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BARRIERS & BRIDGES:

Communication & information exchange with Ukrainian refugees in Romania

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Executive Summary & Recommendations

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This paper was written by Mihaela Negru at the Centre for Independent Journalism in Romania in collaboration with Irene Scott and Alina Belobra from the Internews humanitarian team. Internews acknowledges the assistance of other colleagues from CIJ in the planning of this assessment, collection of data, and wise guidance.

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Executive Summary

Six months into the Russia-Ukraine war, refugees in Romania are still struggling to access timely, relevant and actionable information about their rights and the services available to them. According to the findings of this research, in the early months of the response, refugees relied on informal social networks to share critical information about safe border crossings, temporary protection and early access to humanitarian services. However, they now struggle to access information to assist them in making decisions, and planning for the mid-longer term future for themselves and their families.

Social media continues to be a significant platform for information for refugees. And whilst dozens of Facebook, Telegram, Viber groups have been created, and websites have been established by government, relief agencies and volunteers, refugees **prefer to source their information from other refugees,** volunteers and host community members. Refugees stated that there is an **overabundance of information and sources,** which can make it difficult to determine what is accurate and up to date. Refugee-only groups are considered safe spaces to ask questions, share experience and verify information found elsewhere.

Information that comes from a **genuine personal experience** is valued highly. However, while **98% of refugees reported having access to the internet,** the heavy reliance on digital information platforms is creating a division between the digitally connected and disconnected, with the latter relying heavily on other refugees and volunteers to access and interpret information for them.

The main barrier to accessing information is language. Refugees reported that there needs to be one official information source with **information translated into Ukrainian and Russian**, where complex issues are expressed clearly to ensure information is accessible and relevant to their needs. There is also a preference for central information hubs where refugees can speak to someone and have their questions answered.

Information voids & misperceptions are creating a barrier.

Information voids and misperceptions are also creating a barrier. Many refugees reported that they did not access **information hotlines** for fear that the operators would not speak their language. Similarly, some respondents said they **would not contact the police** or emergency services in a crisis for fear of not being understood. Uncertainty about their status in Romania also fuels a persistent rumour that interactions with the authorities could result in them being deported.

Many refugees see information as a pathway to integration in Romanian society. Besides basic services, such as cash assistance, accommodation, health care, transportation, there is a demand for information regarding language lessons, how to access employment,

training and educational opportunities for all ages. Refugees are calling for media and other content that reflects their need for information from Ukraine, information about their rights and services in Romania as well as news and information about their new home translated into Ukrainian.[1]

While there is some interest from refugees in providing feedback to inform response efforts, two major barriers are preventing the response from meeting accountability commitments. Firstly, refugees state that they are **unsure of how to give feedback** and what platforms are available to them. Secondly, many refugees state that a **fear of being perceived as 'ungrateful'** prevents many people from sharing their experience openenly, preferring to offer positive feedback exclusively.

This research included the perspectives of **1,180 refugees and 19 service providers** in **Bucharest, Iași, Constanța and Brașov** and was conducted between July - August 2022.

1 According to the latest Romania Protection Profile and monitoring report from UNHCR, 53% of refugees in Romania plan to stay in Romania in the near future, 23% plan to return to Ukraine but most (64%) are unsure how they would do so.

See below a summary of the main findings of the research and recommendations for actors to improve information and communication access:

Information Access

- **Internet access:** 98% of refugees use the internet to get information in Romania. Most are using **mobile data and/or the Wifi connection** at accommodations to access the internet. Personally owned mobile phones are the main device used to access the internet (97%), while personal computers/laptops are used less (21%).

- Refugees struggle to access **local and hyper-local information** to meet their needs. While national policies (for education and accommodation, etc) are communicated via government websites, they have difficulty accessing information about the location and eligibility and access requirements for services in their immediate area and feel local interpretations of regulations and decisions from authorities are often poorly communicated.

- **Face-to-face verification:** Refugees from the cities where there is **one main accommodation centre** for refugees (Brașov, Iași) rely on information provided by the staff of those centres, and refugees information needs are met to a higher degree, compared to cities where there are many accomodation/information centres (Constanța, Bucharest) or rural areas where there are no accommodation centres.

- Besides the language barrier, the **dispersion of information is one of the biggest obstacles** for refugee information access. Due to high variability of information among regions, as well as the information habits (preference to rely on others' experiences as the main information source) - the mission to get informed was described by some as similar to a “quest”.

Information Needs

- **Key information needs are:** cash assistance, accommodation, healthcare, education access for children, tax and residency processes, employment access including recognition of professional qualifications.

- Refugees stated the **need for official, structured, centralised** and verified information delivered in a timely manner to enable planning, agency, and control of their lives. Actionable information is very valued.

- Refugees **regularly factcheck information** they find (only 11% never check the information). Refugees verify information with other sources when: they suspect it to be false based on previous knowledge/context (61%), it seems incomplete (52%), and when it comes from a source they don’t know (42%).

> By the way, I know a lot of scammers in groups, so you need to be careful regarding information. [Man, Iași]

Information Source

- **Community knowledge prioritised:** refugees rely a lot on other people's experiences; other Ukrainians are the most used information source, with **Telegram and Facebook groups** preferred over one-to-one information channels on Telegram, Viber, or WhatsApp.

- **Official Information Sources:** only a quarter of refugees use official information sources from the Romanian authorities (21% sometimes, 4% often/always), however this information is accessed by host community volunteers and workers who then disseminate the information among the refugee community.

> Domomoha.ro has generalised information, so you must definitely look for specific information on Facebook. [Man, Bucharest]

Trust

- **Trust in information** increases if it is based on someone else's experience, thus personal discussions and word of mouth are an important part of the refugee information system. The gender of the source is also sometimes important; women report they trust the experiences of other women, rather than men's.

- Refugees would trust official information coming from the Romanian Government and local authorities more if they received it directly via one website or **via news in Ukrainian language** rather than social media or information received by word of mouth.

> As soon as I saw reviews from other people that they helped - yes, somehow it gave me more confidence. [Woman, Iași]

Language

- Refugees stated that **language is the most significant barrier** that prevents them from satisfying their information needs. Few refugees know the Romanian language. The majority recognized the need to study the language and were actively looking for both formal (courses) and informal options (language exchange meetings, speaking clubs, online classes).

- **The majority of refugees speak Russian at home** (72%) but feel a social pressure to use Ukrainian in public places both online and offline. Older people expressed more challenges in communicating in Ukrainian.

- Refugees use **Google translate** to search the internet to satisfy their information needs (accommodation, education, legal issues) and communicate with host communities and host families. Young people claim that Google and Facebook translation services are more accurate for Russian-Romanian, compared to Ukrainian-Romanian, and so often communicate in Russian.

- Refugees want greater access to **Ukrainian and Russian interpreters** to assist access to psychological support and medical consultations. They also express concern at the quality of translations of official information and the quality and intentions of some interpreters.

Social media

- **Facebook and Telegram** are the most popular social media platforms to satisfy information needs. Despite the myriad of social media groups/pages and channels for refugees, the **average number of private and open groups/pages used per person is between 4 and 5.** The number of social media groups/pages slightly decreases with age, and does not depend on the duration of stay in Romania.

- Posts shared in medium or smaller sized **Facebook groups** get higher engagement (likes, shares, comments) than in the groups with more members. In larger groups, information delivery is more one-way and people are often referred to these groups to access information related to frequently asked questions.

> ... [there are] many participants, everyone writes and comments, a lot of garbage; but communication helped a lot to find a doctor. [Woman with children, Bucharest]

- Group administrators reported increasingly active suspected **trolls disrupting group activities** in June-July 2022 including sending false reports to social media platforms to attempt to shut down response groups. **Doppelganger groups**[2] are also regularly created, which confuses members seeking reliable information.

[2] Doppelganger groups are social media pages or accounts designed to mimic another page/account in order to confuse and deceive users and often with the intent to spread misinformation.

Complaints and Feedback

- Ukrainian refugees tend to leave **positive feedback only,** they do not leave complaints or suggestions because they fear being perceived as ungrateful, even when they know that negative feedback/review could be helpful to improve services or to help other Ukrainins in Romania avoid risky situations.

- Despite this, only **13% of refugees do not want to offer feedback at all.** Given the right tools and access, most refugees would **prefer to give feedback in a private message** on Facebook, Telegram, WhatsApp, Viber, e-mail (59%), in person/face to face (35%) and in public review on social media/websites (28%).

Recommendations

Centralise and Localise information:

Refugees expressed two significant needs in relation to information: having a single source for reliable official information, and for that information to be localised to their specific region.

Where possible, actors should work to collaborate on joint information, communication and feedback systems to reduce confusion. Individual systems will still be needed for sensitive or high risk services. Responders should consider supporting that platform to be up to date, include quality accessible and actionable information in Ukrainian and Russian languages, and refer other information platforms towards that source. Consider organising information by region or city to make it more accessible for refugees, but also to more easily see where there are gaps in localised information.

Use community information influencers:

Refugees trust information coming from other people in their own community. Service providers should identify community information influencers and content creators and support them to be messengers within the wider refugee community.

Linking to the central official information sources, the influencers can also be a valuable channel to address community concerns about access to complaints and feedback mechanisms or to address rumours and misinformation with verified information. Communication trees can also be a useful structure to ensure you are reaching varied subgroups within the refugee community, allowing for two-way communication between responders, community volunteers, and the broader community. This will ensure information is in the right language, uses popular channels and is more likely to be trusted.

Diverse needs:

Younger people, and people with distinct information needs, do not feel the information available is meeting their needs. It is not surprising that younger people feel that the Telegram groups frequented by their parents do not feel like the right place for them to ask questions and source information. Consider creating information and platforms tailored to high risk groups such as older people, teenagers and children, and people living with disabilities and their caregivers. Presenting information in different formats, and with information tailored to the individual needs of these groups may increase its impact and acceptance.

Collaborate & share resources:

While our key informants revealed several efforts to collect and analyse questions, concerns and misinformation that may be circulating in refugee social media spaces, these efforts are limited to currently internal activities and analysis output is not shared among the wider response.

As many agencies may not have the skills or capacity to undertake this work, but may have the capacity to answer questions or respond to concerning information or behavioural trends, a central resource of social media analysis would be a useful resource to improve the overall response.

Language Matters:

Beyond increasing access to official information in Ukrainian and Russian languages, we need to ensure that complex legal and official information is accessible to a wider audience. Work with members of the refugee community to review any translations or information materials to ask, 'is the translation accurate?', 'does it meet the current information needs of the community?', 'is it accessible to all educational levels?', 'does this include actionable information?' and 'what questions do you still have after reading this?'.

There is currently a shortage of Ukrainian translators and interpreters, consider prioritising providing translation and interpretation training to refugees with the appropriate language skills to fill this gap.

> We want to work but we have no language skills and we can't leave children unattended and without being taken care of. [Woman with children, Brașov]

Prioritise plain language:

Information available to refugees is often complex and inaccessible to many readers. Refugees need to be able to access, and understand information related to their legal status and options to access services and support. While this information is sometimes available, it uses specialised terminology, jargon and concepts that might be new to many refugees.

Where complex terms or acronyms are necessary, always provide a plain language explanation, use bullet points to separate dense text, and consider other modes of access to the information - for instance audio, video and infographics to help a wider audience access the information. Simplified text, done properly still conveys the same information, but makes that information more useful to more people. Clear Global has an excellent guide for writing clearly, using plain language.

Look to the future:

Government and other service providers might not yet know how long services will be funded and available to refugees. It is natural for there to be some uncertainty on these issues. But this needs to be communicated to refugees. Continuing to actively engage on issues can help reduce anxiety, build trust and show refugees that you understand how important this information is to them (even if the answer is 'we don't know yet, but we will know in one week/month/year'). Refugees want to understand when a decision will be made, how a decision will be made and what options they have to inform and contribute to that decision making.

> We need to know when the program ends, because we need to decide whether to return to Ukraine if the program has ceased, or whether to stay in Romania if it's prolonged. [Woman with children, Constanța]

Information is in your hands:

Hand held devices, such as smartphones, are overwhelmingly the main tool used to access the internet. While you might design information on your laptop or computer, ensure any website or information materials are optimised for reading on handheld devices.

Think about the need for scrolling or card-based content (rather than static PDF pages), shorten headlines, sentences and paragraphs and consider which fonts display well on smaller screens. Audio and video formats may also help your information to stand out among social media groups. As always, consider that no matter how well you have craften your information, people will still have further questions and clarifications to tailor the information to their individual needs - so ensure you clearly display where the reader can access more information.

Physical information hubs:

While refugees rely heavily on social media groups to share and verify information, they prefer to be able to speak to someone, share their concerns, questions and tailor that information to their individual needs. Where information hubs or refugee centres exist, ensure they are equipped to spend time responding to information needs. Where central hubs don't exist, consider what spaces could serve this purpose. Consider including Protection, Gender and Inclusion (PGI) teams to build on this work and ensure greater service and information inclusion.

> I found information on Facebook, googled it - the information is different from Facebook, and I went and the volunteers personally explained everything. [Woman, Bucharest]

Protect personal data:

Ensure your organisation has adequate data security practices and increase open communication with refugees on how their personal data will be protected when they provide it to you. Many refugees have already handed their personal information and documents to many responding agencies and government departments - so a centralised refugee identification system would have less of an impact on refugees that are already in the country. However, contingency planning for potential refugee increases should address this information security issue, for reasons of data security and efficiency.

> We lose the sense of information safety. Our contacts are all over the internet. We escaped bombs, so the sense of threat has changed. [Woman with children, Brașov]

Feed*back* on feedback:

A culture of providing constructive feedback on refugee services needs to be cultivated to ensure services are in line with refugee priority needs and preferences. To combat reservations related to the fear of being perceived as ungrateful, relief agencies need to proactively report back to the community on the feedback they do receive and the positive changes made in response. Feedback reports are often kept as internal documents. Openly displaying the tangible results of feedback on popular information platforms and in face-to-face interactions with the community will increase trust and encourage greater participation in these systems.

> Maybe I would like to (leave feedback). But everyone understands that tomorrow you will have to come back to the same place. And you can't write a bad review, because you will come there tomorrow. [Woman, Iași]

Refugees as response designers:

Refugees currently do not feel they have been adequately consulted in the design of the services to assist them. Now that the emergency phase of the response is over and organisations are looking towards integration and mid-longer term planning, service providers should build sustainable approaches that allow them to listen to community needs and preferences, use them to influence the design of services and importantly, report back to the community on the changes made based on their feedback. Would like to see more involvement of the community to impact the design of services. Making sure that data can be used for decision making purposes.

Multi-platform media:

While early efforts to provide information to refugees in Ukrainian have been made by Romanian media organisations, refugees are largely unaware of this programming. Greater promotion is needed. To widen reach, consider alternative broadcast platforms such as social media broadcast (Facebook live for instance) or narrowcasting through fixed speakers at places where refugees are likely to spend time (accommodation centres and info points).

Media should also consider and respond to the short, medium, and long term information needs of their audiences; for instance, news and current affairs, relief services, entertainment, rumours and misinformation, and educational programming that prepares refugees to integrate into Romanian society.

Media as relief actors:

To adequately respond to the wide range of refugee information needs and rumours and misinformation that may be circulating in the community, Romanian media that broadcast in Ukrainian need to be welcomed into humanitarian response coordination mechanisms as an information and aid actor.

Acknowledging that additional funding is required to make this a reality - through a better understanding of the priorities of the response, how decisions are made and what changes may be coming, Romanian media can more effectively translate this information for their audiences and collect and share feedback on the questions and concerns they hear from their audience. Ukrainian language media can be a valuable platform for hosting community discussions, connecting refugees with decision makers and increasing the accountability of the response.

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