OPERATIONAL UPDATE

Bulgaria

November 2024

UNHCR supports the government to provide **essential aid and protection services** to refugees and asylum seekers, with a focus on facilitating **socioeconomic inclusion** and **social cohesion**.

UNHCR assists Bulgaria to strengthen its asylum system in line with international and EU standards. In the second half of the year, following the release of the European Commission's common implementation plan,

UNHCR is focusing on its support for the development of the Government's **national implementation plan** for the **EU Asylum and Migration Pact.**

KEY FIGURES

73,011

Ukrainian refugees in Bulgaria with valid registration for temporary protection by 22 November 2024

11,874

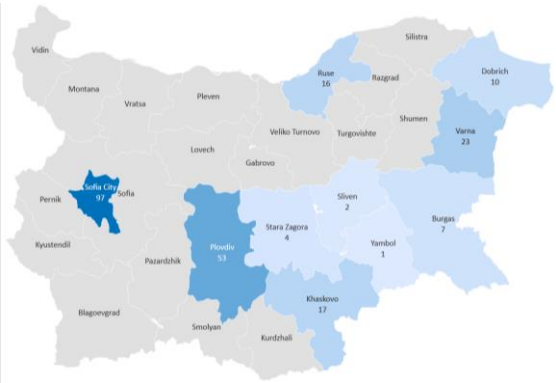
Number of asylum new applications in 2024

2,536

Number of unaccompanied children applying for asylum in 2024

33

Number of unaccompanied children with valid temporary protection by November 2024



**This map shows partner staff whose costs are supported by UNHCR, which may be for a full time or a part time engagement depending on the specific agreement with the partner*

FUNDING (RECEIVED AS OF 30 NOVEMBER 2024)

USD 17 MILLION

Funded 72%
12.2 million

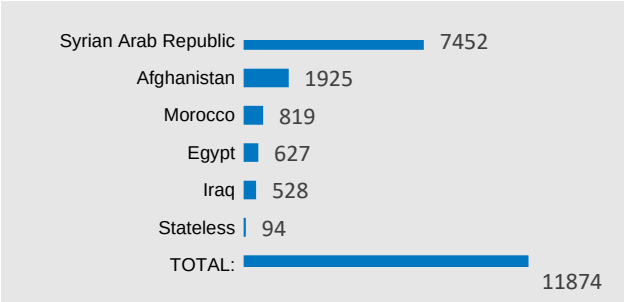
Unfunded 28%
4.7 million

TP REGISTRATIONS IN BULGARIA BY REGION

**This map shows the districts where TP holders are located*

ASYLUM SEEKERS

Countries of Origin



Asylum applications registered in 2024 (State Agency of Refugees data)

Update on Achievements

Operational Context

The evolving situation in Ukraine and the changing needs of refugees have led to a realignment of UNHCR's areas of intervention. UNHCR's efforts are accelerating in fostering inclusion through access to socio-economic inclusion opportunities and to national social protection system and promoting community resilience and mobilization.

Prevailing protection gaps with respect to international protection applicants and beneficiaries necessitates reinforcement of UNHCR's work in several key areas. These include facilitating access to territory and status, improving reception conditions, enhancing access to the national social protection system, and bolstering community mobilization and support. Our aim is to create a more supportive environment for protection and inclusion from the moment individuals arrive and throughout their integration process after their status is recognized. Refugees, in particular unaccompanied children and other vulnerable persons should have access to protection and solutions regardless of considerations about their assumed intentions.

UNHCR is committed to identifying and addressing the risk of statelessness among displaced populations. We are collaborating closely with national authorities and the civil society to map out stateless populations and those at risk, while also supporting the Government's capacity to find sustainable solutions and mitigate the risk of statelessness.

UNHCR hosted a High-Level Forum at the Royal Palace of Vrana, promoting refugee integration among government officials and business leaders.

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Key Highlights

Bulgaria faced political turbulence as the 51st National Assembly failed to elect a Speaker after seven attempts, stalling parliamentary and governmental proceedings.

UNHCR Bulgaria met with President Rumen Radev to highlight 30 years of excellent cooperation for forcibly displaced people. The agency reaffirmed its commitment to collaborate with Bulgarian authorities, particularly in managing mixed migration flows and upholding refugee rights. The meeting highlighted Bulgaria's preparations for the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum and the need for coordinated planning in response to global humanitarian challenges.

UNHCR hosted a High-Level Forum at the Royal Palace of Vrana to promote refugee social-economic inclusion for Bulgaria's mutual economic and social growth. The event gathered refugees, government officials, NGOs, and business leaders to discuss policies and partnerships supporting refugee inclusion and self-reliance through employment and community initiatives. Former Bulgarian Prime Minister Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, and a member of the royal family forced to leave the country after its transition from a monarchy to republic delivered closing remarks emphasizing empathy, combating prejudice, and fostering a compassionate society.

UNHCR and Bulgaria's Ministry of Education and Science signed a Memorandum of Understanding to enhance refugee inclusion in the education system. The agreement builds on existing initiatives like enrolment campaigns, teacher training, and language education, while supporting refugee children's school adaptation and access to higher education opportunities.

UNHCR has been invited by the National Police Juvenile Crime Section to support a project under the Swiss-Bulgarian Cooperation Program aimed at improving child protection and preventing juvenile crime. As the sole supporting partner for the component on UASC, UNHCR will collaborate with the National Police and the International Institute for the Rights of Children, Geneva.

UNHCR and WHO conducted a joint mission to Plovdiv to review MHPSS programs, coinciding with the visit of PRM Health Policy Analyst Lisa Walker for the IASC Reference Group meeting. Key discussions focused on refugee access to health services, the importance of community-based MHPSS, and integrating refugee health professionals into Bulgaria's workforce, addressing a national shortage of 30,000 healthcare workers.

Key Priorities in 2024

- **Access to territory and legal status:** UNHCR and partners regularly monitor borders, reception centres, and detention centres to ensure asylum-seekers can access fair and efficient procedures through information, legal counselling, and assistance.
- **Asylum procedures:** UNHCR supports Bulgaria in enhancing the quality of the asylum system through capacity-building activities for authorities to ensure fair and efficient procedures, monitors international protection procedures and provides guidance and recommendations.
- **Child protection:** UNHCR works with institutions to strengthen the national child protection system in early identification, access to adequate reception conditions, and ensuring representation and guardianship, and expansion of alternative care arrangements for asylum-seeking and refugee children at risk. UNHCR also provides education and child protection services through partners.
- **Education**: UNHCR will continue to support children in their academic, language, and inclusive education and psychosocial support to integrate into the Bulgarian school system. UNHCR and the Ministry of Education and Science will promote enrolment in the Bulgarian school system by removing institutional, sociocultural, and economic barriers and support development of preparatory classes and availability of language courses. UNHCR will also work with authorities and academic institutions to promote access to tertiary education and diploma recognition.
- **Community Based Protection:** UNHCR launched together with partners a joint initiative for the opening of a network of 6 Protection and Inclusion Centers called Compass.
- **GBV**: UNHCR works with State, humanitarian partners, and community members to prevent and mitigate risks, and provide a comprehensive and safe response to gender-based violence (GBV). This includes raising awareness, strengthening referral pathways, and implementing safety audits.
- **Inclusion:** UNHCR fosters refugee socio-economic inclusion, collaborating with local stakeholders on job-matching, employability, and small business initiatives. Additionally, a Refugee Employment Platform has been launched, as part of a regional UNHCR initiative, to facilitate refugee employment.
- **Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS):** UNHCR and partners provide family and community support activities, including through awareness raising and psychoeducation, arts based psychosocial support groups and support groups for parents, amongst others. Likewise, partners provide individual counselling to asylum-seekers and refugees, including referrals to specialized services, while working to improve access to quality MHPSS services.
- **Working with partners:** UNHCR supports the government to ensure policies and legislation are in line with international standards, and promotes a comprehensive refugee response, grounded in multi-stakeholder, "whole-of-society" approaches that includes refugees, local authorities, international organizations, civil society, private sector, and other stakeholders. UNHCR in 2024 works with seven partner NGOs to safeguard the rights and well-being of people forced to flee, deliver assistance, and promote refugees' social protection and access to livelihoods, education and inclusion.
- **Statelessness:** Bulgaria acceded to both the 1954 and 1961 UN Conventions on Statelessness, and introduced a statelessness determination procedure in 2017, granting stateless status to 161 people so far. Following pledges at the High-Level Segment of Statelessness in 2019, the Government has improved the quality of statelessness determination procedure and included stateless people in the 2021 Census. During the 2023 GRF, Bulgaria pledged to regularly review the remaining reservations to the 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons.
- **External Relations:** UNHCR works with whole-of-society partners to showcase the hopes, dreams, diverse talents, and the positive impact of refugees on their host communities, and to promote solidarity, support, and inclusion for refugees.
- **PSEA Network:** An inter-agency Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) network was established by UNHCR and UNICEF in 2023, involving funded partners and authorities to prevent and mitigate SEA risks. A national NGO is also part of the network chairing arrangements. This initiative aimed to ensure a robust complaints mechanism, establish PSEA focal points, conduct joint risk assessments, build partner capacity, and engage in community outreach on trafficking and SEA risks.

UNHCR Presence in Bulgaria

Staff:

31 National Staff (UNHCR contract, AWF and UNHCR vacant positions)

11 International Staff

Offices:

1 Country Office in Sofia

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UNHCR is also grateful for the generous contributions from the private sector and individuals.