular access, leaving families separated for extended periods. Participants expressed deep frustration over the disconnect between domestic decisions and consular actions. Even when SAR grants permission for reunification, Bulgarian consulates abroad frequently deny the necessary visas. In Plovdiv, a participant shared, her sister, who has six children in Syria, was denied a visa despite having official approval.

Beyond visa refusals, access to consulates is also a major barrier. Participants in Plovdiv reported that Bulgarian consulates (specifically in Türkiye and Lebanon) are often unreachable. Families are unable to enter embassy grounds to submit documents or are forced to pay high fees to intermediaries just to secure an appointment. It took on average one year and significant financial resources to complete the process. Some refugees resort to borrowing money to support separated family members.

Participants urged the government to align the decisions of SAR with the actions of consular offices. They questioned the fact that one state body grants permission while another denies the means to execute it. There is a critical need for accessible consular services that do not require paid intermediaries, ensuring that those with legal permissions can submit their applications without obstruction.

Inclusion and integration

If life had been easier in [our] home country, [we] would not have left.

Afghan woman

For refugees and asylum-seekers in Bulgaria, social inclusion and livelihoods was also a topic where they faced significant challenges, related to systemic barriers such as exploitative labour practices and lack of social integration support system.

Among the participants granted international protection who took part in the discussions, only one participant was able to share a positive experience with integrating in Bulgaria which resulted in her obtaining Bulgarian citizenship. The participant expressed feeling safe and well in the country and noted a strong sense of belonging, despite the challenges she faced upon arrival. Even with the initial financial hardships she had, she was still able to start her own business that employs refugees, highlighting her commitment to support the community. Unfortunately, this wasn't the case for the majority of the participants, and she did share having the same struggles as other asylum-seekers and refugees in the beginning, mainly related to finding accommodation and managing language barriers.

"I feel that the country is not supporting or welcoming us. I feel like they are trying to drive us out"

Syrian refugee

Language barriers

Indeed, self-reliance seemed difficult to attain as the language posed a significant challenge for the participants. Findings from FGDs suggest that language barrier limits refugees and asylum-seekers' participation, increases their dependency on interpreters and "helpers", and fuels community tensions. The lack of language proficiency has created a need for intermediaries, which however, poses severe financial risks, as it makes individuals vulnerable to scams, and abuse and exploitation. In Sofia, one group revealed a specific scam where an interpreter colluded with a landlord to inflate the rent by twofold, pocketing the difference while the tenants remained unaware due to their inability to read the contract.

"We want to be part of this society, but without language it is impossible."

Syrian refugee

Access to public services is also obstructed by language barriers. Several participants shared their desire to obtain a driving license, but the lack of language support prevents them from doing so. Participants in Plovdiv avoided going to state institutions alone, because they knew the language barrier would be an issue.

The language barrier creates gaps in healthcare as well. One participant shared that her access to healthcare is frequently mediated through "Google Translate," as professional interpretation is often unavailable during visits. However, this means that they were not able to communicate their health conditions effectively. This experience was shared by other participants as well, who noted the possible mistakes that can be made.

Beyond the language issues, refugees faced other challenges related to the healthcare system. A refugee in Dobrich with a chronic illness pays for his own health insurance but is refused referrals by his GP, forcing him to pay out-of-pocket for expensive specialists. A pregnant woman (eight months along) in Sofia expressed deep anxiety about where she would give birth, having been unable to register her other children with a GP. This caused additional problems for her, as one of her children was suffering from a rash, but she could not take the child to a medical professional.

Accommodation

For refugees seeking independence and a new start in life, the path to sustainable housing is obstructed by a private market characterized by racial profiling concerns and high rents. In Dobrich, participants explicitly stated that *"people in Dobrich do not rent to Syrian refugees."* A participant from Harmanli would emphasise that she is from Iraq, not Syria, hoping this would better her chances of finding an apartment to rent. Even when refugees are able to secure accommodation and pay rent, landlords frequently refused to issue the rental contracts necessary for address registration, which subsequently blocks refugees from opening bank accounts.

Challenges related to finding accommodation also exposed participants to scams. One single mother was the victim of a scam where she paid three months' rent upfront, only to be physically assaulted and evicted, resulting in injury to her child. Another participant paid 2,000 EUR (rent plus deposit) only to discover the contract was fake.

Participants outside Sofia shared that they need to pay rent ranging from 300 EUR for a studio to 500 EUR for a two-bedroom apartment, accommodating 5 people. As usually there is only one breadwinner, this creates extreme anxiety, with more than half of their salaries going to cover the rent, not leaving enough to cover other necessities.

To mitigate the high risk of exploitation, participants recommended that the state provide a form of controlled rental flats as a transitional protection measure. Lastly, given that rent consumes most of the income (e.g., earning 1300 EUR but paying 600 EUR for rent plus bills), participants identified housing assistance as critical support that would allow them to focus on language learning, childcare and career development.

"We sleep and think about rent, and we wake up and think about rent."

Syrian refugee

Livelihoods

While there is a strong desire to work (*"we cannot stay idle"*) the reality is that often participants have to turn to informal employment which leaves individuals vulnerable to abuse and unable to meet basic needs like rent and food.

The informal labour was a dominant theme across all groups. Most participants (both those granted international protection and asylum-seekers) reported working without formal contracts. In Sofia, young men working in construction explicitly stated, *"No one has a formal contract"*, and one noted he works as a freelancer because contracts are unavailable.

The informal nature of this work leads to severe financial vulnerability. In Sofia, adult men reported earning 100-120 BGN for a long day's work in the informal sector, which was insufficient to cover rent and bills. A group in Plovdiv despaired that their husbands would work long hours, and were therefore, unable to spend time with their children, yet they couldn't even afford basic school necessities for them, provided all the other expenses that needed to be covered. Female participants expressed their readiness to also start working, however, this was often not possible due to language barriers, no professional qualifications programs and lack of childcare support.

In Harmanli, women noted that employers *"take advantage"* of young men without documents, lying to them about salaries. One participant in Plovdiv highlighted that working for *"Arab or Turkish"* employers often means irregular pay, whereas Bulgarian employers are perceived as more reliable but require language skills they do not yet possess.

The desire to work is not just financial but social. Participants in Harmanli and Sofia expressed a strong wish to *"be part of this society"* and *"give back to Bulgaria"*, but while they were ready to contribute and integrate, they felt sidelined by systems that failed to accommodate their linguistic or cultural needs and did not provide sufficient integration support. Adult participants in Sofia and Plovdiv expressed frustration that NGO-provided language courses were often held during the day, conflicting with their survival jobs. They explicitly compared their situation to Ukrainian refugees, who they perceive as having access to evening classes that are unavailable to Syrian or Afghan groups. Another issue related to the language classes was that the teachers spoke only Bulgarian, which hindered effective learning of the language.

Participants wished NGOs step in as intermediaries to ensure fair contracts and regular salary payments, protecting them from exploitative employers. Refugees also suggest skill recognition and training, stating that there is a high demand for professional qualification programmes, like those in Germany, that provide internationally recognized certificates. Women in Plovdiv specifically requested "professional qualifications" workshops as a must for integration.

Access to assistance and information

Participants in Plovdiv disclosed instances where they were denied humanitarian support (with NGO staff directly telling them *"Syrians – no"*), while Ukrainian refugees were able to receive aid. There were notable comments made by participants outlining the discrepancy between the support provided to temporary protection beneficiaries and international protection beneficiaries, citing the government programme for Ukrainians that provided them with accommodation as well.

Participants relied heavily on the Compass Centres (and sometimes information found online, namely from refugeelight.com, which is supported by FAR) to access services, as they could not directly communicate with local authorities. UNHCR partners at these centres provided mediation and accompaniment to help mediate access to public services and mitigate the risk of exploitation in the private market, such as rental contracts and labour contracts.

While many participants expressed appreciation for the support they receive from NGOs, several also highlighted that this assistance was not always consistent or appropriate. Some described negative experiences with interpreters or NGO staff whose behaviour they felt was dismissive or disrespectful (*"They made you feel like you came to beg them for something"*). For some, these interactions led to feelings of discouragement and, in some cases, to avoiding certain services altogether. Although NGOs play a crucial role in helping refugees navigate basic services, individuals remain vulnerable when intermediaries are their only way to communicate or access assistance.

Social isolation and community resilience

Despite these barriers, the community is demonstrating significant resilience. The men in Vrazhdebna are learning Bulgarian on their phones to get better jobs, and this practice is shared by other participants as well. Community networks provide essential information. Jobs are almost exclusively found through word-of-mouth, Facebook groups, or personal connections.

For many refugees, Bulgaria offers a relief from war, yet social integration remains elusive. While physical violence is largely confined to border encounters and specific institutional settings, the overall refugee experience is defined by significant challenges in linguistic integration, cultural acceptance, and treatment by the host community.

A majority of participants, particularly women and families, reported feeling physically safe in Bulgaria. A woman in Sofia noted she feels safe because she no longer faces the threats of the Taliban, while women in Harmanli described their life as "peaceful" compared to Syria. Despite this sense of safety, meaningful social connections with Bulgarians are rare. In Dobrich, participants described having "no social life" with the local community,

relying entirely on one another. Exceptions exist, such as a *"cultural night*" organized by BRC once, which successfully fostered connection.

Even though participants faced significant challenges when navigating the administrative systems in Bulgaria, specifically when seeking housing and employment, they still shared positive sentiments about the host community's attitude towards them. There is a strong, articulated desire to be part of Bulgarian society. Participants, particularly those with children, emphasized their wish to remain in Bulgaria to secure better futures.

While some refugees in Plovdiv feel *"part of"* the community through their children's schooling, others report discrimination. In Sofia, the sentiment of being unwelcome is fuelled by administrative barriers and lack of structured integration support, such as school enrolment refusals, rather than physical aggression. The workplace often serves as the primary site of interaction, with participants reporting learning Bulgarian through interactions with coworkers. In Harmanli and Sofia, men working in construction reported "normal" relations with Bulgarian colleagues. However, the language barrier once again was identified as an obstacle to building friendships outside of work. Women in Plovdiv and Harmanli expressed a strong desire to socialize but found themselves isolated by their inability to speak Bulgarian.

Specific bureaucratic requirements also cause distress. A group of recognized female refugees highlighted the discomfort of being forced to remove their hijabs for identification document photos. While they comply, they felt uncomfortable during the process and when showing their ID.

Participants acknowledged that *"bad actors"* within their own community sometimes create tension with locals, but they emphasized their determination to be a "good example" to counter these negative perceptions.

"We Syrians rely only on ourselves."

Syrian refugee

In the absence of robust state support, the refugee community relies heavily on internal networks. In Sofia, a woman defrauded of her rent found housing through colleagues and the Iranian community, while WhatsApp groups serve as critical information hubs.

Mental health and psycho-social support

Mental health could also be identified as a significant challenge. The primary driver of psychological distress is not past trauma alone, but the current uncertainty of legal status and the pervasive fear of deportation, specifically for asylum seekers, while financial insecurity was the detriment for those with granted international protection.

"What is left for me is to take my own life, if I receive another rejection. It has been two years and three months since I last saw my family and children."

Syrian asylum-seeker

In a desperate situation, even professional psychosocial support is sometimes viewed with scepticism or distrust. In Sofia, a woman perceived her experience with a psychologist as negative. She thought that the psychologist dismissed her concerns about living conditions, asking, *"What else do you want? This is the situation."* Many

refugees do not consider receiving professional support, preferring to rely on friends within the community for emotional support.

In detention centres like Busmantsi, the environment itself acts as a severe stressor. Detainees described the conditions as *"driving people crazy,"* with one young man reportedly losing his mental stability because his daily existence is reduced to *"eating his food in bed and using the toilet."*

Community solidarity is the central mechanism for survival. Both men and women rely heavily on informal, personal networks for information and emotional support, often facilitated through WhatsApp groups. Peer discussions serve as a vital outlet to relieve stress and maintain hope, especially for those facing repeated asylum rejections. Religious faith and gratitude were frequently mentioned as psychological anchors that help individuals endure uncertainty.

"Often, I want to cry but I can't cry anymore. We just praise God."

Syrian asylum-seeker

When asked what kind of support they needed, participants did not request formal mental health or psychosocial programmes. While they agreed that such support could be beneficial when it was mentioned, they did not see it as their primary need. For asylum-seekers, psychological distress was overwhelmingly linked to legal uncertainty, therefore they expressed that the only meaningful improvement to their mental health would be obtaining a status. In contrast, recognised refugees connected their anxiety and sense of helplessness to material insecurity, particularly rent, debt, and unstable income, and felt that financial and housing support would alleviate the main sources of psychological pressure.

Overall, findings from the FGDs reveal a troubling protection environment for MENA asylum-seekers and refugees. Many participants perceived certain aspects of the asylum system as functioning primarily as a form of deterrence. This perception is shaped by several factors, including very limited and often inaccessible legal pathways to seeking asylum, repeated experiences of collective expulsion, a lack of effective communication at borders and in detention, extremely high rejection rates, the rigid application of the "safe third country" concept regardless of individual circumstances, and poor reception conditions. For those who had already been granted international protection, experiences were defined by structural barriers affecting integration, including socio-economic exclusion and administrative hurdles.

Experiences of Children and Adolescents

The accounts experiences of UASC are split between those accommodated in the residential care facilities (in Ruse, Sofia and Burgas) and those who are in the "Safe Zones" within RRCs. Participants living in the residential care facilities were able to share a general positive experience, as these institutions offer relatively individualized care environment. Participants accommodated in the Safe Zones, while receiving critical immediate protection, highlighted gaps in educational and personal development opportunities and living standards.

Access to territory

Similar to the rest of the participants in the FGDs, UASC also shared concerning accounts of their travel to Bulgaria that included violence and pushbacks. Children described feeling scared and confused, and many had been separated from family members or had witnessed violence during their journey.

One minor participant in Burgas reported attempting to enter Bulgaria 17 times and that he had to stay in the forest for 7 days. Another child also reported multiple entry attempts, while a different participant shared that he had to stay at a bus station for 25 days. In Ovcha Kupel RRC, another minor participant shared that his private

belongings were confiscated when crossing the border by the authorities. He was sent back to Türkiye without any communication with the Border Police. Another was detained by the police for three hours and considered being beaten *"the least of it"*. Another minor participant also reported experiencing violence but clarified that it was *"only a slap by the police officer"*.

Not all experiences were this negative, however. One underage participant noted that they *"felt okay and well-treated under police custody"*, while other unaccompanied minors described their encounters with border police as professional. In the Voenna Ramp RRC, a significant majority of male unaccompanied minors (six out of seven) reported no physical altercations during their apprehension.

Among the 111 participants, 46 participants reported being detained. Among these participants, three minors were in detention at the time of the focus group discussions. Among the rest of participants who shared they were detained at some point after entry, 17 were unaccompanied children. Therefore, among the 52 UASC who took part of the PA, 38% were currently detained or have been detained. One unaccompanied child shared being detained for 28 days, while another was detained for 17 days.

Children shared that none of them had any information about Bulgaria before fleeing their country. When asked who they rely on during their journey, participants simply stated: *"We ask for help from the smugglers, from who else?"*

Reception conditions

It is notable that unaccompanied children in Sofia, Ruse and Burgas accommodated in residential care facilities reported general satisfaction with the facility conditions, with their relationship with staff and with their overall situation, with the sole exception to this experience being the food.

Burgas participants (who were all granted international protection) were able to communicate effectively in Bulgarian language during the focus group discussion and shared positive experiences with local community and police. Five out of eight participants are enrolled in school and the four who consistently attend classes share the consensus that they are treated well and have a good relationship with the teachers, with one child sharing that he was included in the classes by being prompted to share experiences from Syria as well. All participants were enrolled with a GP and have effective access to health care. When comparing with the conditions of the RRC they were previously accommodated in, one participant noted that he felt unsafe in the RRC, while others emphasised the need of renovations as the facility "was dirty".

The participants from the residential care in Sofia had a different experience from their time in the RRC, with most of them being satisfied with the support they received in the Safe Zones overseen by IOM, especially those accommodated in Voenna Rampa RRC. They did not seem to have specific complaints about their accommodation in the residential care facilities accommodating them at the time of the FGDs, with the only exception being the food, but they did highlight the need for general improvements of the facility. Most children were enrolled in and attend school and receive additional language and educational support. What stood out as well in the discussion were the range of different activities that the staff organised with the help of volunteers in order to provide variety to the residents. The activities include football lessons, language classes, and even excursions to the seaside.

In Ruse, the participants reported general satisfaction with the conditions in the residential care facility, especially after the renovations. There are fitness facilities installed, from which the children can benefit, but as the centre is also open, they are able to go out during the day with preferred location being a nearby skate park. While none of the children were enrolled with a GP or in school, the centre still provides them with informal educational activities on a daily basis, with visits from BRC staff as well, and is able to provide them with urgent care, if necessary. Notably, to mitigate the issue with the food, staff in Ruse started involving the unaccompanied children when preparing the grocery list and during the grocery shopping. Residents were also able to cook for themselves on weekends, should they wish to do so. The staff also expressed willingness to look into delivery options to ensure that the children were able to receive specific types of products as well.

In a different crisis centre, again in Ruse, another unaccompanied child resides along with Bulgarian children. During the interview with him, a positive observation was that the child communicated well in Bulgarian and shared general satisfaction with the living conditions.

The positive experiences shared during these FGDs emphasise the benefits of targeted funding and support, especially when it comes to UASC, who may need a more individualised approach and support to integrate.

The situation was very different for the children accommodated in the RRCs. There were still positive accounts from the children in Voenna Rampa, who did not share any significant struggles with the reception conditions. They liked their rooms and found the interpreters helpful. They were able to enjoy different types of activities, such as basketball, volleyball and cricket.

"We are in an open camp, our lives are calm. We live normally here, we don't have problems in the RRC."

Afghan child

However, this was not the case for all participants. Children in RRC Ovcha Kupel highlighted during the discussion the poor quality of the food, citing that they had cases where they were served *"raw chicken".* They did not seem to have a good relationship with some of the staff who was in charge of their care and did not share anything notable about the activities they were provided with. These sentiments were shared by the children in Harmanli as well, with one participant citing that he was not supported when he wanted to enrol in school.

There were efforts to provide children with basic education, but they were not always successful. Not all children were enrolled in school, but for those who were, this did not guarantee learning. In Ovcha Kupel, children enrolled in the 8th grade reported sitting in class, understanding nothing. They were prohibited from using phones during school, so they were unable to translate the teacher's instructions, or to communicate with classmates.

International protection procedures

Regarding international protection procedures, unaccompanied children displayed a concerning lack of familiarity with the process. One case that stood out was of an unaccompanied child in Harmanli who believed that he would be reunited with his brother in a different European country, but the SAR representative clarified that he was going to be sent back to his family in Syria, as he signed a form for voluntary return.[8]

Children reported weak or non-existent relationships with their legal representatives, frequently citing language barriers as the primary cause. A very small percentage of the children said that they keep in touch with their legal representative and those who do, however, needed to rely on the online translation tools when communicating.

For the procedure itself, children did not have much to share. A small majority indicated that they were not properly explained the procedure, the only communication towards them from authorities being that they would be accommodated in the RRC, or that they were informally informed of their interview the day before. They still were a bit apprehensive because they couldn't verify themselves what the interpreter said during the interview, but nothing specific stood out to them which they could share during the discussion. Only one unaccompanied

[8] As of the time of drafting this report, the child concerned has been returned to Syria. UNHCR is not able to verify whether the return was indeed voluntary, given the child's stated wish to be reunited with his brother in another EU country.

child in Busmantsi alleged that due to an interpreter's mistake, his age was wrongly documented on his papers as 18 years old when he was 17 years old, but for the others there weren't any issues during their interviews.

Nevertheless, there were tensions across all groups, similarly to the adult participants in the FGDs, their asylum applications and subsequent appeals are consistently with negative outcomes. In Harmanli, young boys receiving negative decisions expressed frustration over lawyers who recently promised a visit that to date had not taken place.

Not only asylum-seekers were struggling with the national procedures. In Sofia, unaccompanied children reported that despite holding positive reunification decisions, their families (or some members) have been refused visas. In order to appeal, they relied on NGOs who were handling their cases. Even when they were granted reunification, Bulgarian consulates in Türkiye and Lebanon denied visas for their parents and siblings. In Radnevo, a 16-year-old boy was suffering from mental distress because his mother's visa was refused.

Inclusion and integration

Language barriers were once again highlighted as major obstacle, with all groups noting that it was difficult to connect to people who don't speak their language. Many children expressed desire to learn Bulgarian but were not given the opportunity to do so either because the RRC staff did not support them with enrolment, or because they wanted separate courses that accommodated their working schedule.

Nevertheless, some of them still shared that they had Bulgarian friends and generally felt good in Bulgaria. Children in Burgas noted that they were well-treated by the local community and believed that being able to speak Bulgarian contributed to this.

As most unaccompanied children were not supported financially by their families and the stipend some of them received was not enough to cover all their needs, they often worked without a labour contract. They shared being able to get along with their coworkers, including those that work with Bulgarians. They did not face any significant challenges in their workplace and seemed satisfied in general with the conditions.

Mental health and psychosocial support

"We are not friends, we are brothers."

Syrian child

There was no targeted support for mental health in the RRCs at the time of the FGDs, so children were left to rely only on themselves. Most of them either spent time talking to their families or would deal with any emotional distress on their own. There were occasional and project-based psychosocial support activities such as the social circus events organized by UNHCR partner MiniArt Foundation. Nevertheless, even when they were not feeling physically well, children would first try to solve their problems alone, before reaching out to the RRC doctor.

While in Harmanli RRC, the children confirmed that they confided and supported each other, this was not the experience of those accommodated in Ovcha Kupel RRC. There wasn't that much community among them, as they mostly kept to themselves and stayed in their rooms. Unaccompanied children in Voenna Rampa did not share to have struggled with their mental health.

"100 percent, we are good"

Afghan child

It is notable that despite the challenging conditions in the RRCs and all issues that were shared regarding school enrolment, children accommodated there were purely focused on whether they would be granted international protection in Bulgaria or not. All concerns and suggestions they had were related to their international protection procedures, so that they could remain in Bulgaria and reunite with their family.

Overall, children also demonstrated a high-level of autonomy and resourcefulness, when faced with the numerous challenges related to their status and life in Bulgaria. When asked what they would like to improve, some children had more specific recommendations, varying from renovating the RRCs, having stricter consequences for those breaking the rules in the RRC. One child specifically complained from the fragmented support received by NGOs, appealing for a more structured approach. Children who were granted international protection recommended an increase of the pocket money of monthly 46 to 153 EUR stipend to prevent children from dropping out of school in order to work.

Challenges and children's resilience

The findings from the focus group discussions highlight a deeply uneven protection and reception environment for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in Bulgaria, shaped largely by the type of accommodation, the quality of institutional support, and access to information and services. Where individualized, well-resourced residential care is available, as seen in Ruse and Burgas, children report significantly better outcomes in terms of safety, education, language acquisition, health care access, and prospects for social inclusion. These positive experiences underscore the transformative impact of targeted funding, trained staff, and structured psychosocial and educational activities tailored to children's specific needs. In contrast, participants accommodated in Ovcha Kupel and Harmanli RRCs shared experiences of lower living standards, limited educational opportunities, insufficient psychosocial support, and strained relationships with staff, which collectively undermine their well-being and development.

Across all settings, children's experiences prior to arrival in Bulgaria have had a profound and lasting impact. These trajectories are compounded by a systemic lack of information and effective guardianship within the international protection procedure. The children's limited understanding of asylum processes, weak contact with legal representatives, language barriers, and inconsistent interpretation create significant risks, including uninformed decision-making with potentially irreversible consequences. Even for those granted international protection, persistent obstacles such as family reunification denials, financial insecurity, and administrative barriers continue to generate distress and hinder durable integration.

Despite these systemic challenges, unaccompanied children consistently demonstrated resilience, autonomy, and mutual support, often relying on peer networks rather than formal systems. Their recommendations point clearly toward the need for improving reception conditions in RRCs, ensuring meaningful access to education and language learning, strengthening guardianship and legal representation, expanding psychosocial support, and providing adequate social assistance to prevent early labour and school dropout. Taken together, these findings indicate an urgent need to shift toward a child-centred, rights-based protection system that prioritizes safety, dignity, informed participation, and long-term integration for unaccompanied children in Bulgaria.

Ukrainian Refugees Under Temporary Protection

In early 2025, the Bulgarian government, following the Council of the EU's decision, has extended Temporary Protection (TP) until March 4, 2026, following the European Council extended temporary protection until March 4, 2026, line with UNHCR recommendations[9]. Subsequently, in February 2026 temporary protection has been extended until 4 March 2027. This extension provides a critical, albeit temporary, legal framework for residence, access to the labour market, and social services.

Figure 6. Key findings from Ukrainian FGDs

Access to territory and documentation

Since the outset of the war in Ukraine, TP in Bulgaria has been granted for one-year periods and extended annually, requiring beneficiaries to renew their TP cards each year. The extension of TP until March 2027 has provided an important element of stability by ensuring a continued legal framework for protection. However, successive participatory assessments point to persistent administrative barriers that hinder effective access to rights guaranteed under European and EU law, including the Temporary Protection Directive. A key challenge remains the TP card not being recognised as identity document. Refugees have also expressed anxiety in the period leading to the belated extension of TP in Bulgaria each year and highlighted the lack of access to stable residence options under existing legislation. These factors undermine the stability of refugees' legal status and have far-reaching consequences for their access to services, social inclusion, and livelihood opportunities, ultimately affecting their self-reliance and their social and economic contributions to Bulgarian society.

Access to territory and Procedures

While most participants in the FDG arrived before 2025, there were 15 individuals who have been in Bulgaria for less than one year. When asked about their experience at the border, participants shared mixed feedback.

For those who arrived before 2025, most participants indicated that they did not encounter significant difficulties when entering Bulgaria. Participants from Primorsko, in particular, shared very positive experiences, noting that

[9] UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), UNHCR Recommendations on the continued use of Temporary Protection arrangements and Guiding Principles for Transition in relation to the Ukraine Refugee Situation, May 2025, https://www.refworld.org/policy/countrypos/unhcr/2025/en/150064 (accessed 16 January 2026).

the Border Police were kind and helpful, provided assistance, handed out materials and ensured all documentation was in order. In contrast, other groups described more challenging experiences, mainly related to documentation issues such as missing or incomplete papers. They also mentioned that long queues and thorough checks of luggage and personal belongings made the process tiring and sometimes stressful, especially for individuals travelling with kids.

Among participants who arrived in 2025, or within the past year, most reported no issues at the border. One participant from Varna, who first arrived in 2022, noted that at that time the Police provided extensive information and distributed helpful materials. They highlighted that during the early stages of the conflict, support and information were widely accessible. In contrast, a participant in Plovdiv observed that for more recent arrivals, *"there is nothing at the border at the moment,"* emphasizing the stark difference with the situation in 2022.

A participant in Burgas shared a more challenging experience: despite having all required documents and confirming with the consulate that she had permission to enter, she was initially denied entry and told to return with additional documentation from her landlord to prove she had accommodation in Bulgaria. Another participant added that his friends had faced similar difficulties, noting that Border Police did not offer any explanation for the refusal.

Regarding re-registration process and the renewal of the TP card, one male participant from Varna reported that in 2024 the process became increasingly difficult due to additional documentation requirements, including a rental contract, confirmation from the National Health Insurance Fund (NHIF/NZOK), and a notarized declaration. UNHCR and partners advocated with the Government to take action against such arbitrary practices, observed especially in Varna (but not in Sofia, for instance). According to the participant in Varna, these requirements were no longer applied in 2025.

Uncertainty of status and residence

The 2025 Participatory Assessment indicates that the temporary nature of the protection has become a significant structural barrier to integration. When participants across different groups were asked about their long-term vision for life in Bulgaria, many emphasized uncertainties linked to TP, including lengthy administrative procedures and the absence of accessible pathways to durable residence for individuals without Bulgarian roots. Such factors caused anxiety and prevented them from planning for the future as they came to accept that they could not return to Ukraine in the short term, in particular those who lost their houses, properties and sources of income in Ukraine, especially in the occupied territories.

Several participants expressed a desire to remain in Bulgaria in the longer term, especially those whose children are already well-integrated into local schools, speak the language, and feel settled. However, they emphasized that building a stable life is difficult without a clear legal pathway beyond TP, and many noted that they lack reliable information on the criteria or procedures needed to obtain a more secure status. Additional barriers, such as the inability to access mortgages and challenges in starting a business, further limit the possibility of longer-term integration.

The group in Dobrich shared that they have not considered staying in Bulgaria because they see no viable opportunity to remain. They pointed to limited year-round employment, high housing costs, rising living expenses, and insufficient state assistance as key obstacles to longer term and predictable settlement in Bulgaria.

"We plan on a month-to-month basis—we don't have a long-term perspective".

Ukrainian refugee from Varna

Among pensioners, perspectives varied depending on personal circumstances. Some expressed a desire to remain in Bulgaria, while others – such as groups in Primorsko – stated that they would prefer to return to Ukraine as

soon as possible. Pensioners highlighted that the low Ukrainian pensions are insufficient to cover living costs in Bulgaria, noting the need for additional support with housing, healthcare, and other essential expenses. One pensioner in Varna who expressed an interest in remaining in Bulgaria and applying for long-term residence suggested that the process may be more accessible for pensioners as they may face fewer procedural obstacles because they are assessed under a different set of criteria.

Participants also described how this legal uncertainty affects their coping mechanisms and everyday decision-making. Without clarity on whether they will be allowed to stay in the country in the coming years, many reported that they cannot make long-term plans and instead focus on short-term goals and plans. For example, one participant from Burgas explained that, despite their children being fully integrated and feeling *"more Bulgarian than Ukrainian,"* the family cannot plan for the future due to concerns about what may happen if they are required to leave. Similarly, another temporary protection beneficiary noted that major life decisions, such as her husband starting a business, are put on hold until there is clarity about what will happen after 2027.

Despite the rights formally granted under Temporary Protection, in practice Ukrainians feel they have very limited entitlements and no realistic possibility of returning home. Many explained that they wish to have the same rights as Bulgarian citizens so they can settle securely, access stable housing, and build a predictable future. They emphasized that although they pay the same high living costs and taxes as locals, they receive no comparable social benefits, leaving them with significant expenses but little support. While their rights appear extensive on paper, participants noted that, in reality, they *"are treated as tourists."*

Overall, the assessment shows that while many beneficiaries of Temporary Protection wish to establish stable, long-term lives in Bulgaria, structural limitations, unclear legal pathways, and challenging socio-economic conditions prevent them from doing so. The resulting uncertainty forces families into short-term coping strategies and undermines their ability to build secure futures in the country. A clear and accessible long-term legal pathway is essential to enable people to plan their future in Bulgaria. Participants emphasized that without a stable status, it is impossible to build secure lives. Strengthening social assistance – especially for pensioners and people with disabilities – is equally important. Expanding employment opportunities would further support long-term integration and self-reliance. Additionally, participants highlighted the need for timely and transparent information regarding any re-extension of Temporary Protection.

Challenges in Transitioning Out of Temporary Protection

In addition to unclear legal pathways toward long-term residence, participants highlighted challenges in transitioning out of TP, for example in cases involving relocation to another country or return to Ukraine.

Some FGD participants who had left Bulgaria for another European country, or Ukraine, and later returned described significant difficulties related to health insurance obligations. They pointed to a systemic gap whereby individuals who inform migration authorities of their departure are not automatically reported to the National Revenue Agency (NRA). As a result, health insurance contributions continue to accumulate during their absence. One female participant shared that upon returning from Germany, she discovered a substantial debt to the NRA; although documentation from migration authorities confirmed her absence from the country, the NRA did not accept these documents and kept the debt active.

Male participants in Plovdiv reported similar experiences, stating that they were never informed that contributions would continue or that deregistration from the system was not possible. These issues are rooted in the Law on Health Insurance, which mandates continuous payments and does not provide a mechanism for deregistration.

Participants from one of the Varna FGDs also recalled widespread confusion during the early phase of Temporary Protection in 2022, when information regarding health insurance obligations was inconsistent and frequently changing. Procedures at the National Health Insurance Fund (NZOK) were described as difficult to navigate, with limited communication and a lack of clear guidance for refugees. Others reported being advised to delay registration due to unclear rules, only to later discover that unpaid contributions had accumulated despite them not having used health services.

These challenges are further compounded by the fact that Temporary Protection is granted by a single EU Member State and does not automatically transfer if a beneficiary relocates to another country. As a result, individuals who leave Bulgaria risk losing access to protection and associated rights without a clear or coordinated procedure for suspending obligations in the country of departure.

Renewal of Ukrainian documents

Renewing personal documents, such as passports, remains a major challenge for many Ukrainians in Bulgaria. Participants described the process at the Ukrainian consulate as extremely difficult. Securing an appointment is often the first obstacle; registration is complicated, time-consuming, and frequently unavailable. Parents noted that managing these administrative demands is especially hard when combined with caregiving responsibilities and daily life.

A participant also pointed to a broader structural issue: the absence of formal agreements between Ukraine and Bulgaria on several administrative procedures. This lack of coordination complicates essential processes such as renewing documents, accessing employment, and legalizing educational diplomas in Bulgaria.

Older people and individuals with disabilities face even greater difficulties. They are required to submit documentation every year to the Ukrainian healthcare and pension authorities, confirming that they reside in Bulgaria. To do so, they must either travel to the embassy in Sofia or return to Ukraine. For many, this is simply not feasible. One woman from Sunny Beach shared that her husband, who has a disability and chronic pain, cannot travel at all. She cannot leave him unattended, and the cost of traveling to Sofia is beyond their means.

In addition, some participants reported further complications related to documentation and banking. They need to travel to Sofia to visit the Ukrainian Embassy to resolve issues concerning closed bank accounts in Ukraine and other administrative matters. These administrative hurdles, combined with long distances, high travel costs, and limited institutional support, create significant stress and uncertainty.

In this context, Compass Centres has played a crucial role by providing much-needed guidance and support in navigating complex bureaucratic procedures. Participants expressed strong appreciation for the Compass staff, noting that they consistently help them understand the system and address the various administrative challenges they face. Additionally, IOM's support, particularly in Primorsko, was highlighted as especially valuable, with many participants acknowledging the positive impact of their assistance.

Refugee Inclusion

Community engagement

In regard to community engagement and access to information, participants highlighted the need for clearer and more reliable communication delivered through a single centralized source. They also emphasised the importance of accessible community spaces where individuals can socialise and take part in activities, including sports and recreational opportunities for children.

Some individuals have become key pillars of support within local communities. In Primorsko, participants described a single social worker from IOM who manages nearly all tasks for refugees at the government base, including medical accompaniment and administrative procedures. In Sunny Beach, another individual was described as collecting information, helping refugees find accommodation, and arranging legal support. The host community also plays an important role. Participants in Pomorie highlighted a local pastor who has been preparing warm meals for refugees for two consecutive years.

Insights from the FGDs show that Ukrainian women are often the primary drivers of integration, community organization, and social support. At the same time, they face several structural barriers, including childcare responsibilities, de-skilling, and caregiving duties that limit their ability to participate fully in community and professional life.

"Women integrate easier- the superpower of women".

Ukrainian refugee from Plovdiv

Despite these challenges, women continue to create their own spaces for empowerment. In Burgas, a professional painter leads creative sessions for children that introduce them to Bulgarian traditions and art. In Pomorie, women take part in a group called "Truth and Happiness", which provides psychological support and organizes thematic sessions on topics such as astrology, mental health, and women's issues. A 79-year-old woman from Zaporizhzhia described how, despite facing significant vulnerabilities including missing documents, health problems, and financial instability, she still prioritizes small acts of self-care, such as buying basic cosmetic products to maintain her sense of dignity and normalcy.

Older women expressed interest in creating *"social beauty salons"* for pensioners, emphasizing the need for dignified, affordable social spaces. Women also called for Bulgarian professionals, particularly doctors, to act as mentors who could help them navigate procedures for professional legalization and reintegration.

Access to Information

For many Ukrainian refugees, the journey to Bulgaria was characterised by limited access to reliable information. Several participants recalled arriving with almost no official guidance and relying instead on informal sources. Some indicated that their initial information came from sessions organized by tourist companies in Ukraine, while others depended on word-of-mouth or social media platforms. One woman used TikTok to find basic instructions about registering for Temporary Protection. This early dependence on informal networks continued after arrival.

Once in Bulgaria, information sources became even more fragmented. Social media platforms such as Telegram and Viber were widely used, particularly community-led group chats such as those run by Compass Centres or "In the Heart of Ukraine". While these channels are trusted and widely used, participants described them as overwhelming and disorganized.

Informal mutual support remains essential. Refugees frequently share advice with each other about doctors, safe travel routes, administrative procedures, and legal issues. Official channels are seen as more reliable but often remain inaccessible due to bureaucratic complexity or the lack of materials in accessible languages. In this context, Compass Centres are considered critical information hubs.

Despite the abundance of information sources, participants highlighted several gaps. A major concern is the absence of a single platform that combines all essential information, forcing refugees to piece together knowledge from multiple disconnected sources.

Refugees consistently rely on organizations to access their rights and essential services. NGOs such as the BRC, Caritas, FAR, and partners within the Compass Network, as well as international organizations like IOM and UNHCR, are seen as the most reliable providers of information, legal counselling, and mental health and psychosocial support. The legal assistance offered by FAR remains crucial for navigating complicated processes such as obtaining health cards or appealing decisions on social assistance. Compass Centres offer vital support in navigating the healthcare system and provide professional psychosocial services.

Social activities facilitated by NGOs and volunteers, including cultural events, art therapy, and language clubs, reduce isolation and promote a sense of belonging. For many participants, these gatherings are not only social but also emotionally restorative, strengthening connections with both Ukrainians and Bulgarians.

Language barriers

Language challenges intersect with almost all areas of daily life, affecting access to services, employment, and social inclusion. This issue appears across every topic discussed during the FGDs, and when participants were asked to name the three main challenges they face, language consistently ranked at the top - just as in previous

participatory assessments. A majority of the participants rely on staff of the local Compass Centres for translation and explanation of different documents and procedures.

Despite the central role of language in inclusion and integration, there are no government programmes providing language support. Participants noted that free courses are extremely limited, usually only basic A1 level, and often inaccessible to individuals who have lived in Bulgaria for more than a year. Access to B1 and B2 level Bulgarian language courses is severely limited or non-existent which also in terms creates an additional barrier to meeting the required professional standards. Moreover, participants highlighted the need for more inclusive and tailored language classes that respond to different learning tempos and specific group needs.

Across all locations, female participants expressed a strong preference for intensive vocational language training rather than basic introductory courses. They also requested formats tailored to their needs, for example conversation-focused courses for working and non-working mothers. In addition, participants suggested that there should be an option for them to leave their kids in the care of NGO, or Compass staff, while there are Bulgarian language courses.

Male participants in Plovdiv highlighted a specific social barrier related to everyday interactions. When they attempt to speak Bulgarian, some locals *"immediately switch to Russian,"* which limits their opportunities to practice and improve their language skills and contributes to feelings of exclusion. This FGDs also perceived women as having a distinct advantage in the process of integration, men observed that women tend to learn Bulgarian faster and integrate more easily than men.

When speaking with pensioners, they shared that learning a new language is much more challenging for them compared to younger people. They requested tailored language classes delivered at a slower pace to better support their learning needs.

Child Development and Education

Perspectives of the parents

Participants described a mixed experience of early childhood, school, and social integration in Bulgaria, with both strong examples of successful inclusion and persistent systemic barriers. Many parents highlighted positive encounters with educational institutions. In Pomorie, schools and kindergartens were repeatedly praised for their welcoming attitude, with Ukrainian children forming significant portions of some classes and integrating well. In Burgas, some children were said to be adapting so successfully that they are already *"feeling Bulgarian."* Parents in Plovdiv also shared encouraging stories: one child won second place in an aerial acrobatics' competition, and fathers reported that their children experienced *"no bullying"* and felt comfortable in their schools. Some families are already planning long-term futures in Bulgaria, with teenagers preparing for university applications with assistance from Compass staff.

Joint activities, such as mixed camps organized by the BRC, were viewed as helpful in building connections between Ukrainian and Bulgarian youth. Community hubs like Compass Centres and "Ukrainian Dom" have become essential social spaces for children and adolescents, offering art therapy, peer interaction, and psychological support: resources that are especially important for those who feel isolated or *"not accepted"* elsewhere. Mothers in Plovdiv emphasised that their children use psychosocial support *"a lot"*.

Alongside these positive experiences, parents also identified serious challenges. For younger children, access to pre-school remains one of the most pressing issues. In Plovdiv, mothers noted the scarcity of kindergarten places that directly prevents them from seeking employment. Although demand for Bulgarian kindergartens has grown as families pursue socio-economic opportunities, the system has struggled to adapt. Participants referred to a *"buffer kindergarten"* initiative intended as a temporary solution, but described it as unsuccessful, lasting only three months and offering no pathway into the public kindergarten system once it ended.

For school-aged children, enrolment can feel inconsistent and at times arbitrary. While some schools, such as the one in Pomorie, are described as inclusive, others appear to lack clear placement procedures. In one Plovdiv family, siblings were assigned to different grades despite being of similar academic level: one was placed correctly,

while the other, eligible for the 8th grade, was assigned to the 5th. Despite such setbacks, parents noted that many children show remarkable resilience and manage to adapt well academically.

Language barriers remain the single largest obstacle to stable integration. Adolescents and parents report that children may repeat grades because of language difficulties, and many families choose to continue online Ukrainian schooling due to fears of long-term uncertainty or concerns about overwhelming their children. Some young people manage both systems simultaneously, attending Bulgarian school during the day and Ukrainian school online at night, in order to avoid falling behind in their home curriculum.

The social environment for Ukrainian youth also varies widely. Some families report immediate acceptance and friendship, while others experience hostility. A mother in Plovdiv described her youngest child being targeted. Moreover, mothers in Varna, Plovdiv and Burgas noted that strong "Russophile" sentiments among segments of the host community create daily anxiety, making them feel unsafe even while walking outside. Particularly in Burgas, a lot of the mothers shared that their kids experience bullying at school. This hostility appeared to be reinforced by some teachers taking the side of Bulgarian students during conflicts and blaming Ukrainian children.

"They always take the side of the Bulgarian kids".

Ukrainian mother from Burgas

Taken together, these experiences illustrate a polarised landscape for some children. Many children are integrating well, finding supportive teachers, peers and community structures, while others face barriers related to access, language, and discrimination. Mothers often report more challenges, likely because they interact more frequently with schools and social services, while fathers tend to view school environments more positively, though they also acknowledge that their wives engage more with Bulgarians because of childcare responsibilities.

Children's perspectives

A dedicated focus group with adolescents revealed a strong sense of being caught in limbo, with many expressing anxiety about their legal status - particularly the fear that turning 18 might result in losing protection. Although the TP legal framework does not require loss of protection at 18 as long as the TP Directive continues to be extended, their concerns reflect a significant information gap and as already mentioned, an urgent desire for a more predictable future and durable solution.

Unlike younger children who adapt more easily through play, adolescents voiced the need for practical, structured support: language classes, sports activities, math tutoring, and places where they can simply *"hang out"* with Bulgarian peers to reduce isolation. They also rely less on official institutions for safety, instead developing their own networks, sharing *"safe routes,"* and exchanging coping strategies. Adolescents in Varna described particularly distressing experiences of physical and verbal aggression, including incidents of being told to *"go back to Ukraine."*

Healthcare (services, accessibility and costs)

Another of the most frequently discussed topics in the FGDs was health and access to healthcare. Participants generally agreed that services in Bulgaria are relatively accessible with appointments that are available without long waiting times, and most refugees from Ukraine have successfully registered with a general practitioner. However, despite this overall accessibility, several challenges were still identified.

Across all locations, groups consistently highlighted high out-of-pocket expenses. The cost of medication was repeatedly described as very high, making it difficult for many, particularly pensioners and people with chronic conditions, to obtain the medicines they need. A participant in Primorsko shared that accessing necessary medicines on a regular basis is challenging because of limited financial resources and reduced assistance. Participants noted that non-governmental programmes that previously helped cover medication costs have either

ended or become more limited, leaving some individuals having to choose between meeting daily needs and buying medicines. Dental care was also identified as important but unaffordable for many.

Some participants reported being refused referrals or experiencing inconsistent acceptance of health booklets and health insurance. Although most people have been able to register with a GP, often with support from Compass Centres, several felt that consultations were very procedural and did not always offer practical solutions. Moreover, some GPs refused to accept Ukrainian patients because they did not speak Bulgarian. Others said that the care they received did not feel effective. Access is further complicated by unreliable online information, with platforms such as "Superdoc" reportedly containing outdated contact details for healthcare providers.

Participants expressed a mix of positive and negative experiences regarding the quality of care. One person from Varna described waiting three hours in a hospital before receiving assistance for a broken arm. In contrast, a woman in Burgas shared a very positive experience at "Surce and Mozuk" Hospital, describing the staff as kind, professional and supportive.

However, participants highlighted a significant positive aspect: access to healthcare and medication in Bulgaria is generally very easy. Waiting times for medical appointments are relatively short, and many medications can be purchased without a prescription, unlike in countries such as Germany or Poland.

"The system here works, unlike in Ukraine—you pay for health insurance, but the healthcare system actually works".

Mother of children with disabilities

A significant challenge was reported across FGDs conducted in smaller towns, where access to specialised medical care is limited. Participants explained that such towns typically have only one or two general practitioners, while specialist doctors visit infrequently. As a result, accessing specialised care often requires travelling to larger cities. This is particularly difficult for older persons and persons with disabilities who require regular follow-up and ongoing treatment. Long distances, travel costs, and mobility limitations were described as major barriers to receiving timely and consistent medical care, especially when specialised services are available only in larger urban centres (e.g. travel from Primorsko or Pomorie to Burgas, or even sometimes to Sofia).

Compass Centres, as well as personnel from other organisations, have been extremely helpful in assisting people to register with a GP, locate medical specialists, give translation support for appointments and document preparation, and overall offer guidance that helps navigate the healthcare system more effectively. They also support individuals in completing the paperwork required for medication reimbursement. In Primorsko specifically, an IOM worker has provided additional support by accompanying residents to their medical appointments, arranging transportation, and facilitating other necessary logistics.

Refugees with Disabilities

Older persons and parents of children with disabilities described significant administrative burdens related to disability certification procedures (e.g. TELK), as well as high associated fees and a lack of continuous mental health and psychosocial support. Participants also noted that the cost of specialised medical examinations and medications represents a substantial financial burden for affected families.

Parents of children with disabilities highlighted a pronounced lack of accessible information, particularly for newly arrived refugees. Many reported limited awareness of available rehabilitation services, eligibility criteria, and payment conditions. The process of obtaining disability recognition was described as exhausting and, in some cases, *"impossible,"* due to complex bureaucratic requirements and extensive documentation. Families reported navigating lengthy procedures that require language proficiency they often do not possess, frequently resulting in delays or denials of support. In one case, a child's disability percentage was reduced following reassessment,

which led to the loss of eligibility for a state-funded personal assistant despite the child's continued need for constant care.

Disability certification procedures were further described as inconsistent and difficult to navigate. Some refugees reported that general practitioners did not inform them about disability recognition procedures or, in some cases, refused to issue referrals, further complicating access to support.

Older participants also described the impact of reassessments on access to care. In one case in Primorsko, a participant reported that her 85-year-old mother, who lives with dementia and requires constant supervision, had her disability rating reduced from 100 per cent to 91 per cent. This administrative change resulted in the loss of eligibility for a state-funded personal assistant, placing the full burden of care on the family and causing significant physical and emotional strain.

In addition, one parent in Varna described a particularly frustrating experience related to the enrolment of a child with disabilities. The participant highlighted a fragmented process requiring repeated submission of the same documentation to multiple commissions and institutions. The current procedure involves several stages, including separate medical commissions, specialist assessments, general practitioner visits, and applications for official disability status. The parent stressed the need for a more streamlined and centralised system, where all required documentation could be submitted in one place. The child's specific and complex needs further limited available options, compounded by a lack of available places in specialised schools, such as the facility in Asparuhovo, Varna, resulting in the child remaining unenrolled.

Participants explained that they often relied on support from different organisations and Compass centres in order to gather more information about the TELK procedures, document submission, appointment accompanying and translation.

Housing and Accommodation

FDG participants are currently living either in private rental arrangements or accommodated under the humanitarian programmes.

Private accommodation

Refugees described mixed experiences while finding private accommodation.

On one side, a few participants reported positive experiences. Individuals shared that they have good relationships with their landlords, good neighbours, hold proper contracts, and feel supported in their current housing arrangements. One Varna pensioner found the Bulgarian rental process smooth due to its flexibility. He noted that contracts could be signed directly with the owner, eliminating the need for a notary and the financial guarantees (like bank account proof and self-support documentation), which is often required in other EU countries. Other participants found renting relatively easy or were helped by friends. In Plovdiv, one participant noted that rents are cheap compared to other countries.

On the other side, like international protection applicants and refugees granted international protection in Bulgaria, significant issues were reported related to the access to affordable housing in Bulgaria. Many shared that rents were high and deposits substantial - often two or even three months' rent. Some noted that when they first arrived, including those who came in 2022, rental prices were already elevated. One participant, for example, initially paid 500 euros for a large apartment but eventually had to relocate to a smaller unit at a higher cost as rents continued to rise. Others remarked that rents had been increased multiple times by landlords and overall, in major cities such as Sofia, Plovdiv, and Varna, rents have surged. For several participants, the rental process was complicated and financially burdensome. Beyond rent and deposits, they also faced additional expenses such as school-related costs, clothing, and supplies.

Many refugees reported discrimination in the housing market. Some landlords refused to rent to Ukrainian nationals, a trend confirmed by multiple participants. People described situations where landlords requested numerous documents or extra payments and still refused. There were also cases where landlords refused to return deposits when tenants moved out. Participants shared experiences of moving several times and losing

money, with no clear justification provided. Additionally, when not all household members were listed in rental contracts, some landlords refused to update their registered address, preventing individuals from entering their new address into their protection documents, which is required to access their rights, and leaving them with only a temporary or "service" address.

To cope with these challenges, participants relied on different approaches. Because of the aforementioned barriers, many participants turned to real estate agencies, though experiences varied greatly. Some found agencies helpful, while others encountered dishonest practices. One participant described paying a deposit after signing a preliminary agreement, only to have the conditions changed the next day, making the deposit unrecoverable. Others in Plovdiv reported an agent of Ukrainian origin working with a Bulgarian agency who took deposits for apartments that did not exist and then stopped responding.

Others found housing through acquaintances or community connections. Many expressed that having someone who could guarantee for them when speaking with landlords would have significantly eased the process. In addition, participants suggested repurposing unused properties in Bulgaria and making them available to people in need, including through government-supported housing or rental schemes.

Accommodation under the Humanitarian Program

The program for humanitarian support and integration provides accommodation for up to 60 days, on a one-time basis, within the period of validity of temporary protection. Persons belonging to one risk group or more are entitled to accommodation under the program for the entire period of temporary protection.

Participants from Primorsko expressed gratitude, noting that staff at the base are very friendly and that meals are provided. In Sofia, pensioners similarly reported that *"everything is fine and free."*

However, significant challenges were also described. In Varna, participants characterized the Zheleznichar Base as a site of high tension and frequent conflicts both among residents and between residents and management, where *"everyone there has medical problems, are poor."* Uncertainty about how long individuals can remain in the government programme further contributes to stress.

Meanwhile, also in Primorsko, which houses a large majority pensioner population, residents highlighted the lack of heating as winter approached. In Plovdiv, female participants noted they *"have to do the renovation themselves"* to create comfort and security, indicating that refugees at times must bear basic maintenance costs without support. A resident of Elhovo reported that the facility has no elevator, creating major difficulties for one of her children who has disabilities. Parents additionally shared that collective bases are particularly stressful for children with conditions such as autism, who struggle with overcrowding, lack of privacy, and the absence of quiet spaces. As one participant expressed, *"better to have their own accommodation".*

Overall, the housing situation reveals a contradictory reality: while some refugees in government-supported accommodation expressed satisfaction, the programme is shrinking and increasingly limited to the most vulnerable. Concentrating on individuals facing multiple, compounding challenges (illness, disability, financial hardship) creates a dense cluster of complex support needs. Currently, the implementation of state-supported specialized care and integration programmes is inconsistent, leaving much of the social protection burden on NGOs and humanitarian actors and exposing residents to fluctuations in available resources.

Livelihoods and Social Protection

Employment

Participants described significant challenges related to economic inclusion, emphasizing that available work opportunities are often seasonal (hospitality, housekeeping), low-paid, or inflexible, with very limited part-time options. Some women choose to work *"unofficially"* because it offers the flexibility needed to care for young children, which formal employment does not always allow. Others highlighted structural obstacles, particularly the high language requirements and the complex procedures for recognizing and legalising Ukrainian professional skills and academic diplomas in Bulgaria, which directly impact their ability to secure suitable employment and achieve long-term financial stability.

Highly qualified individuals reported that regaining their professional status is particularly difficult. A doctor in Burgas described the process of legalising her medical diploma as difficult and expensive, forcing her to work as a health mediator instead of a doctor. Participants working in regulated professions shared similar experiences, noting that they cannot practice their professions despite evident labour shortages in Bulgaria. The process for diploma recognition for medical experts was described as *"very difficult"* and *"extremely long,"* with one participant estimating it may take no less than five years. She hesitated for a full year before even starting the procedure due to its complexity. She also reported a lack of centralised information, which required her to independently gather details from several institutions - the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, and the National Centre for Information and Documentation. Moreover, medical professionals must complete multiple mandatory exams in fields such as surgery, gynaecology, paediatrics and hygiene, even after decades of experience, leaving many feeling they must *"start from zero."*

Language requirements further compound these barriers. Access to B1 and B2 level Bulgarian language courses is severely limited or non-existent for adults who have lived in Bulgaria for more than 12 months, creating a major obstacle to meeting the required standards.

Some participants also described workplace vulnerability. In Varna, one woman reported that her colleague is bullied by her employer and required to work longer hours *"specifically because she is Ukrainian."* Similarly, through the discussions, participants highlighted a clear mismatch between their qualifications and the jobs available to them. An engineer expressed frustration that he is unable to find work in his field and is currently working as a banichar (baker).

"I am working under civil contract, and the end date of my contract coincides exactly with the date on which my protection expires."

Ukrainian woman from Burgas

Others noted that the absence of formal agreements between Ukraine and Bulgaria regarding certain administrative procedures further complicates diploma recognition and job access. One participant also suggested that a "digital nomad" visa would allow young IT professionals in settling in Bulgaria.

These examples reflect a situation in which highly skilled professionals unable to practice their professions and Bulgaria missing out on valuable expertise. As one medical doctor explained, many of her colleagues have chosen to move to Poland or Czechia, where the process of the recognition of professional qualifications is easier. Meanwhile, highly qualified individuals in Bulgaria - doctors, engineers, IT specialists - are pushed into lower-skilled work or experience non-recognition of their expertise, leading to underemployment, loss of skills, and long-term frustration.

Social Assistance

Parents reported persistent barriers in accessing child benefits. Although TP beneficiaries are formally entitled to child benefits, as Bulgarian administrative courts have repeatedly ruled, applications are frequently rejected in practice. Accessing this support often requires formally contesting decisions, with assistance from Compass Centres, particularly legal assistance by FAR lawyers on behalf of UNHCR. Most mothers reported initial rejections, with the only noted exception being a woman married to a Bulgarian national. These barriers were described as particularly challenging for single mothers, who also face difficulties in securing stable employment while managing caregiving responsibilities.

Participants also emphasized the need for increased government support related to housing costs, medication, and overall healthcare until they can become self-reliant.

While access to state social support for TP beneficiaries has improved, concerns remain regarding the sustainability of this assistance. Participants highlighted an ongoing reliance on NGOs to help navigate

administrative procedures and address unmet needs, raising questions about the durability of protection should humanitarian funding further decline.

Social Inclusion

FGDs reveal a mixed experience for Ukrainian refugees in Bulgaria. While many encounter significant social tension and negative attitudes, robust community support and positive interactions with locals are vital in helping them navigate daily lives and fostering integration.

Participants across several locations reported experiencing negative attitudes, discrimination, and hostility from members of the host community. These behaviours were often linked to misinformation and socio-economic anxieties. In addition, several participants described incidents of verbal aggression or receiving hostile comments when speaking Russian or Ukrainian in public. Such attitudes were attributed to misunderstandings about refugees' circumstances, including the perception that Ukrainians were *"beggars"* or responsible for increased prices in shops.

"You can't park here—go back to Ukraine."

Woman from Varna

Discrimination was also reported in essential services. In hospitals, refugees were occasionally told to speak only Bulgarian, and one participant was refused assistance by a pharmacist. Tension was noted in public queues, especially in healthcare settings, where some Bulgarians shouted at Ukrainian refugees. In the housing market, participants encountered barriers such as landlords unwilling to rent to Ukrainians and rental ads specifying *"for Bulgarian citizens only"*.

Some of the most serious incidents involved vandalism and conflict in schools. Multiple participants reported damage to their cars, including scratches or graffiti featuring the letter "Z" and anti-Ukrainian messages. Parents noted that bullying against Ukrainian children is a prevalent concern. Several described teachers showing bias toward Bulgarian students during conflicts. An adolescent in Varna reported being physically attacked, including being hit and having water poured on him.

Despite experiences of discrimination, a consistent theme across all groups was a strong sense of general physical safety in Bulgaria. Participants in Varna said they feel comfortable walking alone at night. Women in Primorsko described the area as quiet, peaceful, and relaxing. Some refugees even stated that Bulgaria provides a better environment for them than other European countries. A participant in Plovdiv referred to Bulgaria as *"the best place for Ukrainians in Europe"*, and others noted feeling safer here than in Ukraine.

Many participants highlighted supportive interactions with the host community. Neighbours were frequently mentioned as helpful, especially in assisting with practical matters such as finding doctors, navigating systems, or completing documents. In Sunny Beach, similarities between Bulgarian and Ukrainian values were said to make integration easier. In Pomorie, the atmosphere was described as friendly and normal, with locals generally ready to help.

Social and cultural activities also played an important role in integration. Participants mentioned joining local groups, such as the Pensioner Club at Burgas Port, as well as forming friendships with Bulgarians, for example one pensioner from Varna goes fishing with his Bulgarian friend. The Director of "Ivan Vazov" school in Pomorie received specific praise for supporting the integration of Ukrainian students. Positive school environments were frequently noted, contributing to a feeling of belonging and, for some, a sense of becoming *"part of the Bulgarian community"*.

Comparative Analysis

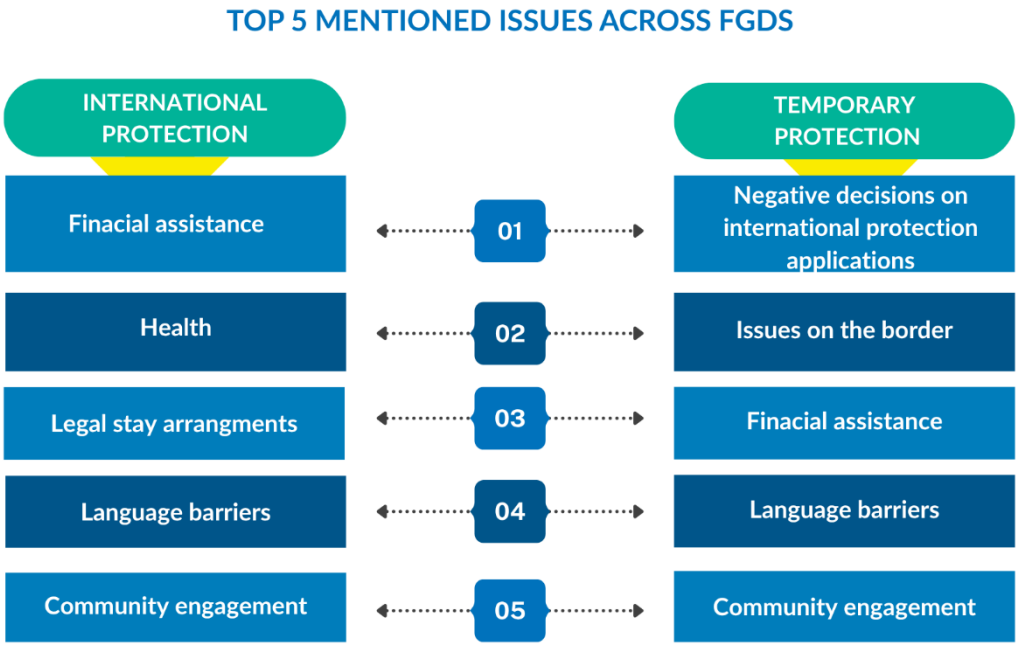

Figure 7. Comparison across the top five mentioned issues in the MENA (IP) and Ukrainian (TP) groups

Ukrainian groups faced distinct, comparatively more structured and supportive, protection system in Bulgaria. Their integration pathway was significantly supported by **organized community networks** (such as Viber, Telegram, Compass Network, and refugee-lead and diaspora initiatives such as Ukrainian House and Second House) and **state-led programs** that helped stabilize housing for the most vulnerable. Their main challenges centred on financial insecurity, driven by high rents, and overwhelming uncertainty about the future of TP. However, they benefited from access to language courses, school enrolment for children, and community events that eased adaptation and social inclusion.

Forcibly displaced and stateless people from Afghanistan, Syria and other countries navigated a far more **fragmented and challenging system**. While they relied heavily on NGOs, such as the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee for asylum procedures, and FAR in the case of Palestinian and stateless refugees, and Caritas for employment, or BRC and USRF for social or psychosocial support, significant gaps in state-led reception and integration left them disproportionately dependent on informal networks and personal resilience. Their struggles were compounded by their experiences of not being heard in the international protection procedures, repeated asylum rejections for persons in need of international protection, a lack of structured or tailored language programs, and exploitative work and accommodation conditions in informal sectors. Housing insecurity and the inability to register their addresses created additional barriers, such as refusal to open bank accounts or sign labour contracts, while minimal psychosocial support forced them to rely on informal community networks. In their case, individual and community resilience depend mainly on faith and peer solidarity.

Both groups of forcibly displaced people face significant challenges, including **financial constraints, discriminatory attitudes, and legal uncertainty**, and both rely heavily on NGO support. While this assistance is invaluable, the heavy dependence on NGOs in the absence of a structured government programme raises serious concerns about sustainability. If these organizations face funding constraints or reduced capacities, refugees and asylum-seekers risk losing their only access to vital services.

This creates a **sharp contrast in outcomes**. Ukrainian refugees generally have better access to services and opportunities, yet their situation remains precarious due to the temporary nature of their protection status,

which limits long-term planning. In contrast, forcibly displaced and stateless people from Afghanistan, Syria and other countries are often denied this possibility altogether, as most receive negative decisions from the outset, leaving them unable to even consider a future in Bulgaria. With the asylum system of Bulgaria not providing them with any perspective, they invest all their resources to moving onwards to other EU countries. They experience exclusion and prolonged detention as coercive measures to force their agreement to return to their countries of origin, regardless of the risks they may face if returned.

Ukrainian participants need assistance to facilitate access to state services, while participants originating from Middle East countries and other countries need additional support to fill critical systemic gaps where state services are entirely absent or inaccessible.

Enhancing Protection, Integration and Inclusion of Refugees in Bulgaria: Other Responses

What UNHCR did so far:

The PA is a primary and structured mechanism for UNHCR to communicate with and gather input directly from the communities we work with. This is supplemented by several other active feedback channels, including: Annual protection monitoring, inter-agency socio-economic insights analysis (SEIS), monitoring of reception and detention conditions and interviews in missions, complaints and requests through email and telephone, dedicated feedback and complaint mechanism, ad hoc in-person visits to the UNHCR office, and reports from partners.

Informed by the holistic feedback gathered through these various channels, alongside ongoing protection analysis of local developments and the asylum environment, UNHCR initiates specific responses to address identified needs, which are detailed below.

In responding to findings from the participatory assessment with forcibly displaced and stateless people in Bulgaria, UNHCR strengthened protection by advocating for family unity, fair asylum procedures, and access to territory in line with EU and international law. This included sustained engagement with Parliament, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and asylum authorities to remedy unlawful refusals and cancellations of family reunification visas, ensure correct application of the national law, and safeguard the right to family life. UNHCR provided extensive technical assistance for Bulgaria's implementation of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, with a strong focus on child protection, statelessness, detention safeguards, legal assistance, and vulnerability screening. UNHCR also provided comments on draft legislation, including the new Law on Asylum and International Protection. Through guidance on country of origin information, third-party interventions before courts, and comprehensive capacity-building for asylum caseworkers, judges, lawyers, border police, and prosecutors, UNHCR contributed to more rights-based, trauma-informed, and child-sensitive international protection procedures and stronger accountability for fundamental rights at borders.

In parallel, UNHCR advanced inclusion and wellbeing by addressing reception conditions, child protection, integration, and access to services, directly reflecting community-identified risks and priorities. A nationwide GBV safety audit in reception and detention facilities informed efforts to reduce protection risks and improve referral pathways. Targeted support for unaccompanied and separated children included advocacy for stronger safeguards following initial apprehension by the police authorities, specialized trainings, and coordinated action with UNICEF, the Council of Europe, and legal aid actors. To promote sustainable inclusion, UNHCR influenced national policy through the Migration and Asylum Management Strategy, expanded livelihoods and private-sector engagement, and advocated for refugees' access to social protection schemes. Education and social cohesion were reinforced through nationwide school enrolment campaigns, extensive teacher training, support to higher education access, and public initiatives such as World Refugee Day, while Compass Protection and Inclusion Centres served as hubs linking communities to education, employment, and university opportunities. Together, these actions translated participatory assessment findings into concrete advances in protection, inclusion, and self-reliance.

Stakeholder recommendations

On 18 March 2026 UNHCR organised a workshop with Government institutions, civil society and academics to present the preliminary findings from the PA. During the workshop, four working groups were created to address the main concerns raised by refugees. As a result of the group work, the following recommendations were formulated:

Sustainability – Alternatives to Temporary Protection

- Allowing individuals to apply for international protection while still benefiting from temporary protection would create a smoother transition to long-term status. This could be achieved through simplified procedures or by automatically granting humanitarian status, provided that applicants retain their right to work. Such an approach would reduce legal uncertainty and improve predictability for both institutions and beneficiaries.
- Developing a targeted information campaign is essential to ensure that people understand the available legal options and the implications of each pathway. Clear communication, combined with advocacy efforts, would support informed decision-making and strengthen trust in national procedures.
- Removing the requirement for obtaining a visa D would significantly reduce administrative barriers for individuals seeking a more durable status. Streamlining this aspect of the process would also ease the workload on institutions and reduce delays in regularising stay.

Humanitarian Support and Integration Programme for Displaced Persons from Ukraine

- A comprehensive preliminary needs assessment is necessary to identify vulnerable individuals and tailor support accordingly. This would help ensure that resources are directed where they are most needed and that risks of neglect are reduced.
- Future decisions on the programme should carefully consider its structure and location strategy. Either discontinuing the programme or ensuring that beneficiaries are not placed in remote areas would mitigate the risk of long-term isolation and improve access to essential services.
- Ensuring that accommodation sites are located close to healthcare, education, employment, and social services is crucial for meaningful integration. Proximity to services reduces dependency, improves autonomy, and enhances overall wellbeing.
- Mainstreaming beneficiaries into existing services is a more sustainable approach than maintaining parallel systems. This would also help institutions build capacity to respond to the needs of diverse populations.
- Improving information dissemination through social media and other channels would help beneficiaries better understand available support and navigate administrative processes. Effective communication also strengthens transparency and reduces confusion.
- Having social workers on-site or ensuring regular visits would provide essential support to families and individuals. While project funding may temporarily cover staffing, a long-term and sustainable model involving municipalities should be prioritised.

State Integration Policies

- There is broad agreement on the need for a comprehensive national integration programme, though no consensus emerged on which institution should lead it. Proposals included the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, the Council of Ministers, or the creation of a dedicated Integration Agency, with strong involvement from the Ministry of Education and municipalities.
- Adapting social services for children who have been granted protection is essential to ensure that their developmental, educational, and psychosocial needs are met. Strengthening these services would also support early integration and long-term inclusion.
- All public services should be adjusted to accommodate the needs of individuals with international protection, including access to interpretation and translated information. This would help improve service quality and ensure equal access for all users.

- Integration policy should be designed with a broader perspective that includes marginalised communities beyond protection beneficiaries. This would promote social cohesion and prevent the perception of preferential treatment.
- Institutions highlighted the need for reliable data on employment among persons with international protection. Collecting information on the number of individuals who hold a permanent address registration would also support better planning and resource allocation.

International Protection Procedure and Legal Aid

- Expanding access to legal aid will require increasing awareness of the availability of free state-funded services, especially in smaller or remote regions where coverage is limited. Improving outreach would ensure more equitable access to procedural guarantees.
- To improve interpretation quality during interviews, minimum standards for interpreter selection should be introduced alongside specialised training. Strengthening complaint mechanisms would allow applicants to signal problems and improve accountability.
- Special safeguards should be developed for unaccompanied children who receive negative decisions. Waiving administrative fees and ensuring that residence options under the Foreigners Act are prioritised before asylum procedures would help protect their best interests, while voluntary return should only be considered under safe and appropriate conditions.

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