UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

Slovakia

Summary Analysis of Focus Group Discussions with Refugees on Social Protection & Cash Assistance

Bratislava, Slovakia
July 2023

Cover photo: Bratislava, Slovakia. A refugee woman from Ukraine participating in an activity for seniors organized by UNHCR-funded partner SME SPOLU at their community center. The activity aimed to strengthen interaction among senior refugees by fostering a warm spirit through a story-sharing moment.
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Introduction

Focus group discussions (FGDs) with refugees constitute an essential tool for shaping UNHCR and partners' protection and inclusion programmes, including cash assistance. FGDs allow for a direct dialogue between protection actors, such as UNHCR, and refugees. By shedding light on the refugees' perspectives through FGDs, UNHCR promotes an environment of trust and accountability. With this engagement, UNHCR not only elevates the efficiency of its assistance but also ensures a greater resonance with refugees themselves. This analysis aims to harness the power of collaborative dialogue and pave the way for a more responsive, tailor-made, and efficient system of social protection and cash assistance for refugees in Slovakia.

The objective of the FGDs analyzed in this document was to consult refugees, in particular but not exclusively those coming from Ukraine, and collect feedback on which groups of refugees are the most vulnerable and in need of cash assistance; identify possible risks of the cash assistance programmes and mitigation strategies together with refugees; collect feedback on possible challenges associated with the national social protection system; and identify refugees' preferred channels for feedback and complaints related to cash assistance.

The eligibility criteria for cash assistance programmes that UNHCR has been facilitating in Slovakia in 2023 were adapted based on the results of the FGDs analyzed in this document. This also helped to ensure refugees' buy-in in the cash distribution process and reduce the number of complaints about exclusion and inclusion errors.

Context

Since the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine in February 2022, Slovakia has seen a rapid influx of refugees[1] fleeing hostilities. The majority have been women and children as well as older people, people with disabilities, and those with urgent medical care needs. As of 30 April 2023, 115,196 individuals had applied for temporary protection in Slovakia.[2]

According to the Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment (MSNA) conducted with refugees in Slovakia, around 60% of respondents reported humanitarian assistance as one of their main sources of income, while only 36% mentioned salaried work.

[1] Terms "refugees" and "temporary protection holders" are used interchangeably in this document.

[2] Slovakia: UNHCR Operational Update, May 2023, available at: https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/102321. For the most updated information about the number of temporary protection holders in Slovakia, please consult the website of the Slovak Ministry of Interior under the following link: https://www.minv.sk/?docasne-utocisko.

The MSNA findings also revealed that around a third of respondents were facing challenges to obtain enough money to cover household's monthly expenses, primarily food, but also rent for households living outside of collective centers.[3] Relatedly, according to the Protection Profiling & Monitoring interviews with refugees in Slovakia, over 90% of respondents have urgent unmet needs, mostly of material nature, while over 70% of them prefer to receive support in cash.[4, 5]

In agreement with the Government of Slovakia, UNHCR provided transitional cash as of May 2022 to support the basic needs of refugees fleeing Ukraine who registered for temporary protection status in Slovakia. The transitional cash assistance programme, i.e. multipurpose cash (MPC) provided a safety net until refugees could transition to the Government's social protection systems or achieve self-reliance. The MPC was provided for an initial period of 3 months (June-August 2022) and was exceptionally extended for a 4th month (September 2022). An Inter-Agency Agreement was signed between UNHCR, UNICEF, IOM and IFRC/Slovak Red Cross on the Short-Term Emergency Cash Assistance to support the Government in meeting material needs of refugees in Slovakia. UNHCR enrolled in its registration system all eligible refugees for Material Needs cash support alongside the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and Family (MoLSAF). UNHCR supported the provision of cash assistance for 60% of the enrolled caseload and provided lists of the remaining caseload (40%) to UNICEF for their financial support.

UNHCR has effectively paid for around 32,000 individuals in 4 months with a total of 7.5 million USD by October 2022. Additionally, UNHCR Slovakia has been working continuously with MoLSAF to ensure a smooth transition from humanitarian MPC assistance to inclusion into the national system. As per the national legislative Act no. 417/2013, temporary protection holders with material needs should have access to specific social assistance support in Slovakia. However, considering the complexity and challenges that even nationals may face in accessing specialized services, it was noticed that some refugees among the most vulnerable groups may not fully meet their needs through the government social programme. The low rate of social benefits could result in a heightened risk of being unable to cover basic needs of vulnerable families.

[3] Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment conducted in July - August 2022, commissioned by UNHCR and implemented by REACH - Impact Initiative, published in October 2022, pp. 6, 15-16, 21, available at: https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/96557.

[4] Over 4,600 Protection Profiling & Monitoring interviews were held in Slovakia between October 2022 and August 2023.

[5] Data extracted as of 24 August 2023: https://data.unhcr.org/en/dataviz/293?sv=54&geo=0

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After the successful conclusion of the MPC assistance, UNHCR identified a clear need to further complement and cover current gaps in social protection systems in Slovakia through targeted Cash for Protection for vulnerable individuals that, due to their protection profile, require additional support to meet their basic needs. In addition, the Cash for Protection programme was implemented as a protection intervention to respond to specific protection situations or profiles, help reduce refugees' reliance on negative coping mechanisms and achieve further protection outcomes.

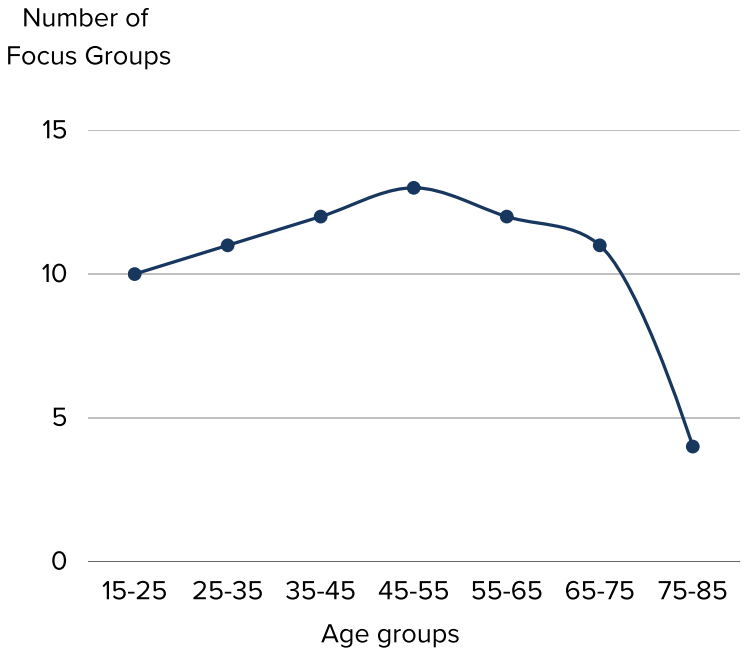
Information from the FGDs with refugees analyzed in this document served as a basis for designing the Cash for Protection programme in 2023.

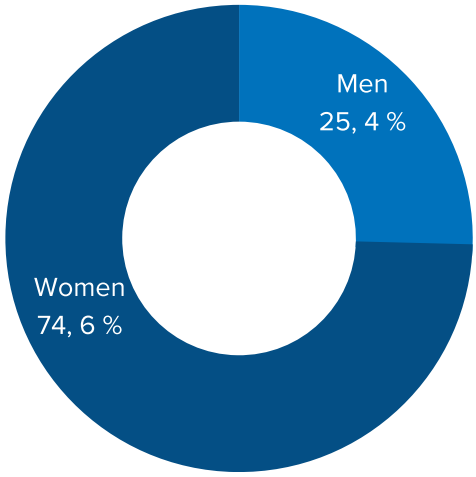
Methodology

From 1 to 20 March 2023, UNHCR held 13 FGDs in all regions of Slovakia proportionally based on the density of the refugee population. The FGDs took place in Bratislava, Košice, Banská Bystrica, Humenné, Michalovce, Nitra, Opatovská Nová Ves, Poprad, Prešov, Trenčín, Trnava, and Žilina. The majority of the refugees who participated in the FGDs resided in state-subsidized collective accommodation centers.

In total, 101 Ukrainian refugee women and 34 men of ages ranging from 15 to 87, including people with diverse specific needs, participated in the discussions. Conscious of the age, gender, and diversity considerations, older persons, single parents, and people with disabilities were particularly encouraged to take an active part in the discussions. For instance, older people participated in 12 of the 13 FGDs; likewise, single parents (mostly mothers) and persons with disability were represented, participating in 8 out of 13 FGDs. Their participation ensured that information about specific needs of persons in vulnerable situations is heard, and their opinions and views understood.

Charts 1-2: Age and gender considerations of refugees participating in the FGDs





While FGDs generally offer valuable insight into the experiences and views of refugees, they come with inherent limitations. Their qualitative nature means they may not provide statistically representative data for the entire refugee population. The group setting can influence individual responses, with dominant participants potentially overshadowing quieter members. Cultural and social norms might also deter open discussion on sensitive issues. Thus, while FGDs provide depth and unique opportunities for dialogue between refugees and protection actors, such as UNHCR, they should be complemented with other methodologies to ensure a holistic understanding of the issues discussed. Therefore, UNHCR complemented the FGDs with structured key informant interviews with representatives of the national and local authorities, as well as local NGOs.

The FGDs analyzed in this document were organized with the support of community outreach volunteers and other community structures in safe and suitable environments (mostly in urban settings) and with due consideration to preferences of refugees and their availability. UNHCR staff facilitated all the FGDs using a semi-structured template with pre-identified topics (see below) and basic open questions to encourage discussions.

During the FGDs, the following topics were discussed:

1. UNHCR's role in cash assistance.
2. Socio-economic resilience.
3. Eligibility criteria for cash assistance: Main vulnerabilities identified by refugees.
4. Proposed additional eligibility criteria.
5. Effective access to the social protection system in Slovakia.
6. Provision of information.

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Main findings

I. UNHCR's role in cash assistance

The large majority of participating refugees in the FGDs were aware of the inter-agency humanitarian cash assistance programmes in 2022; of these, several were enrolled in the multi-purpose cash assistance programme and received monthly payments, with some reporting delays in receiving them. During the discussions, refugees recognized cash assistance was most crucial to cover accommodation, healthcare, and transportation needs.

Most participants recognized UNHCR's role as critical in providing cash assistance to refugees, and requested UNHCR to advocate with the Slovak Government for the expansion of the public medical insurance scheme and (re)introduction of free public transportation modalities.[6] Some refugees also emphasized the need for assistance in finding employment as an effective long-term solution for achieving self-reliance.

II. Socio-economic resilience

The majority of the refugees who participated in the FGDs indicated they were barely able to cover their basic needs. During the FGDs, it became apparent that additional financial support is required in particular by single parents, persons with disabilities, families with children, and older people. Most of the priority unmet needs cited by them were related to basic daily expenses, such as expenses for young children, medical costs, including for people with disabilities, transportation, and general school supplies. In addition, families with children with autism mentioned the need to cover extra costs to ensure their access to education.

> *"Giving cash is a basic type of support, but if you give the chance to someone to work, it will help the person to improve and be productive. All here are educated and have experience."*
> A refugee in Opatovska Nova Ves.

Refugees highlighted a lack of job prospects as the main barrier preventing them from earning an adequate income and becoming self-reliant. Crucial factors cited in this context included the complicated and expensive process of recognition of foreign professional qualifications in Slovakia, translation of educational certificates, language barriers, obstacles for those with disabilities, lack of childcare facilities, and limited job opportunities in (often remote) locations where accommodation centers are situated.

[6] Various cities across Slovakia offered free public transportation in the initial phases of the emergency in 2022. These schemes were however often discontinued which constitutes an additional burden for refugees when travelling to work, school, etc.

Participating refugees also noted that the Government cash assistance for children at kindergarten level was not adequate to cover the additional costs incurred in stationaries, meals, supplies, etc. They also pointed out that refugees with temporary protection are now being charged for public services that were initially free of charge. For example, the Slovak post offices that were previously offering free delivery of humanitarian parcels to Ukraine are now levying an expensive charge.

Refugees in the FGDs observed that most of the older people were not able to work or find jobs to sustain their lives, often facing difficulties due to the language barrier, physical limitations, and lack of insurance, while most of their financial resources was spent on medications and treatments.

Those with physical disabilities and chronic illnesses also faced difficulties in accessing treatments, medicines, and therapies from pharmacies, public hospitals, and clinics since they were not adequately covered by insurance.[7] People with disabilities highlighted the obstacles to access the available social protection system in Slovakia, in particular the lengthy and complex eligibility assessment process for disability support before the Centers of Labour, Social Affairs and Family (CoLSAF).[8]

Refugees also shared that while there were no school fees, families with children (especially single parents) found extracurricular activities, transportation, meals, medications, and general school supplies inaccessible and expensive. This demonstrated a need for monthly cash assistance rather than one-off assistance. Single mothers, particularly those with children under the age of three, faced obstacles working because day care facilities were not available for young children.

[7] From 1 September 2023, all refugees shall have full access to health services at the same level as the local population, with the exception of spa treatment.

[8] Humanitarian aid for refugees from Ukraine with severe disabilities is provided via CoLSAFs. It amounts to 300 EUR for 40-59% (degree of) disability, and 508 EUR for persons with over 60% disability. New disability assessments for Ukrainian refugees are conducted by field workers of the CoLSAF through a 12-question assessment tool. This assessment form marks an innovation in the government assessment of disability for local population, which is currently lengthier and requires various medical assessments.

III. Eligibility criteria for cash assistance: Main vulnerabilities identified by refugees

When asked to identify refugee groups that are most in need of cash assistance based on their vulnerabilities, refugees stated that UNHCR should prioritize mothers with small (multiple) children, persons with disabilities, and older people. The FGDs revelated that refugees gave the highest priority to persons with disabilities, followed by single mothers with young children, and older persons. An additional group in particular need of cash assistance according to the participating refugees were people with chronic illnesses, given their limited access to public health system[9] and high costs of health care supplies in Slovakia.

Main vulnerabilities identified by refugees

IV. Proposed additional eligibility criteria

When asked about additional eligibility criteria for cash assistance, refugees stated that those who arrived from Ukraine on or after 24 February 2022 as well as those coming from affected conflict zones in Eastern Ukraine should be considered in a prioritized manner.

Most participating refugees stated that only those who arrived from Ukraine on or after 24 February 2022 should be receiving cash assistance. However, some participants suggested that if the place of origin in Ukraine for those who left before 24 February 2022 was an area affected by armed conflict, thus leaving them with no option of returning home, as homes and other infrastructure, including schools and health facilities, were destroyed in these areas, they should be included in the cash assistance.

[9] Until August 2023, temporary protection holders in Slovakia had access only to immediate (and needed) health care.

Some emphasized that all Ukrainian refugees notwithstanding of their region of origin in Ukraine should be eligible for assistance, with priority given to those from areas of active armed conflict or regions affected by the armed conflict.

Additionally, refugees in the FGDs indicated that Ukrainian students who had been temporary protection holders, but later opted for temporary residence, were no longer benefitting from UNHCR's assistance and remained in dire need of aid to cover daily expenses. Although these individuals should avail themselves of national assistance as they are considered residents in Slovakia, refugees in the FGDs clearly stated that they fled due to war and their needs remained the same as needs of those with the temporary protection status.

Many participants agreed to the need to further assign cash assistance by examining the individual circumstances of refugees on a case-by-case basis. Participants highlighted the needs of individuals who were not able to access steady jobs and those with insufficient income, such as those with regular jobs but minimum wages that were not able to adequately cover daily costs. Refugees also recommended considering accommodation as a determining factor for assistance.

V. Effective access to the national social protection system in Slovakia

Majority of the participating refugees were aware of the Government cash assistance programme for persons with material needs, and most were registered. Focus group discussions generally highlighted the strict eligibility criteria from the MoLSAF, lack of proper information on the process of applying for social benefits, and language barriers as critical points that hindered access to state social benefits.

Refugees with specific disabilities emphasized the lengthy waiting time and generally complicated process for receiving a disability card and disability cash assistance in Slovakia. They also noted that refugees with certain intellectual disabilities such as Autism and disabilities recognized in Ukraine were not fully eligible for disability cash assistance in Slovakia.[10] Additionally, Ukrainian children with disabilities lacked access to various public services, such as free transportation, unlike their Slovak counterparts.

Some participating refugees noted other difficulties in accessing cash assistance provided by the social services under the MoLSAF. They were aware of the new requirement of fulfilling 32 hours of community services per month as a condition for receiving Government cash assistance but some refugees were unable to engage in it due to, among other reasons, the need to take care of other vulnerable members of their households.[11]

Refugees highlighted that students from Ukraine with the temporary residence status were not eligible for cash assistance for material needs despite being dependent on parents with the temporary protection status.

While refugees were supported by humanitarian workers and volunteers in collective accommodation sites, they also pointed out the general lack of information on official websites. They stated that when they applied for cash assistance, some officials did not know about the eligibility of refugees and the process of including them in the state cash assistance programme, leading to inconsistent approaches and rejections of their applications. Some participating refugees stressed that NGO social workers working at helpdesks and those visiting accommodation centres assisted them with their applications.

[10] This may be caused by the fact that the severity/level of disability may be in certain cases assessed differently in Slovakia compared to Ukraine.

[11] The Slovak legislation provides that individuals can be exempted from community services. This applies also to persons with disabilities or medical condition. This requirement has been embedded in the law prior to 2022, but until the end of 2022 it did not apply to Ukrainian refugees.

VI. Provision of information

Social media applications like Telegram and Facebook were the most preferred channels of communication according to the participating refugees. An overwhelming majority of them confirmed that they are subscribed to UNHCR Slovakia's official Telegram channel.[12] For older people, offline modes such as SMS or phone calls were more desirable. Many of the refugees also relied on UNHCR registration sites, community centers, collective accommodation facilities, partner organizations, Blue Dots, and the social workers stationed at these locations. The majority of participating refugees felt adequately supported by UNHCR and partner organizations with the provision of information through existing communication channels.

[12] Since participating refugees were mostly invited to the FGDs through outreach volunteer networks and not through UNHCR's official (online) communication channels, the information about their subscription to UNHCR Telegram channel does not appear to be distorted.

Conclusion

The influx of refugees into Slovakia due to the conflict in Ukraine has underlined the pressing need for an efficient and responsive system of social protection and cash assistance adapted to refugee needs. The FGDs conducted by UNHCR with refugees provided a nuanced insight into their experiences, challenges, and preferences in this regard.

Several key takeaways emerged from the FGDs. Firstly, there is a substantial awareness among refugees regarding UNHCR's role in cash-based interventions. Their pressing needs span across accommodation, healthcare, and essential services for young children. The significant barriers faced by refugees include limited job prospects, high healthcare costs, and difficulty accessing public services. Furthermore, the FGDs underlined the importance of providing regular, monthly cash assistance, with a priority given to certain vulnerable groups, including single mothers, older persons, and people with disabilities and chronic illnesses. Additionally, a thorough, case-by-case examination of individual circumstances is recommended to ensure fairness and inclusivity.

Accessing the social protection system in Slovakia remains a challenge for refugees. While many are registered and aware of the government programmes, challenges such as language barriers, lack of awareness among officials, and complex processes deter a streamlined approach to assistance. Despite these challenges, refugees highlighted the crucial role of social workers, humanitarian personnel, and various communication channels in providing support and information.

While significant achievements have been made in financial assistance and social protection of refugees in Slovakia, the FGDs underscored the need for continual improvements, adaptability, and a holistic approach in ensuring refugees' well-being and successful inclusion into Slovak society.

UNHCR-UNICEF Cash for Protection programme[13] was designed with due regard to the needs expressed and proposals made by the refugees during these FGDs, resulting in the identification of four main criteria for refugees to be eligible for this targeted cash assistance programme, namely: (i) being 60 years old without sufficient family support, (ii) being or having a family member with a disability or serious medical condition, (iii) being a single parent or caregiver, and (iv) being a single pregnant or lactating mother. In addition, priority has been given to individuals and families who are considered vulnerable by the Slovak Labour Office, as well as newly arriving individuals and families with vulnerabilities who fulfil the aforementioned criteria.

[13] For more information on the current UNHCR-UNICEF Cash Programme, please visit UNHCR Slovakia Help site at: https://help.unhcr.org/slovakia/cash-assistance/cash-assistance-2023/.

UNHCR National Office in Slovakia
Palisády 29/A
811 06 Bratislava, Slovakia

www.unhcr.org/sk/
Telegram channel: t.me/unhcr_slovakia
Facebook: @UNHCRSlovensko
Twitter: @RefugeesCE
Help page: help.unhcr.org/slovakia/

Contact

Executive Office:
svkbr@unhcr.org

Protection team:
svkbrprot@unhcr.org