

Refugees and Asylum-Seekers



In January 2020, young refugees from different cities across Ukraine met in Kyiv for a two-day workshop on project management and leadership skills. Earlier in 2020, this group initiated a project on social inclusion and tolerance building, funded by UNHCR's Regional Bureau for Europe. Photo credit: UNHCR.

Overview

Refugees and asylum-seekers in Ukraine come from over [60 different countries](#), including some of the biggest refugee-producing countries such as Afghanistan, Syria, and Somalia, as well as the Russian Federation. The population includes single mothers and vulnerable women, unaccompanied minors, persons with disabilities and others who have gone through a traumatic experience. Ukraine offers two forms of protection to those who have fled persecution and war in their own country and are seeking asylum in Ukraine: [refugee status and complementary protection](#). Although Ukraine has asylum legislation and institutions in place, weaknesses remain in the procedure, and material reception conditions do not provide an adequate standard of living. Asylum-seekers do not have access to free urgent medical care. The state does not provide them with social assistance or language courses. Refugees and asylum-seekers complain of discrimination in access to health services, education, and employment. The situation has become even more complicated with the COVID-19 outbreak, since quarantine measures have had a negative impact on small businesses, employment and education opportunities.

Still, some have managed to learn Ukrainian, find a job, start a business and integrate, while many other refugees and asylum-seekers who cannot return to their country of origin and are in search of a new home express their interest in learning Ukrainian, finding opportunities to sustain themselves and integrating in Ukraine, the place they would like to call home.



Statistics

Refugees in Ukraine (as of 1 January 2021)¹

2,255

Refugees and persons with complementary protection in Ukraine

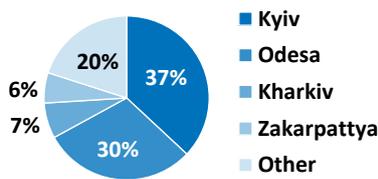
24%

Of refugees and persons with complementary protection are women and girls

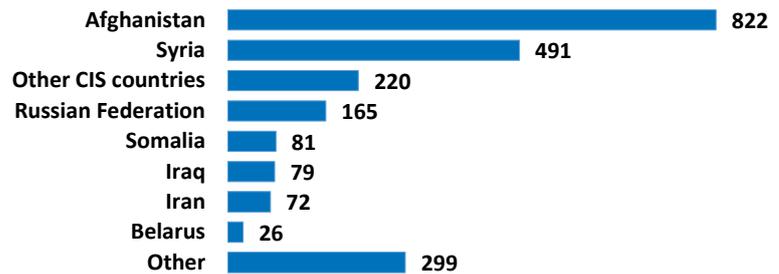
17%

Of refugees and persons with complementary protection are children

Host regions



Countries of Origins



CIS: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan (excluding Russian Federation)



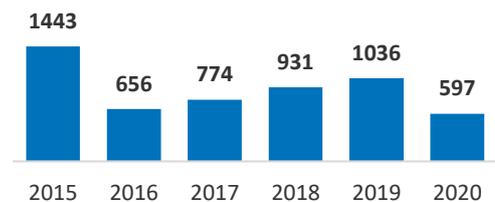
Trends

Until the start of the conflict in 2014, an average of 1,500 persons per year applied for asylum in Ukraine. Most entered the country irregularly through the eastern border with the Russian Federation. The number dropped sharply after the conflict started. In 2019, the number of new asylum applicants increased by 11 per cent but remained low at 1,036 persons. [New applications decreased to 597 persons in 2020, due to COVID-19-related border closures](#) and disruptions in the work of offices of the asylum authorities.

Only around 100 asylum-seekers per year are granted one of the two protection statuses in Ukraine. The quality of the Refugee Determination Procedure (RSD) has improved, albeit slowly, over the last few years. Nevertheless, the government recognition rate remains low, especially for asylum-seekers from Syria.

A majority of asylum-seekers remain in the procedure for a long time and receive rejections at the end of the procedure. According to the data from the UNHCR registration database, around a quarter of the asylum-seeking population has been present on the territory of Ukraine for five years or more.

Arrivals from 2015 to 2020



¹ Government Statistics – provided by the State Migration Service of Ukraine

Impact of COVID-19 on the Refugee Population

The closure of the border crossing points has made it more difficult for asylum-seekers to access the territory and to request asylum. For refugees and asylum-seekers living in Ukraine, the COVID-19 pandemic puts them at heightened risk. Measures adopted in relation to COVID-19 to prolong legal stay of foreigners did not apply to asylum-seekers. This puts them at risk of being undocumented or with no valid document, increasing their vulnerability, and creating additional challenges to access services, especially health care.

COVID-19 related Protection Risks for Refugees and Asylum-Seekers in Ukraine

|  Information |  Health care |  Livelihoods |  Higher risk of infection |
|--|---|---|---|
| Lack of access to information about prevention/response in languages they understand. | Lack of access to free-of-charge health care for asylum-seekers; UNHCR is currently paying for them. | Lost livelihood sources in the informal sector due to lockdown of markets. This had severe negative impact both on families and single persons. | Around 300 asylum-seeker can be accommodated in state Temporary Accommodation Centers (TACs) at a time if they cannot afford rent. |
| Response | Response | Response | Response |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> UNHCR and its NGO partners supported refugee communities to translate information about COVID-19 prevention and response in languages refugees can understand. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> UNHCR re-allocated funds to support medical expenses of refugees and asylum-seekers. UNHCR reinforced its advocacy with the Government for the inclusion of asylum-seekers into the medical system of Ukraine. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> UNHCR provided additional financial assistance to vulnerable asylum-seekers to help them cope with the impact of COVID-19. UNHCR's NGO partners moved all the Ukrainian language classes online to ensure an uninterrupted learning process. UNHCR covers Internet access to those asylum-seekers and refugees who attend classes regularly. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> UNHCR provided hygienic items to support persons residing in the state Temporary Accommodation Centres and facilitated donations of hygienic items from the private sector representatives to the TACs directly, to support their contingency planning. |

UNHCR's Work

UNHCR's work is guided by its **Multi-Year, Multi-Partner Protection and Solutions Strategy** which sets forth its plans for engagement in Ukraine for a period of five years, during 2018-2022. The strategy reflects the results of broad consultations with stakeholders.

Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Between May and December 2020, in addition to its regular programs of support, UNHCR Ukraine provided financial assistance to support vulnerable asylum-seekers and refugees to cover urgent needs:

- April:** one-time minimal **cash-for-hygiene assistance** to the most vulnerable asylum-seekers, covering **209 families**.
- May:** cash assistance was provided to **532 households**.
- June:** financial support was provided to 25 persons who received grants to start small businesses in 2018-2019, in order to keep their business afloat during the quarantine and to cover operational losses.
- May-July:** increased provision of **in-kind hygiene assistance** to clean public areas of temporary accommodation centres (TACs) where currently 260 asylum-seekers and refugees reside. Provision of personal protection equipment (PPE) for individuals and families residing in the TACs for asylum-seekers, as well as for the TAC administration staff members.

DID YOU KNOW

UNHCR and its partners recorded a **two-fold increase** in calls/emails from refugees and asylum-seekers complaining that they lost their job due to the quarantine measures. People said they **could not pay the rent and had no money to support their families**. Some refugee communities, e.g. Somalis, have reported their high reliance on remittances from abroad. Communities became unable to cover even the most basic needs.

- **September:** [school cash assistance](#) was provided to [80 households](#) to support access to information and communication technology (ICT) for children studying on-line.
- **December:** [winterization support](#) in the amount of three months of subsistence allowance was provided to [540 families](#).



Before I came to Ukraine, I saw snow only on TV. When I first saw it, I thought it was very beautiful. And at the same time, very dangerous. When low temperatures hit, our flat gets cold, because the windows are not properly insulated. Also, the floor gets cold, and it is really bad for our children who sleep on mattresses on the floor” (a refugee from Somalia).

This family with six children fled from Somalia and applied for refugee status in Ukraine. The COVID-19 pandemic made it difficult for them to meet ends as the family’s income relied on the informal labour market. To support the household, UNHCR provided them with financial assistance to cover needs which increased during winter. Read the full story [here](#). Photo credit by UNHCR.



Protection of Refugees and Asylum-Seekers

Refugee Legislation

Ukraine’s current refugee law still requires improvements and UNHCR has been advocating for amendments to the national legislation on asylum to bring it in line with international and European Union (EU) standards. Throughout 2019, UNHCR and its NGO partners closely cooperated with the State Migration Service (SMS) in revising the current law. In January 2020, UNHCR officially published its [comments on the draft of the new law](#)² shared by the SMS, highlighting remaining protection concerns but also welcoming important improvements. Subsequently, a significantly revised version of the draft law was registered in Parliament in April 2020, requiring UNHCR to prepare a [second public commentary](#)³, expressing more concerns, in particular regarding the risk of detention of asylum-seekers which would increase if the law were adopted in the registered version. UNHCR has been in contact with the SMS, Parliamentarians and civil society organizations, notably in the framework of the Civil Council on Migration Issues of the Ombudsman of Ukraine, which also has developed comments on the draft text. Ukraine had a National Plan for Integration of Refugees and Persons in Need of Complementary Protection into Ukrainian Society until 2020, but it was not implemented due to lack of funding.

- **Access to Health:** Currently, asylum-seekers do not have access to free-of-charge medical care. They are expected to pay for medical services at the same rates as other foreigners. Most asylum-seekers cannot afford these prices. Together with WHO, [UNHCR advocates with the Government of Ukraine to grant asylum-seekers access to free urgent medical care](#). UNHCR also advocates for refugees and asylum-seekers to be accorded the same considerations as nationals; for example, if nationals with chronic diseases or above 65 years of age are being offered vaccination, then refugees should also benefit.

²UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), UNHCR Comments on the Draft Law of Ukraine on Granting Protection to Foreigners and Stateless Persons, January 2020, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5e60ec1c4.html>

³ UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), UNHCR Observations on the New Version of the Draft Law on Granting Protection to Foreigners and Stateless Persons (Ukraine), May 2020, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5ec688ee4.html>

My child needs urgent medical help. If not provided, my little girl will die. With my asylum-seeker certificate, I cannot afford to pay for her treatment in Ukraine. Even the UN cannot pay for her treatment, because the hospital does not provide invoices and the prices for us, asylum-seekers, are like for foreign businessmen. We needed to engage lawyers to help us. Our documents are reviewed for years, and meanwhile we have no rights for anything in this country” (Asylum-seeker from Afghanistan.)

Our family has been waiting for a decision on our asylum application for some time. Because we cannot access healthcare, our children do not have vaccinations. The younger child cannot go to kindergarten without vaccinations. I cannot be sure that I will be able to enrol my older children in school” (Asylum-seeker from Tajikistan.)

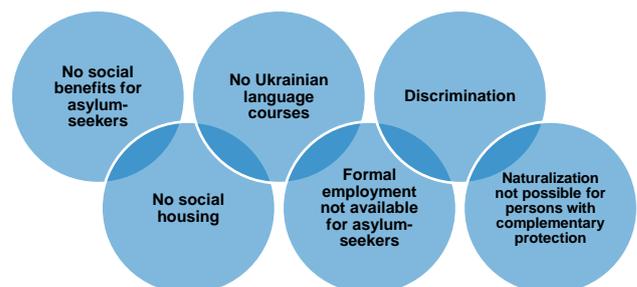
- Livelihoods Support and Self-Reliance Grants:** In November 2017, UNHCR Ukraine launched a program to provide financial assistance to refugees and asylum-seekers who want to start their own business or attend vocational training to achieve greater self-reliance. As of 2020, 130 persons have benefitted from the program. Many have initiated small farming businesses, food processing and production of crafts. Others have started small-scale businesses involving tailoring, furniture production, graphic designing, beauty parlours and barber shops. Photo on the right: *Baz, a refugee from Afghanistan, received a vocational training grant to cover the tuition for a course on furniture design, as well as procurement of equipment. Upon completion of the studies, Baz significantly improved the quality of his services and increased the number of clients.*



- Community-Based Protection (CBP)** is a process whereby UNHCR supports communities to use their own knowledge and capacity to identify their concerns and design a response themselves. In Ukraine, refugee communities participate in trainings organized by UNHCR on a variety of topics, such as community mobilization and empowerment, NGO management, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) response, access to migration procedure, psychological first aid, etc. UNHCR has trained refugees on asylum and migration issues, forming a network of paralegals from within the communities. Since the start of its **Community Support Initiatives program** in 2018, UNHCR has assisted 26 refugee community initiatives and funded 18 projects to promote peaceful coexistence between refugees and their host communities. In 2020, UNHCR established a CBP working group engaging NGO partners and government counterparts at the central and regional levels.

- Language Training:** UNHCR provides basic language training for refugees and asylum-seekers and advocates with the Government to initiate certified state language courses. In 2018, the Ministry of Education cooperated with partners on improvement of the manual used for refugees’ language studies. In 2020, over 130 refugees and asylum-seekers received life-skills trainings, which also included language training. Responding to the request from the refugee community, UNHCR supports intensive language training for highly motivated refugees and asylum-seekers.

Key obstacles to local integration in Ukraine



- Access to Employment:** UNHCR and its partners provide counselling to refugees and asylum-seekers on employment and labour market opportunities. Through partnerships, UNHCR provides support with access to apprenticeships or work-placement schemes; and advises on diploma recognition procedures to enable employment that matches refugees’ and asylum-seekers’ qualifications. UNHCR also assists with obtaining work permits and advocates with the State Employment Centre for inclusion of refugees and asylum-seekers in their retraining programs.
- Legal Assistance:** UNHCR provides free legal assistance through its NGO partners to asylum-seekers during their asylum procedures to assist them accessing their rights, obtaining documentation, and gaining access to medical services and employment. Annually, UNHCR and its partners provide legal assistance to around 2,500 refugees and asylum-seekers.

Working in partnership

UNHCR has been working in Ukraine since 1994 and established a country office the following year. Since then, UNHCR worked with Government entities, national and local authorities, for an improved national asylum system aligned with international standards, as well as strengthening the capacity of national NGOs to advocate for, protect and assist refugees.

Free Legal Aid Centres (FLAC): As of 1 July 2015, government-run FLACs became operational and available to asylum-seekers in the asylum process. However, only a minority of the lawyers from the FLACs possesses the required specialized skills necessary to assist asylum-seekers and refugees. Supporting FLACs with the aim of progressively developing their capacity in the area of asylum is one of UNHCR Ukraine's strategic priorities.

The State Migration Services of Ukraine (SMS): The Department on Foreigners and Stateless Persons of the State Migration Service is the main counterpart of UNHCR in Ukraine. The SMS was established in 2010 as a government institution coordinated by the Minister of Interior. Through the SMS, the Minister implements the state migration policy on combating illegal migration, on citizenship, registration of refugees and other categories of migrants. The SMS is responsible for implementation of the Refugee Law. The SMS's Headquarters in Kyiv coordinates the work of 12 regional branches. The decision to grant protection is taken at the central level.

UNHCR also works in coordination with the [State Border Guard Service](#); the judiciary (the Supreme Court and the National School of Judges); the Ombudsperson of the Ukrainian Parliament (Verkhovna Rada); and the Ministry of Social Policy. For more read [UNHCR Ukraine's Thematic Update Partnership with Ukrainian Authorities](#).

Four NGO partners implement UNHCR programmes in Ukraine aimed at protecting and assisting refugees and asylum-seekers through the provision of legal aid, social assistance, psychosocial support, and advocacy and capacity building activities. These partners are: The [Right to Protection \(R2P\)](#), [Rokada](#) (in **Kyiv and Kyiv oblast**); [R2P](#) (in **Lviv, Lutsk, Chernihiv and Kharkiv**); [Desyate Kvitnya](#) (in **Odesa and Mykolaiv**); and The [International Fund for Health Well Being and Environment Conservation \(NEEKA\)](#) in the **Zakarpatska oblast**.



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