UNHCR
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
Haut Commissariat des Nations Unies pour les réfugiés

PROTECTION BRIEF
BULGARIA

JULY 2024

Ukrainian refugees and host community performing traditional songs, June 2024/ UNHCR ©/ Dobrin Kashavelov

Operational Context

The application of temporary protection (TP) to refugees from Ukraine in Bulgaria has been extended until March 2026. Following the Government's second annual re-registration exercise, 15,000 refugees from Ukraine have registered or renewed registration for TP between April and end of June 2024.

On 31 July 2024, the Council of Ministers extended the Government's Humanitarian Programme for TP holders in Bulgaria, until the end of the year. The humanitarian assistance programme introduced in March 2022 has been extended several times by three governments. While the current programme includes government-sponsored accommodation, the short extension periods and lack of clarity regarding the duration of the programme has caused uncertainty among many refugees, in turn limiting their access to other rights such as education and employment. Despite Bulgaria's commendable support for refugees from Ukraine, there are still gaps with regards to the implementation of the TP Directive (TPD), including as it relates to accommodation, education, employment, and social protection. In March 2024, the draft Humanitarian and Integration Programme was presented to the Council of Ministers but was not adopted due to the change of government and in view of the lack of agreement among institutions regarding their responsibilities for each component of the program. In particular, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy disagrees with its responsibilities under the program due to lack of capacity and resources.

Key Figures

Refugees from Ukraine under Temporary Protection

61,433
Temporary Protection beneficiaries residing in Bulgaria as of 11 July 2024

70%
Of Temporary Protection beneficiaries are women and children

31
Unaccompanied and Separated Children registered for TP

7%
Of valid Temporary Protection beneficiaries are older persons

97%
of respondents have been granted temporary protection

53%
of households have at least one household member with a serious medical condition

25%
of respondents have at least one household member whose documentation is missing or expired

82%
of respondents have immediate family members who remained in Ukraine

78%
of respondents with immediate family members in Ukraine have faced challenges reuniting in the host country

35%
of respondents have at least one urgent need

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41%
of respondents visited Ukraine at least once since their initial departure

61%
of respondents who visited Ukraine faced difficulties upon their return to the host country

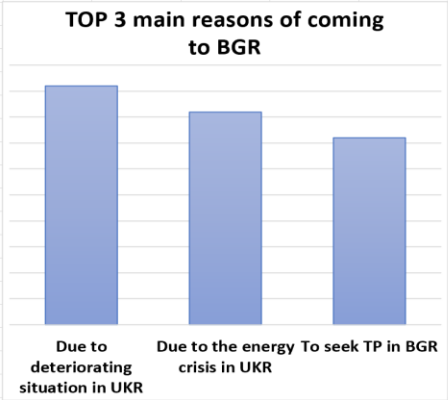
25%
of respondents were unable to visit Ukraine, mainly due to security reasons

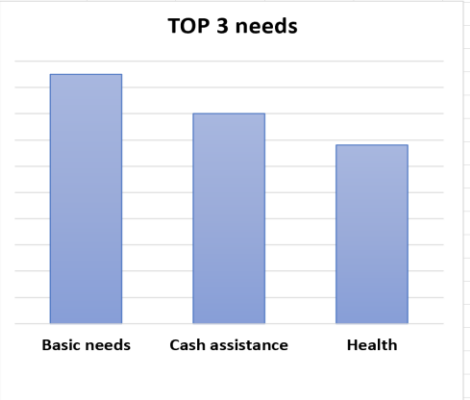
92%
of respondents who are employed in the host country do not have an employmen contract

Overview

Since the beginning of June 2024, there has been a significant increase in the number of new arrivals in Bulgaria (vis-à-vis departures), contributing to a higher estimated presence of Ukrainian nationals within the country – as of end-April, 55,200; end-May,62,900; and end-June, 106,300. Initial rapid protection monitoring findings conducted by UNHCR in July show that newly arriving Ukrainians are mostly coming from Odesa, Kherson, and Dnipropetrovsk oblasts in southern and eastern Ukraine.

UNHCR conducted a rapid assessment with more than 2,300 refugees benefiting from the Government accommodation program. The main reasons cited by newly arrived refugees from Ukraine include the deteriorating situation in Ukraine, the ongoing energy crisis that affects availability of electricity, as well as intentions to seek temporary protection in Bulgaria. Approximately 8% of those surveyed came from other European countries, including Poland (6%), Romania and Germany, either due to the reduced humanitarian support in these countries or to visit relatives residing in Bulgaria. Most of these refugees are undecided about staying long-term in Bulgaria. UNHCR will continue to monitor whether TP registration and school enrolment rates of children in the upcoming academic year correspondingly increase with intentions to stay long-term.





Profiles of Refugees from Ukraine

Data used in this report was collected as part of UNHCR Bulgaria's Protection Profiling and Monitoring exercise for the Ukraine Situation, in partnership with the Bulgarian Red Cross. During April-July 2024, 873 interviews, representing household members were conducted in various locations in Bulgaria.

Most respondents, 80 per cent, arrived in Bulgaria in 2022, with the majority originating from Odesa, Kharkiv, and Kyiv oblasts. 68 percent of respondents currently live in rented accommodation and 14 per cent in government-sponsored accommodation.

Demographic profiles

99%
of respondents are Ukrainian nationals

84%
Of respondents are women and girls

20%
Of household members are older persons

53%
of households have at least one household member with serious medical conditions

Protection environment for refugees from Ukraine

A sense of uncertainty faced by refugees in relation to their stay and future in Bulgaria, limited Government support to access their rights under the TPD, and the impact this has on their well-being, have characterized the refugee situation in Bulgaria in 2024. Refugees from Ukraine have created a strong sense of community and mobilized to provide essential information to access housing, healthcare, employment and other rights, and support for the most vulnerable refugees, including older persons and persons with disabilities[1]. This report aims to present data and findings in relation to vulnerabilities of refugees and uncertainties affecting their lives, and the protection risks which flow from these uncertainties, including those surrounding **legal status and documentation, employment, and accommodation** The protection risks highlighted in this report are interlaced and may compound other risks. Uncertainty surrounding legal status and accommodation, for instance, may increase their vulnerability to trafficking and abuse and exploitation. Uncertainties and consequential risks in relation to legal status, accommodation and employment may heighten vulnerability and may spark premature return decisions induced by challenges in accessing rights and support in Bulgaria and other EU countries.

The majority of respondents in the Protection Profiling and Monitoring exercise, 99 percent, have applied for temporary protection (TP) in Bulgaria. UNHCR's monitoring at TP registration sites in March and June 2024 found that remote location of registration facilities around Bulgaria, especially for those in Varna and Burgas provinces in the Black Sea region, poses a challenge for those who want to renew their TP. While TP re-registration is only possible at the six registration and reception centres in Sofia and southern Bulgaria run by the State Agency for Refugees, new TP registration is possible at designated regional police departments and district police stations countrywide when the refugees are in possession of all the required documentation. UNHCR monitoring of new TP registrations in Varna and Burgas, and around the Black Sea region, in July 2024 do not indicate long waiting periods, which was indicated in the 2023 Participatory Assessment[2] among the main challenges together with the lack of information and cost of transportation. Since 2023, some 2,500 Ukrainians of Bulgarian descent have obtained Bulgarian citizenship. Regional directorates of the Ministry of Interior indicate that many Ukrainians are interested in obtaining longer-term employment permits in Bulgaria.

[11] UNHCR, *Voices of Refugees in Bulgaria 2023*, May 2024.
[2] UNHCR, *Voices of Refugees in Bulgaria 2023*, May 2024.

Legal and job counselling at Compass Protection and Inclusion Centre in Varna, May 2024/ UNHCR ©/ Bulent Peker

Protection issue I: Access to civil status, identity documents and procedures

The absence of concrete legislative provisions and mechanism on the identification of beneficiaries of temporary protection with specific needs, including persons with disabilities, older persons, persons with serious and/or chronic medical conditions, as well as unaccompanied and separated children and LGBTIQ+ individuals, impedes consistent identification and referral to services. This also hampers effective access to rights. The early and systematic identification of persons with specific needs is essential to promoting their effective protection and access to rights. The inability of refugees to exercise one right often negatively impacts the enjoyment of others. For example, lack of capacity in local schools significantly impedes adults' access to the labour market, whilst a lack of sustainable, longer-term housing has had a multifaceted impact on refugees' ability to exercise other rights including education, employment, and social protection.

The lack of social workers at the places of accommodation under the government humanitarian programme, gaps in referral pathways and provision of counselling as well as lack of sufficient number and capacity of services, particularly in remote areas further exacerbate challenges. UNHCR and partners proposed amendments to the legislation to explicitly regulate identification of persons with specific needs and assessment of their vulnerabilities. While Compass Protection and inclusion centres provide a number of services and referral pathways at 6 locations throughout the country, a comprehensive mechanism is necessary to ensure timely identification, needs assessment and referral.

In 2024, the TP beneficiaries have faced certain issues during the re-registration process, namely the date of validity of the TP cards being filled in the existing document by hand by the respective officials, without a stamp

or other official state ensigns. This has led to various authorities, property owners and employers in Bulgaria refusing to accept such TP documents as they seem less trustworthy and easier to fake.

Access to identity documents is key to accessing rights and essential services. 19 per cent of respondents have at least one household member missing or possessing expired documentation, mainly international passports, followed by internal passport. Bulgaria currently maintains a flexible approach, accepting expired identity documents, for TP registration and re-registration. However, expired identity documents could affect refugees' access to financial and other basic services. Refugees have faced challenges in accessing essential services with their TP registration cards, including obtaining driver's licenses and opening bank accounts. Many banks deny opening accounts to refugees from Ukraine due to considerations with regard to the Law on Measures against Money Laundering. Banks require Ukrainian national passports, as TP registration cards are not considered identity documents under the Bulgarian legislation. This also leads to challenges in finding employment which can create additional issues for refugees who wish to stay in Bulgaria for longer periods of time.

Since their first arrival in Bulgaria, seven percent of respondents have reported events requiring civil registration such as birth, death, divorce, and marriage in their households. Small number of respondents reported difficulties with civil registration both with Ukrainian consular institutions and civil authorities in Bulgaria, due to costs and insufficient information on the procedures.

Ukrainian refugees face specific challenges to family reunification. 78 per cent of respondents still have immediate family members who remained in Ukraine, but majority have faced difficulties reuniting with these family members due to martial law, disability, medical conditions and security reasons. Refugees from Ukraine have also mentioned that delays in the process, lack of information and missing documentation have prevented family reunification.

Refugees from Ukraine under Temporary Protection do not have access to international protection procedures under an administrative instruction. The SAR order was issued in April 2022 to discontinue the registration and institution of proceedings for granting international protection to displaced persons from Ukraine. Instead, they are to be registered as foreigners granted temporary protection. The only exception allowed was for displaced persons from Ukraine without documents proving they fall within the scope of the TP Directive. The order was unsuccessfully challenged in court, with the Supreme Administrative Court ruling that, considering the purpose of the TP Directive is to protect those displaced under mass influx and those of other asylum seekers, it is not possible for a person to benefit from TP and be in a procedure for granting international protection simultaneously.[3] Proposed amendments to the Law on Asylum and Refugees (LAR) envisage a possibility for those granted TP to also apply for international protection, be registered within three months of submission of the application and be granted humanitarian status within one month of registration in cases where the application is submitted within one year of the expiry of temporary protection[4].

[3] Decision 7885 from 14.07.2023, Supreme Administrative Court, Case No 1992/2023.
[4] Currently the legislation allows beneficiaries of temporary protection to submit an application for international protection but stipulates that the applicant is to be registered (and the procedure initiated) only after the termination or revocation of temporary protection.

Svetlana was a violin teacher before she was forced to leave Ukraine. When we met with her, she happily shared that despite being a refugee in a new country, she was able to fulfil her dream here and become a violinist in a professional orchestra. Today, when she is not busy working at the Burgas Opera House, she attends Bulgarian language classes in Sunny Beach and teaches instruments to refugee children/ UNHCR ©/ Dobrin Kashavelov

Protection Issue II: Inclusion in Employment, Education and Social Protection

While the Government humanitarian accommodation programme provides only partial support, it hampers the inclusion of the most vulnerable, including children and people with disabilities in remote locations, and fails to facilitate access to education, health, and livelihoods in line with the refugees' rights under the Temporary Protection Directive. Transition from the humanitarian accommodation support should be developed with a view to foster the rights of refugees and managed to avoid reduced support for vulnerable households that may lead to heightened risks of homelessness and destitution, family separation, premature return, onward movement and may compound risks of exploitation and trafficking. When temporary measures get protracted in time, such as stays in hotels, the wellbeing of refugees can be negatively impacted, which can, in turn, have knock-on effects on their longer-term integration. Perpetual renewal of ad-hoc measures, such as subsidised places in hotels, will eventually become more expensive than investing in long-term solutions that benefit both refugees and host communities.

Employment: Data from the profiling exercise indicates that 86 per cent of refugees from Ukraine have vocational or higher education, and 22 per cent are employed in Bulgaria. 11 per cent of refugees from Ukraine reported working excessively long hours. Moreover, assessments indicate high prevalence of exposure to labour

exploitation, earnings not meeting subsistence needs, and mothers with young children facing difficulties with the care of children due to low levels of school enrolment and lack of access to childcare.

25%
of respondents do not have an employment contract

11%
of respondents reported working excessively long hours

1%
of respondents reported the confiscation of their documentation (e.g. passport) by their employer

In 2024, UNHCR partners have registered an increase in the number of Ukrainian older persons of retirement age seeking employment. Refugees supported through UNHCR employment services have found employment in diverse fields ranging from manufacturing, hospitality to the IT sector.

In the MSNA survey conducted in 2023[5], 14.6 per cent[6] of refugees from Ukraine were employed in Hospitality, Accommodation and Food services, 9.2 per cent – in Manufacturing, 8.6 per cent – in education, 6.6 per cent – in arts, entertainment, and recreational activities[7]. Since January 2024 until June 2024, within the framework a UNHCR partnership, Caritas Bulgaria has supported 341 refugees and asylum seekers to find employment. 25% have been occupied in hospitality, 25% - in services, and 24% - in production and construction activities. The Employment Agency's EU-funded project Solidarity supported 2855 refugees with TP to be employed, with the Agency covering minimum salary for the initial three (later six) months and with an option for additional financial assistance for covering rent. The project ended on 31 July 2024 and no such targeted measures have been further developed.

While Bulgaria needs labour force in various sectors, employment rates are low among refugees, and the majority of refugees are employed in jobs that do not fit their professional qualifications and technical skills. Labour exploitation is also a concern. In Bulgaria, 25 per cent of the respondents in the profiling exercise who are employed said that they do not have an employment contract and 11 per cent reported working excessively long hours. The biggest reported barriers to accessing employment remain language, lack of decent employment opportunities, limited opportunities that match skills as well as lengthy and complicated certification recognition procedures, leading to needs for reskilling and appropriate technical and vocational educational training matching the job market opportunities.

During a participatory assessment, refugees have expressed interest in knowing more about their rights in general, for instance, job and training opportunities, about having their diplomas and qualifications recognized, opportunities for entrepreneurship, and about healthcare and social benefits that come with employment. 36 per cent from the interviewed people shared that they obtain information about job opportunities from the refugee community, and 23 per cent - look for employment online. 44 per cent of the respondents (TP beneficiaries) shared that prior to them being forcibly displaced, they have been occupying jobs relevant for their education and skills. 76 per cent of interviewed refugees from Ukraine confirmed that enrolled in a Bulgarian

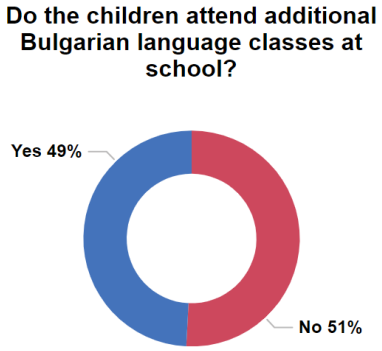
[5] RRP for the Ukraine Situation, *Multisector Needs Assessment 2023*, p.20, available here
[6] As a share of occupations of all employed refugees from Ukraine.
[7] RRP for the Ukraine Situation, *Multisector Needs Assessment 2023*, p.68, available here

language course, while some shared that they were not studying Bulgarian because there are no available courses in their areas or due to connectivity problems for online courses.

Access to education: As of March 2024, 1,323 children are enrolled in preschool education and 3,582 in primary and secondary education. This represents about 47 per cent rate. The enrolment rate steadily increases with every school year. 350 kindergartens and 650 schools have refugee children.

37 per cent of households with school-aged children reported at least one child not registered for education in the host country, mostly 70 per cent, due to lack of places in local schools and kindergartens, proof of vaccination, or preference for online education, followed by language barriers, lack of information on enrolment procedures, and lack of special education offered.

In June 2024, the Council of Ministers issued a draft decree on admission of temporary protection beneficiaries in higher education institutions in Bulgaria. In its comments, UNHCR has highlighted the need to ensure flexibility in the determination of the annual quota of subsidized places, currently limited to 150; clarify the modality of allocation of places across universities; and consider exempting those who have graduated from Bulgarian schools or possess a language certificate from the requirement to undergo specialized Bulgarian language training. The Ministry has accepted the increase of the quota, and on 27 July the Council of Ministers voted to an annual quota of subsidized 400 places.



Social Protection and Specific Needs

- 53% of households have at least one family member with a serious medical condition
- 23% of households have at least one family member with a disability

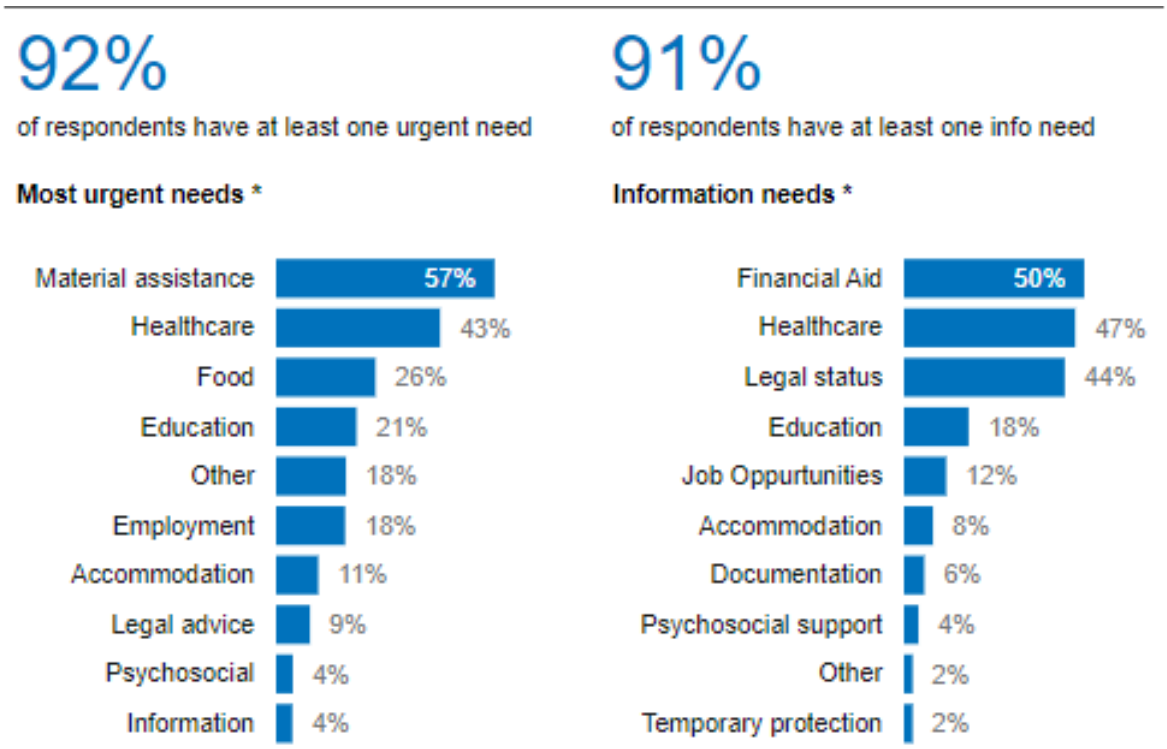
72 percent of respondents in the Protection Profiling and Monitoring exercise have applied for government social protection benefits at one point. 11 per cent of respondents experienced challenges applying for these benefits due to reasons including language barriers. UNHCR partners continue- to provide legal assistance, including in instances of refusals issued by the Social Assistance Directorates for granting social assistance to refugee children, establishing disability under the Territorial Expert Medical Commission (TELK) procedures and applying for social disability, child and other types of benefits that refugees in need are entitled to. In the first 6 months of 2024, UNHCR legal aid partners supported 79 beneficiaries to access benefits, primarily under the Law on Family Benefits for Children where TP beneficiaries are not explicitly mentioned within its scope. In 2024, 281 applicants received benefits under the Family Child Protection Act, and 572 individuals under the Disabilities Act.

Beneficiaries of temporary protection are entitled to access medical care under the same conditions as Bulgarian nationals. Health insurance is only covered by the state for 3 months upon the initial registration for temporary protection; upon the expiry of this period the beneficiaries have to cover the cost themselves if unemployed or

through their employer. The health insurance payment is covered by the state for the entire period of temporary protection only for children under 18, women above 63 and men above 65 years old.

An obstacle for TP beneficiaries to access healthcare include general practitioners being unwilling to register them as patients. Furthermore, there are limits to the number of registered patients with a general practitioner (GP), hence limiting access to primary and secondary healthcare as well as to obtaining prescription medicines covered by a health insurance. In Bulgaria, in order to access secondary health care for free, a referral from a GP is necessary.

Beneficiaries of TP with disabilities are explicitly included in the Law on Persons with Disabilities and are entitled to receive support, including disability benefits. However, they must undergo an assessment in Bulgaria which is a complex and bureaucratic process, with registration with GP a prerequisite for starting it. Ukrainian refugees with disabilities share with UNHCR that the procedure costs more than the assistance, and that if they are awarded the disability benefit for three months, they are required to do another assessment after three months. In addition, TP beneficiaries who decide to stop making health insurance payments and do so for longer than three months, e.g. they leave the country and do not pay for their health insurance, will have their health insurance interrupted, and in case they need medical attention higher fees will be administered. However, the right to health care is restored once the missing contributions for the relevant past periods are paid.



CALLS TO ACTION

Access to stable forms of legal stay

UNHCR recommends the Government of the Republic of Bulgaria to ensure:

- Adopting of a longer-term **humanitarian and integration programme** for the most vulnerable families and individuals that allows refugees to make informed decisions. UNHCR urges the Government of Bulgaria to adopt integration and inclusion programs for refugees, including for refugees from Ukraine, in line with the EU Action plan on integration and inclusion 2021-2027, and ensure that such programs are sufficiently funded and implemented.
- Designing a broader **accommodation and housing strategy for all vulnerable households**, including refugees, that takes into account the situation of those with particular needs, such as children, older persons, women at particular risk, those with chronic health conditions and persons with disabilities, who need additional support to secure accessible and adapted accommodation located in areas with access to essential services including health care.
- **Early identification of specific needs** of refugees and establish harmonized individual needs assessment and case management procedures. Procedures to identify persons at heightened risk requiring specialized services such as unaccompanied and separated children and people with disabilities and those at risk of labour exploitation and trafficking should systematically be part of registration procedures for Temporary Protection. UNHCR recommends that procedures to identify persons at heightened risk are included as part of registration procedures for temporary protection, as well as procedures to renew residency and other associated documentation to enhance opportunities for the identification of these groups.
- Adopting proposed amendments to the **Law on Asylum and Refugees** establishing identification mechanism for vulnerable beneficiaries of temporary protection. UNHCR further urges the government to ensure the necessary administrative and financial resources are available in order to implement the identification and referral procedures and ensure the specific needs are identified and addressed and the vulnerable refugees, including children and people with disabilities, and have access to meaningful social protection, including child benefits and disability benefits.
- **Flexible approaches for requirement of valid identity documents** when they are required for accessing rights or purposes like receiving residency permits, by broadening the range of acceptable documents for proving identity and accessing rights.
- Ensuring that temporary protection beneficiaries have the option to effectively access asylum procedures, and in such circumstances, have their applications examined in line with applicable international and EU standards, including by ensuring the primacy of refugee protection. Legislative amendments should make clear that the beneficiaries of humanitarian protection, as proposed in the amendments to the Law on Asylum and Refugees, have a right to apply for and be recognized as having refugee status should they meet the relevant definition. The legislation should clarify the interplay between humanitarian protection and international protection and ensure outlining the requirement of providing information about the availability of different protection statuses, procedures and associated rights and obligations to support informed decision making.

Access to health, education, and safe and decent employment

UNHCR recommends the Government of the Republic of Bulgaria to:

- UNHCR urges the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education and Science and the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy to facilitate the integration of refugee professionals, particularly in health, education, and social protection sectors, and streamline the relevant administrative procedures, also with a view of strengthening available services to persons with specific needs, in particular children, persons with disabilities and those with underlying medical conditions. UNHCR has offered technical support to the relevant authorities to achieve this key requirement for effective implementation of the Temporary Protection Directive and relevant recommendations of the European Commission.
- **Strengthening labour rights** through increased efforts to raise and improve awareness of these rights and reporting mechanisms for exploitative working practices amongst refugees.
- **Provision of Bulgarian language courses** through the allocation of government funds and creation of a system for provision of free Bulgarian language classes for children and adults.
- Recognition of diplomas of medical experts needs to be facilitated, as per the guidance of the European Commission.

UNHCR Bulgaria, July 2024