Floods and deserts: information access and barriers in Moldova's refugee response

Internews

UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This research was commissioned by The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in Moldova to better understand how Ukrainian refugees and the host community in Moldova create, access and share information about the Ukrainian refugee response. It aims to identify barriers to accessing quality information and information gaps which could be filled media, humanitarian or governmental service providers.

This research uses Internews' Information Ecosystem Assessment (IEA) approach to understand the 'health' of an information ecosystem by investigating Information supply, Information demand and Information dynamics such as trust or misinformation that might pollute and confuse the information supply and create risks for communities (For further details, see the methodology section below).

At Internews, we believe everyone deserves trustworthy information to make informed decisions about their lives and to enable actors to hold power to account. In nearly two decades on the front lines of humanitarian crises, Internews has seen how poor access to information can increase exposure to risk and derail a response effort, costing time, resources and the dignity of crisis-affected communities.

Internews is a thought leader in the field of information access in humanitarian contexts and has completed more than 50 IEAs in 30 countries to date. As a founding member of the Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities (CDAC) Network, we have contributed to the growing acceptance of information and communication as aid, and advocated for communities affected by crisis to access quality information and be allowed to actively participate in humanitarian programming cycles, and the importance of gathering reliable data and information for the development of evidence-based approaches to Accountability to Affected People (AAP) activities.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AAP Accountability to Affected People
CEA Community Engagement and Accountability
CFM Complaints and Feedback Mechanism/s
Dopomoha A platform run by volunteer network Moldova for Peace where refugees and Moldovans can request material aid including food, clothing and hygiene items.
Dopomoga A government-supported website which provides information about services and updates relevant to the refugee response in Moldova.
FGD Focus Group Discussion
GBV Gender-based violence
GDPR General Data Protection Regulation
Green Line The "Green Line", or Refugee Response Green Line, is a telephone service provided by UNHCR in collaboration with the Republic of Moldova which people can call to ask questions about available services.
IEA Information Ecosystem Assessment. Research to understand how information is generated and shared in a particular environment.
IOM International Organisation for Migration
IWPR Institute for War and Peace Reporting
KII Key Informant Interview
MHPSS Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
NGO Non-governmental Organisation
PSEA Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
Primaria Moldovan local government offices
PWD People with Disabilities
RAC Refugee Accommodation Centre. Centres established to temporarily house displaced people arriving from Ukraine to Moldova.
RCF Refugee Coordination Forum. The RCF is a joint coordination body headed by the Republic of Moldova and the UNHCR which coordinates activities and in the refugee response in Moldova.
SMS Short Message Service
SRHR Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
TPS Temporary Protection Status
UN United Nations
UNFPA United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR The UN Refugee Agency, officially referred to as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.
UNICEF United Nations Children's Fund
ZDG Ziarul de Gardă media outlet

Executive Summary

Information and communication are a vital form of aid that supports the dignity, resilience and agency of people displaced by conflict. From the start of the Ukraine war, there have been a myriad of initiatives to provide Ukrainian refugees in Moldova with information, communication channels and digital connectivity. The response to the refugee influx in Moldova was swift. In addition to quick coordination between the Moldovan Government and aid actors, citizens also played a key role. Residents opened their homes to host refugees and volunteered their time to distribute lifesaving aid and transport people across the country. The Moldovan media – while still reeling from the economic pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic – extended already stretched resources to cover the war and the refugee influx.

At the onset of the war, refugees crossing into Moldova were handed sim cards and offered swift access to local mobile networks to access lifesaving information, connect with family and plan their next steps. Refugee accommodation centres (RACs) were rapidly equipped with Wi-Fi, and social media networks mobilised to respond to information needs and provide other urgent information. Within the early months of the refugee response, an Accountability to Affected People (AAP) group was established to coordinate information, and advocate for improved Community Engagement and Accountability (CEA) practices.

For both refugees and the host community, their information needs, priorities and barriers have changed over the last year. While the early months saw social media groups respond to frantic requests for food, aid, shelter and transport (both within Moldova and beyond), coordinated systems now exist both online and offline to provide verified information and connect Ukrainians with services. Amidst uncertainty about prospects to return to Ukraine in 2023, inclusion initiatives have become more central to refugees' needs, particularly with the implementation of Temporary Protection Status (TPS) for Ukrainian refugees in March 2023. Amidst these developments, Ukrainians find themselves needing different types of information and support.

While there is a lot to celebrate within the refugee response in Moldova, gaps remain. This report aims to assess the overall health of the information ecosystem in Moldova to provide practical recommendations to communicators, service providers and government officials about how information provision can be improved within the response. This research is informed by a mixed methods approach including focus group discussions (FGDs) with Ukrainian refugees, key informant interviews (KIIs) with government and humanitarian actors and a survey with over 2,000 Ukrainian and Moldovan participants.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Refugees are well informed and satisfied with information they receive

95 percent of refugees say they are either very satisfied (67 percent) or somewhat satisfied (29 percent) with the information they have. Refugees prefer that aid agencies share information with them via phone calls (49 percent), messaging applications (48 percent) or in-person (47 percent). However the flood of information can be overwhelming at times. Comparatively, the Moldovan community feels less informed about the refugee response. Around 50 percent of Moldovan citizens feel that refugee-related information is important, however a similar number report only having 'a little information' about the response and its priorities. This information gap leaves Moldovan communities at a heightened risk of exposure to false and misleading information about the response.

Age impacts access

Information is concentrated in digital spaces, in particular on websites, social media and messaging apps. This creates barriers for older refugees, visually impaired people and others who may not have access to the internet or smart phones. Teens (13 to 17 years old) and older refugees (65+) are less likely to have information about available services, and tend to present more unique information needs, such as needing information about sexual and reproductive health services (SRH) or care for chronic diseases.

Key trusted channels are performing well

Refugees generally trust aid providers and key information channels such as Dopomoga, the Refugee Response Green Line, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and volunteers. According to research participants, key information channels could be improved by offering more detailed information about service access in areas outside of Chișinău, and by providing information for specific groups such as older refugees and people with disabilities (PWDs).

Where you live impacts the quality and quantity of information available to you

Services — and related information — tend to be concentrated in Chișinău, particularly services related to legal issues and civil documentation. Further variations are visible between rural and urban areas, and between people living in different types of housing. Ukrainians living in refugee accommodation centres (RACs) indicate higher access to information than those living with Moldovan hosts, whereas people living in urban areas have more information than those in more rural parts of Moldova. Variations in local approaches to coordinating and communicating aid contribute to these dynamics.

Information gaps

Most refugee participants did not experience difficulties accessing information (61 percent in surveys). Those who did experience challenges were most commonly unsure where to go for information (16 percent) or were uncertain whether information was true or official (10 percent). Such needs tend to be heightened among Ukrainian teens, older refugees (namely, those over 65) and marginalised groups such as people with disabilities (PWDs), Roma communities and undocumented men. Refugees most mentioned needing information about basic aid like food (63 percent), health services (60 percent) and cash assistance (56 percent). Moldovan citizens are calling for greater transparency, wanting to know more about how money allocated to refugees is sourced (25 percent) and how it is spent (25 percent).

Community divides are evident despite a common language

The common use of the Russian language makes it easy for most refugees to access information and communicate with Moldovans. Most refugees speak Russian at home (72 percent of survey respondents) as well as many Moldovans (46 percent). However, when it comes to written information, Ukrainians prefer options in both Russian and Ukrainian.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Misinformation is contributing to social tensions

There are rising social tensions between refugees and citizens in Moldova – particularly in Bălți and Cahul. While these may not reflect the experiences of every Ukrainian, it highlights a concerning trend that deserves attention. Refugees reported hostile attitudes from the host community, worries for personal security, and hesitations to publicly identify themselves as Ukrainian, use Ukrainian language in public, or to contact local authorities in an emergency. Misinformation about funding sources for the refugee response, decisions around aid distribution and rising economic pressures in Moldova further contribute to these tensions.

Information risks

Refugees indicated being cautious about information they receive (especially online) and cross-referencing information with multiple sources. However, they do face information risks online, including exposure to scams, fraud and hate speech. Refugees have created some private, Ukrainian-led communication channels to safely share experiences, recommendations and information. Moderators of such groups do, however, report difficulties with scams and misinformation on these channels and report experiencing hate speech on more public forums.

Use of feedback mechanisms is limited

Respondents (both Ukrainians and Moldovans) were not commonly aware of complaints and feedback mechanisms (CFMs) available them. Where refugees were aware, they expressed reluctance to provide negative feedback to service providers for fear of being perceived as ungrateful, or because they did not feel their input would have an impact on aid operations. Some refugees feared they would be barred from services if they complained. Refugees of all ages feel they have limited opportunities to play a role in the design of the response. While Ukrainian and Moldovan volunteers play an important role in service delivery, they do not feel well-informed of the wider priorities of the response or the full extent of services available. They also lack avenues to share their first-hand experience of community needs and concerns.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The gaps identified above present an opportunity for government and humanitarian agencies to improve communication, engagement and accountability practices in the response:

INCREASE TRANSPARENCY TO REDUCE MISINFORMATION AND BUILD TRUST.

- Provide clear information to refugees and host communities about the priorities of the response, how decisions are made and how aid is funded and allocated. Clarify publicly where specific vulnerability criteria are being used to determine eligibility for services.
- Ensure information is shared in two-way channels where people can ask questions and clarify information. Hire monitors to respond promptly, with actionable information to questions and comments on social media and messaging forums and consider hosting social media 'live' sessions to connect refugees with decision makers in the response.
- Continue to build on existing rumour tracking activities to actively respond to misinformation circulating about the aid response, including existing misperceptions about the funding, distribution and priorities of aid. Use identified rumours as an early warning system for community information gaps, misperceptions, hopes and fears.
- Ensure your organisation has adequate data security practices and clearly explain to refugees how their personal data will be protected when it is shared with your organisation.
- Offer training on content moderation/management, reporting of online risks, service mapping, information literacy, fact checking and verification techniques for administrators and volunteers engaged on private communication channels. These administrators play a key role in moderating discussion and need to be equipped to respond and report online risks.

RECOMMENDATIONS

COMMUNICATE IN MULTIPLE FORMATS TO BE ACCESSIBLE TO DIFFERENT NEEDS.

- Offer information in Russian and Ukrainian where possible, particularly for written materials.
- Share key information about services and eligibility criteria in different formats and channels. Tailor your information to consider the unique information and communication needs and preferences of different age groups, and among specific communities like PWDs, single women or undocumented men.
- Communicate clearly to the Moldovan community about services they are also eligible to access while also highlighting any relevant eligibility criteria.
- Share information relevant for older people in digital spaces (even if they are not active users) so relatives and friends can help transmit information to them.
- Identify areas where Ukrainian youth may be eligible but unaware of services, activities and opportunities offered by Moldovan government and NGOs.
- Ensure up to date information about your services is included in the new Services Advisor map to inform refugees, volunteers and other service providers.

INCORPORATE REFUGEES INTO DECISION MAKING AND RESPONSE DESIGN TO SHIFT THE POWER.

- Build processes to regularly listen to community needs and preferences and adapt programmes based on the feedback received.
- Report back to refugees on the result of research conducted with them to allow them to use findings to advocate for their own needs and to address survey fatigue.
- Consider recruiting a diverse and representative group of refugees to participate in planning processes, such as the Humanitarian Response Plan, to ensure programming is accessible, trustworthy and effective.

ENCOURAGE AND PROMOTE THE SHARING OF FEEDBACK AND COMPLAINTS.

- Consider conducting information campaigns for hosts and refugees to explain the purpose of feedback in humanitarian responses. Address misperceptions that providing negative feedback could impact individual access to services. Communicating openly about how complaints are received and how sensitive complaints are handled may also increase interest and trust in the process.
- Provide clear evidence of where complaints and feedback have directly contributed to changes in aid responses to foster a culture of feedback. Make the case for why people should feel motivated to participate.
- Provide regular training and capacity building sessions to phoneline operators in cultural- and trauma-informed communication techniques to ensure they can be sensitive to requests and feedback.
- Promote the value of a centralised CFM. Limiting the number of places where people can provide feedback may help reduce confusion about feedback. While some people may feel uncomfortable complaining directly to an agency providing services (particularly in small towns), underutilised, centralised CFM systems (such as the Green Line) may allow users to feel more comfortable sharing their thoughts. Share this centralised feedback data with humanitarian coordination mechanisms regularly so that more agencies can collaboratively respond to overall community feedback and perceptions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATIONS

ENSURE THAT QUESTIONS ABOUT THE NEW TEMPORARY PROTECTION STATUS (TPS) CAN BE EASILY ANSWERED BY INFORMATION PROVIDERS AND IS AVAILABLE TO BOTH MOLDOVANS AND UKRAINIANS.

- Using a variety of different formats in the upcoming communications campaign about TPS can help ensure wide reaching access to this crucial information. This includes communications face-to-face (in-person), online and in multiple languages (including Romanian, Ukrainian and Romani).
- Ensure two-way communication channels are available so people can ask questions about their individual status and clarify information.
- For refugees outside of Chișinău, ensure the campaign is clear about where registrations will take place, the timeframe for registration and whether any logistical support is available (such as transport, accommodation and childcare for people who must travel to register).

SUPPORT MEDIA AS A WATCHDOG AND KEY INFORMATION PROVIDER.

- Be ready to answer questions from Moldovan media about the refugee response, to enable media to be a key information provider as well as an accountability tool.
- Create forums where media and humanitarians can regularly interact and build trust. By enabling Moldova media to understand and engage in aid processes, it can more effectively translate information into relevant updates for their audiences, helping address information gaps in Moldovan communities in particular. More guidance on engaging with media in humanitarian responses can be found here.
- Encourage and support media organisations to hire content creators from the refugee community. This can help media more effectively highlight the needs and perspectives of refugees and encourage more diverse coverage.

INTRODUCTION

Through the contributions of Ukrainian refugees, Moldovan citizens, government and service providers, this research sets out to assess the information ecosystem present within Moldova's refugee response. We explore where information gaps, perceptions and barriers are impacting access to services and the extent that both refugees and citizens feel their needs and preferences are at the centre of the response. This research aims to identify areas where the refugee response in Moldova can expand on past successes to ensure information needs continue to be met for both Ukrainians and Moldovans in the year to come.

We believe that through increasing access to participatory information channels which are tailored to local preferences, service providers can more closely align services with needs, and better engage with the communities they hope to assist. Healthy information environments enable everyone to make better-informed decisions, participate more fully in their communities and hold power to account.

The research pursued the following objectives:

Identify the information available for refugees and the sources they use to access information

Identify priority information needs

Identify the main barriers to accessing that information

Describe the information dynamics/behaviour (including trust)

METHODOLOGY

This research uses the Information Ecosystem Assessment (IEA) as the framework to understand the information supply, demand, and dynamics in this environment.

What is an Information Ecosystem Assessment?
IEAs are tools developed by Internews to understand the varied sources, influences and unique local characteristics of how communities produce and consume information. The ways in which people interact with information are what makes information ecosystems dynamic and diverse.

The IEA assesses the "health" of an information ecosystem by investigating three main elements:

- **Information supply:** Suppliers, creators or broadcasters of information;
- **Information demand:** The information needs and preferences of the community;
- **Information dynamics:** Dynamics such as trust or misinformation that might pollute the ecosystem.

In a humanitarian context, information is a vital form of aid. Timely, relevant and accessible information helps affected citizens to understand the situation, make informed decisions and gain access to life-saving aid. In a healthy information ecosystem, people have the skills to assess the quality of the information they receive (this is defined as information literacy). They also know where they can request further information or submit complaints or feedback.

The IEA is a key approach in the Community Engagement and Accountability (CEA) toolkit which aims to ensure that aid providers can listen to and act on people's needs, suggested solutions and feedback and complaints, to ensure people receiving assistance play a leading role in the decisions that affect them. Read more about the Information Ecosystem Approach.

Location
Data was collected from four locations in the Republic of Moldova (hereafter referred to as Moldova): Chișinău, Bălți, Cahul and Comrat. These locations were chosen because of their popularity among refugees as destinations for mid- to longer-term settlement. Data was collected from the towns of Chișinău and Bălți whereas collection in Cahul and Comrat also incorporated some surrounding villages.

Despite the presence of refugees at Moldova's border crossings with Ukraine, these locations were excluded from research to allow us to focus on the information needs and preferences of people that are more likely to stay in Moldova (at least in the mid-term), rather than refugees who may be transiting onward to other countries. Further research may determine differing information needs and challenges for these groups of refugees.

Duration
This research was conducted from November 2022 to February 2023, while data collection took place from November 2022 to January 2023.

Research methods
We incorporated a mixed methods approach to include four methods of data collection:

1. Focus group discussions (FGD)
A total of 16 FGDs were held face-to-face (in-person) and online in Chișinău, Bălți, Cahul (particularly UTA Găgăuzia) and Comrat with a total of 125 participants.

2. Key informant interviews (KIIs)
18 semi-structured KIIs were conducted online and in-person with government officials, local and international relief agencies, volunteers, media officials and administrators of social media groups.

3. Quantitative community survey
A quantitative, face-to-face survey was conducted with Ukrainian ref-

ugees (1,171 respondents in total) and Moldovan citizens (957 respondents). Data was collected by Ukrainian and Moldovan data collectors.

4. Desk research and analysis
Desk research was undertaken to analyse existing reports, action plans and other documents relevant to information access for refugees and citizens in Moldova. While no other IEA research exists, some humanitarian agencies and information providers collect data on information habits and barriers and where available, have been referenced in this report.

Sampling
The IEA approach does not intend to be a statistically representative sample of the Ukrainian refugee community residing in Moldova. However, we do aim for our research to reflect the diversity of the community by ensuring that data collection covers relevant sub-groups of the community according to their age, gender, location, accommodation type and vulnerability group.
To mitigate the risk of disproportionately reflecting certain perspectives (for instance by only incorporating young women) we used a quota sampling method for the survey with subgroups weighed by approximations from past research and publicly available reports. The survey with Moldovan participants covered both Moldovans involved in hosting refugees and others who were not supporting the response, to provide more balanced insights. Around 75 percent of refugee participants were women, which is reflective of Moldova's refugee population. Across data collection, no personal or identifying information was collected and data was disaggregated by age, gender and other research-specific variables. All participants gave free and informed consent to participate in this activity.

Figure 1: Gender breakdown of Ukrainian survey respondents

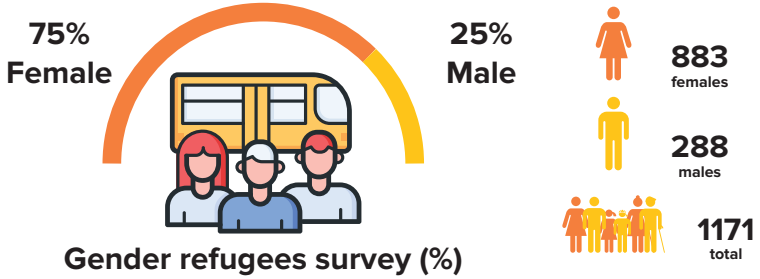
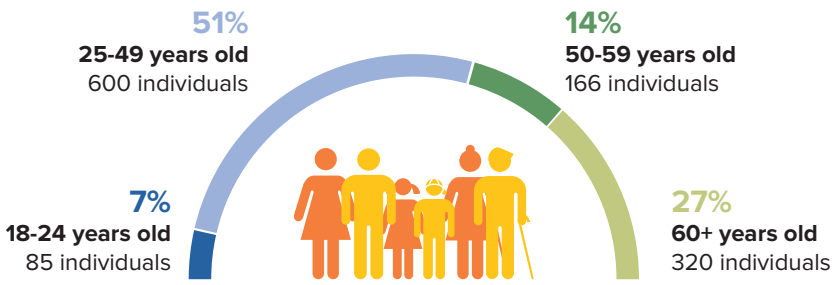


Figure 2: Age distribution of Ukrainian survey respondents



Research challenges and limitations
As is common with qualitative research, our team faced some challenges in the delivery of this research:

Participants tended to self-censor
Respondents sometimes appeared reluctant to discuss any negative experiences in Moldova in detail. Many mentioned a fear of retaliation from local networks or service providers if seen appearing ungrateful or overly nationalistic. To address this challenge, we recruited Ukrainian field researchers and gave all respondents the option to provide feedback in Russian or Ukrainian to help develop trust and create a sensitive environment for discussion during the FGDs.

In some cases, local authorities or volunteers asked to be present for FGDs which may have further discouraged free expression. Where our researchers felt people may be hesitant to share, they asked follow-up questions after the recorder was turned off and once local stakeholders had left.

Men were hesitant to participate
Many men were reluctant to participate in group discussions. Most were fearful of being sent back to Ukraine or of public judgement for leaving Ukraine at the start of the conflict.

Conditions in Moldova may have impacted feedback
Data was collected amidst high levels of inflation and increasing costs across Moldova, and in the leadup to the Christmas season. Although

there is no evidence that such events significantly impacted the data collected, such conditions serve as an important backdrop for the feedback provided in this report.

Research scope
This research did not aim to assess service quality. However, in the process of the research, people gave feedback regarding the quality of services and described their interactions with service providers. Although this is adjacent to the scope of this report, such feedback has been shared with the appropriate governmental and relief agencies for action.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research is generously produced with funding from the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR in Moldova. The Lead Researcher was Mihaela Negru, with writing support from Haley Schuler-McCoin and editorial guidance from Irene Scott. The field research team consisted of Alina Belobra, Marianna Prysiazhniuk and Ganna Usach from the Internews humanitarian team.

We would like to also thank research participants including representatives from the Republic of Moldova, local and international relief organisations, the Refugee Coordination Forum (RCF), local media and citizens and volunteers tirelessly contributing to relief efforts. Most importantly, we would like to thank the Ukrainians who sat with us in community halls, refugee centres and, over many cups of tea, shared their perspectives with us. Without their contributions this research would not have been possible, and we hope that we have fairly represented their views.

This report was designed by Corneliu Comendant.

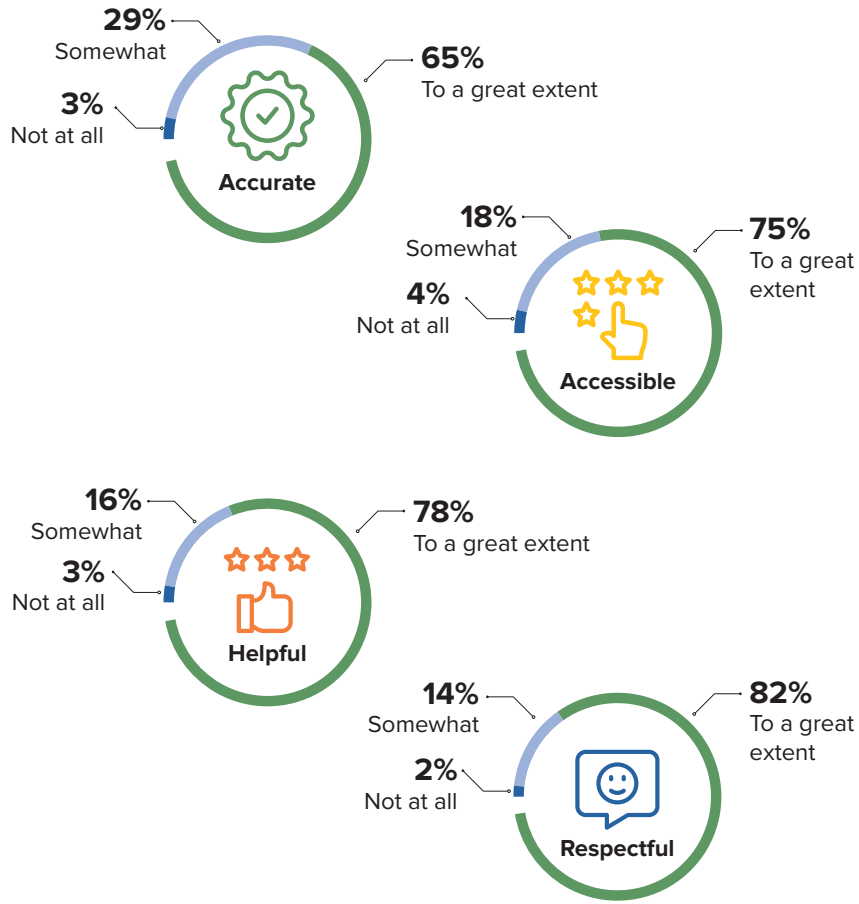
Section 1: Information needs, gaps and barriers

This section details the gaps in the information landscape we identified. While most IEAs begin by addressing the 'supply side' of the information ecosystem first (i.e., who creates the information in a given environment), we have decided to start by highlighting the gaps and areas for improvement, so the needs of the community remain at the forefront of this report.

Generally, refugees are satisfied with information they receive about refugee support. Over 95 percent of Ukrainian respondents who participated in our survey reflected being either very satisfied (67 percent) or somewhat satisfied (29 percent) with such information. It is notable that this figure is considerably higher than the satisfaction with information provision in comparable responses. However, it may not indicate a perfect information environment, or a full understanding of the services available. People sometimes "don't know what they don't know" and service providers need to remain agile and proactive in providing information. At least 65 percent of respondents felt that refugee-related information was accurate, accessible, helpful and respectful. These four key metrics are important in an information environment to build a trusting relationship with information provider and receiver.

While most refugee respondents were satisfied, a significant portion expressed difficulties accessing information (39 percent). Of those respondents, they did not know where to go for information (16 percent), whether information could be fully trusted (10 percent) or needed to access several sources to get the full breadth of information or tailor it to their needs (6.5 percent).

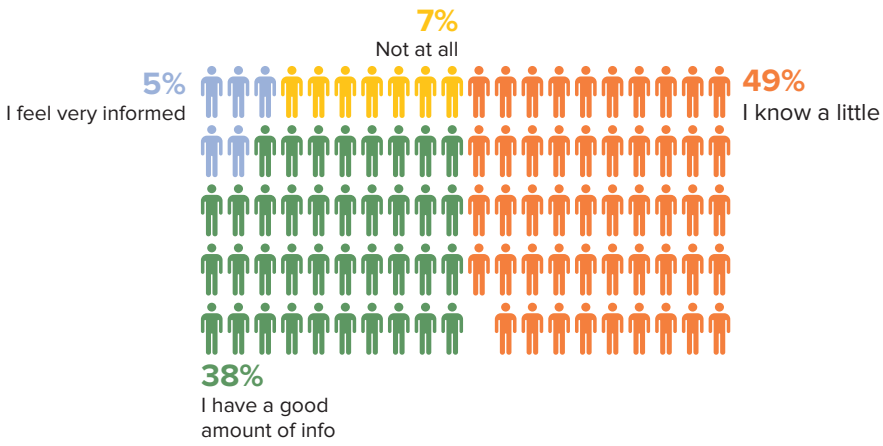
Figure 3: Do you feel the information provided to you about aid services is accurate, accessible, helpful and respectful? (Percentage of responses[1], Ukrainians)



[1] All of the following figures indicate the percentage of responses to a given question or set of questions, unless otherwise specified.

Figure 4: Primary difficulties in accessing refugee-related information (Ukrainians)

Figure 5: How informed do you feel about the refugee response? (Moldovans)



Comparatively, Moldovans feel less informed about the refugee response, and this is a significant gap identified by this research. 49 percent of respondents from the host community mentioned knowing only a little about refugee services, and only five percent felt very informed.[2] Of those who felt they did not have enough information, they felt the need to access too many sources to get complete information (18 percent of respondents mentioned this), they do not trust the information available (12 percent) or they do not know where to find such information (10 percent). Unsurprisingly, Moldovan volunteers are more well informed than the average citizen, and those who participated in FGDs mentioned facing less information barriers than they did at the beginning of the response, indicating an improvement in information systems over the last year.

[2] It is important to mention that a respondent's interest in the refugee response would also play a role in how informed they may feel about the refugee response. Someone uninterested in the refugee response, or who does not prioritise such information, might be satisfied with the information they have, but may only have a small amount of information.

Moldovans reflect wanting more information about aid mechanisms and processes, including how money is acquired and spent and what services are offered. Importantly, a significant portion (24 percent) are not interested in such information. When asked whether they felt refugee-related information was important, the majority felt it was (63 percent) and only eight percent mentioned such information was not at all important to them. Moldovans reflect generally wanting more information about aid mechanisms and processes, including how money is acquired and spent and what services are offered.

Figure 6: What would you like to know more about regarding the refugee response? (Moldovans)

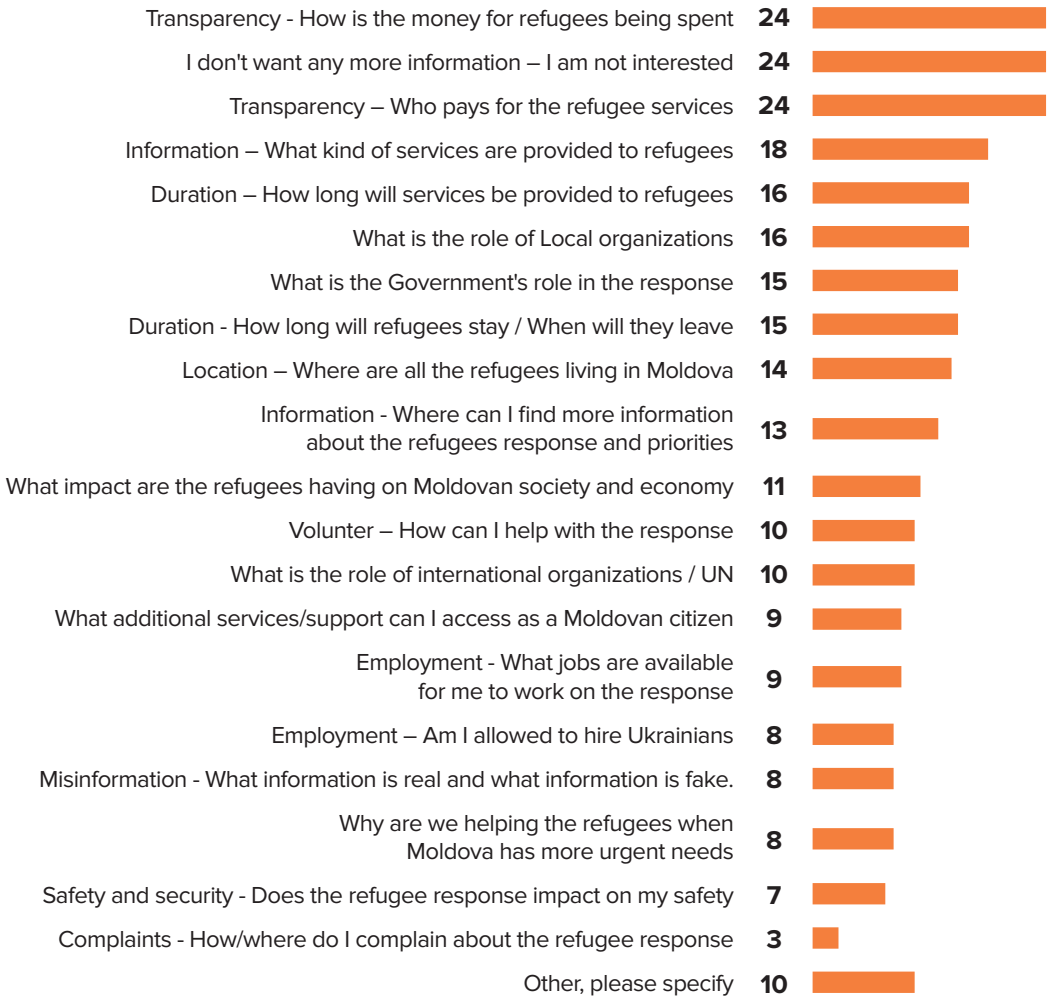
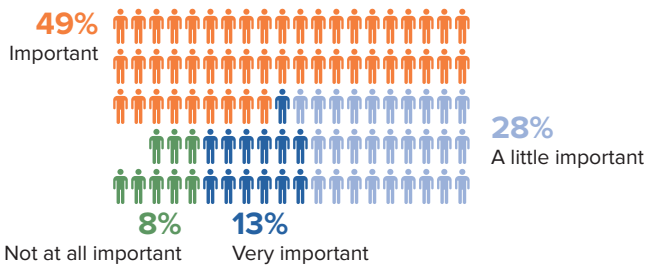


Figure 7: Level of importance of refugee-related information. (Moldovans)



A proactive approach by government and service providers is needed to respond to this gap. 45 percent of Moldovan respondents were not aware that some new services established for refugees were also available to Moldovans, highlighting the need for more awareness raising about the harmonized approach to services.

Figure 8: Ways to improve access to information about the refugee response. (Moldovans)

Recommendations for improving information access for Moldovans closely follows their preferences for more information about aid-related structures and processes. It also points to the importance of official information directly from members of the refugee response, such as the Moldovan Government and NGOs. Ensuring such information is available on Moldovan media can also help increase exposure since Moldovans most commonly mentioned relying on Moldovan media for refugee-related information (30 percent) over other information channels.

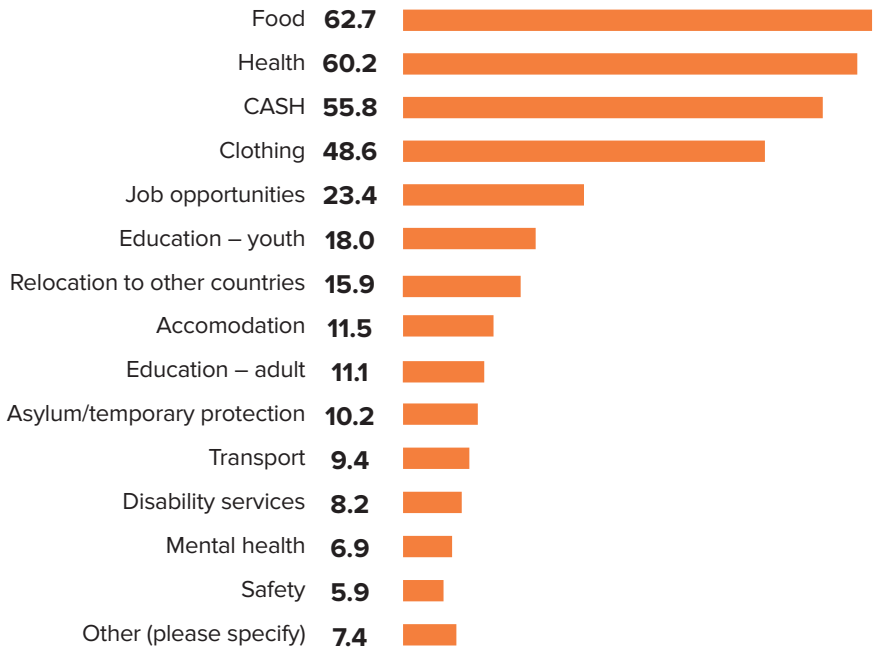
Insights from research participants shed light on several areas where more information is needed, and where communications processes and pathways can be improved across certain categories of services provision within the refugee response.

Service mapping and information-sharing

Research participants often reflected confusion over which NGOs provide what services. Refugees fear this may result in them missing out on services, and volunteers say that this information gap is limiting their ability to communicate effectively and connect refugees with relevant services. In light of these difficulties, Ukrainians commonly mentioned service-related information gaps, including needing more information about food and clothes (63 percent of respondents mentioned this need), healthcare (60 percent) and cash assistance services (55 percent). In addition to these needs, participants in FGDs mentioned needing information on a wide range of services and topics including civil documentation, legal rights and employment. Call data shared by the Refugee Response Green Line phoneline provides similar insights regarding which services Ukrainians need more information about. As of November 2022, 41 percent of calls made by Ukrainians inquired about food aid, and a further 33 percent were about cash assistance[3].

[3] November 2022 call data provided by the Refugee Response Green Line.

Figure 9: Categories of information-related needs. (Ukrainians)



While refugees would like to have more information related to their immediate needs (namely food, cash, health and clothing), Moldovans are interested in information about how aid money is spent (24 percent), who funds it (24 percent) and the types of services offered (18 percent).[4] Among calls from Moldovans to the Refugee Response Green Line, 65 percent inquired about cash assistance with a further six percent asking about housing. The key informant clarified that most of the latter inquiries were in regard to refugees moving out of host accommodations[5].

In late January 2023, the Refugee Coordination Forum (RCF) launched a service mapping tool for the response called Services Advisor Moldova. Services Advisor aims to inform refugees and NGOs about the services available in a given location through a public, interactive map. It also works to connect ser-

[4] These categories, and others mentioned by Moldovans are highlighted in Figure 6 above.
[5] Key Informant Interview with the Refugee Response Greenline, November 2022

vice providers together. While the tool is in its infancy, it is expected to address some of the challenges to accessing aid-related information in Moldova.

Cash assistance

Cash is a central topic for refugees, particularly those who are unable to work. As inflation hit record highs in 2022, the war in Ukraine continues to put pressure on household spending for Moldovans and Ukrainian refugees. Cash is a critical service and the frequency of questions related to this topic point both to its importance as a service, as well as the presence of communication and service delivery challenges. With cash assistance programs operated by different relief agencies throughout the country, questions about access and eligibility for cash services is common.

For some cash programmes, refugees receive a notification by text before they receive a cash payment. Respondents told our researchers that these texts often come late, are duplicated or are not received, creating confusion and frustration. Cash accounted for a third of refugee calls to the Refugee Response Green Line in 2022 and 65 percent of the calls made by Moldovans.

> *"We need clarity on why we don't receive text messages. If we see this service [cash assistance] announced, why do the messages not come?"*
>
> ***[Ukrainian woman, Cahul]***

Complications to cash assistance can create serious disruptions to people's well-being, particularly for refugees who lack other financial safety nets. Improved communications around cash assistance were commonly recommended by FGD participants, such as streamlining cash assistance programming into one national system (or one unified communication approach) and offering the option to get information through a call-back number or online portal to save long wait times at call centres.

Employment

In FGDs, people also expressed particular interest in information about employment opportunities. Although this feedback wasn't as high in survey responses (23 percent), there appears to be a growing interest for employment-related information, particularly among adult men and young Ukrainians. Young people told us that finding information about jobs is a priority for Ukrainians under 18, but legal and language barriers present a challenge:

> *"It's hard to find a part-time job, you need to be over 18 and know Romanian. There are few vacancies... they might hire you to pump fuel at the petrol stations"*
>
> ***[a 17-year-old Ukrainian, Bălți]***

Health

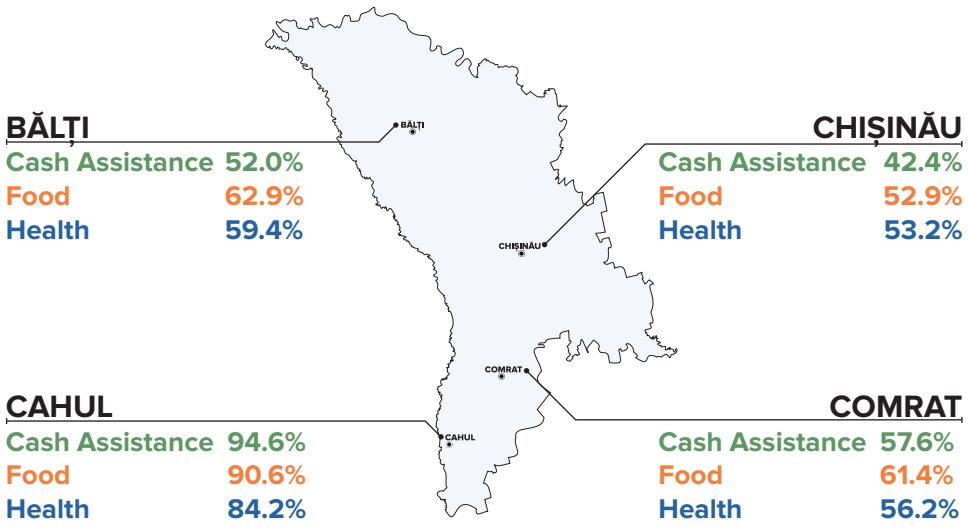
The need for more healthcare-related information was also highlighted in FGDs and was highlighted by 60 percent of Ukrainian survey respondents. The need for clarity on safe medication substitutions for Ukrainian prescriptions was commonly mentioned as fewer refugees now prefer to travel back to Ukraine to access healthcare. Some of these challenges may be addressed by the introduction of the Temporary protection System which will register refugees to one family doctor for health-related support.

> *"A Ukrainian living in Moldova can only register with a family doctor if they have an IDNP [identification number] and a lease agreement. Many do not have this. Men of military age are generally afraid to share such documentation with anyone. This is increasing demand for medical care outside of the local health system."*
>
> ***[NGO employee, Bălți]***

While commonly mentioned by all respondents, the need for health-related information increases with age. 65 percent of refugee respondents over 50 express a need for health-related information compared to 48 percent of respondents between the ages of 18 and 24. The opposite is found when assessing demand for information about mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS). Younger refugees are almost twice as interested in this topic than older refugees, but they told researchers they are not sure where they can access social or psychosocial activities in Moldova. The need for specific mental health services such as counselling or psychiatry was not brought up by respondents in FGDs, perhaps because such topics continue to be taboo among Ukrainians. However, sensitive communication can help normalise such topics. For example, explaining services available, describing what happens in a session, and addressing concerns about how refugees can access help discretely.

Beyond specific types of service provision, how information is provided and where varies across Moldova, creating differences in access to information from one place to another. NGO and governmental services tend to be concentrated in Chișinău and to a lesser extent in other urban centres of Moldova. Legal services and civil documentation processes — such as renewing documentation or registering lost documentation — must be done at administrative offices and the Ukrainian Consulate which only has an office in Chișinău. Refugees living outside of the capital experience difficulties accessing services centralised in the capital and have less access to information in general. Information needs in Cahul are particularly high compared to other parts of the country.

Figure 10: Information needs by area (Ukrainians)



> *"I called the Green Line. They could not help, because all the services [they know about] are in Chișinău."*
>
> ***[Ukrainian woman, Bălți]***

A more limited aid presence elsewhere in the country, particularly in sparsely populated areas, exacerbates this issue. UNHCR local consultations in October also found that areas beyond the scope of this research face challenges similar to those we surveyed, and that Găgăuzia and Ocnița in particular have a limited NGO presence, despite hosting many registered refugees.

They also must travel to nearby urban centres for certain information and services. This creates an additional logistical challenge for single mothers who may have difficulty finding childcare or traveling long distances receive aid.

> *"[To apply or renew your documents], you need to go either to Bălți or to Chișinău. This costs money and time. Then, I must take my two young children. How, if I am here alone, without my husband? I went [to verify my documents], I thought I would go crazy."*
>
> ***[Ukrainian woman, Cahul]***

Incomplete or inaccurate information about requirements to receive aid is also an issue raised by the refugee community. One Ukrainian woman highlighted how incomplete communication further complicates access to aid:

> *"Even if [NGOs or local authorities] call and say, 'come, and bring your passport,' it turns out that you need a host to accompany you, you need photocopies of passports, and so on."*
>
> ***[Ukrainian woman, Cahul]***

To overcome such gaps, refugees often discuss available services on local communications channels present on Viber and Telegram. 48 percent of refugee respondents mentioned preferring communications across such channels.

Beyond the concentration of aid the capital, there are inequalities between people living within Refugee Accommodation Centres (RACs) and those in private accommodation. Refugees living in RACs who participated in our survey indicated lower information needs than those residing with host families or in private accommodation. Such feedback runs counter to an operating assumption that refugees residing with hosts would naturally benefit from higher access to information by residing with someone who knows the context. However, combining the relatively low amount of information available to Moldovan citizens about the response and services, with the physical distance from those services is resulting in these refugees staying in hosted or private accommodation feeling out of the information loop. Importantly however, field visits indicated that the availability of information also varies widely from one RAC to the next, creating disparities even between RACs operating in the same town.

Figure 11: Information needs by type of housing, %. (Ukrainians)

Often, service provision in local RAC centres is managed either by the local administration or locally present NGOs. Private communications chats are often set up for RAC residents on Viber and Telegram, which local aid providers and Primaria officials use to notify them about upcoming services. Refugees living outside of RACs in hosted or rented accommodation tell us they are typically not included in such groups. According to a key informant who operates a local Viber group in Bălți, a dispute broke out in the group when Ukrainians living in apartments realised RAC residents had not informed them about an upcoming aid distribution. According to the moderator, limited resources likewise discourage local NGOs from sharing information about their services among the whole refugee community, for fear of not being able to cover needs:

"The local NGOs don't want to be added to the chat, or for us to share information about their services. There are over 1,200 people in the chat and the majority are refugees. They are scared that they can't help everyone... but people still get aid and talk about it in the chat [leading to frustration]."

[Key informant, Bălți]

More collaboration among NGOs and a standardised approach to these groups, and who is invited to participate can ensure such gaps are minimised. Coordination and enabling higher awareness about services offered among NGOs can also enable organisations to be more being about the limits of their own services. Respondents also felt such awareness raising will reduce confusion among refugees about where to go for aid, and that such information can be provided through online forums but is also valuable in face-to-face interactions. Clear communication about aid operations is crucial to ensuring a dignified and inclusive humanitarian response.

Increased information about how decisions are made about who can access aid is also needed. An FGD with volunteers and NGOs said that in their area, that the Primaria determine beneficiaries based on specific vulnerability criteria – such as how many children or older people are in a family. However, refugees are often not aware of such criteria, making them feel they were unfairly barred from services when they do not receive aid.

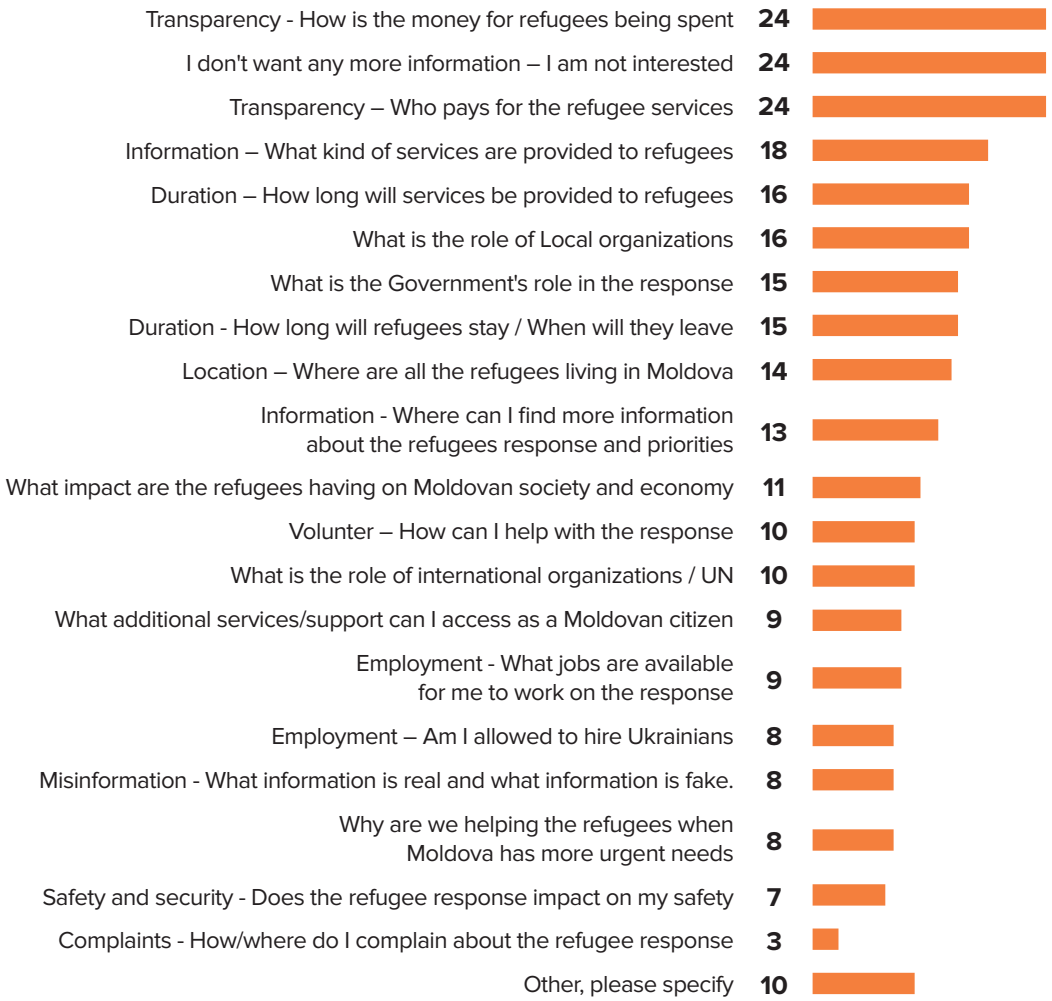
FGD respondents reflected a fear of being blacklisted from refugee services if they complain or are seen to create trouble. One FGD participant reported being blacklisted from medical support after having a dispute with a doctor. Other participants reflected hearing rumours of a refugee 'blacklist' but were hesitant to disclose further information. These concerns may contribute to a reluctance to participate in complaint and feedback mechanisms used by NGOs.

Information gaps may impact social cohesion

Many people do not to know who funds refugee services in Moldova. Almost a quarter (24 percent) of Moldovan residents who participated in our survey said they would like to know more about who pays for refugee services. 24 percent also wanted to better understand how such money is spent. Moldovans generally look for this information from media (46 percent), and one third would like central and local government to provide more information (32 percent, respectively 29 percent).

Rumours that aid to refugees is paid through Moldovan tax revenue are present in Moldova and are likely borne out of this information gap. This misperception could contribute to growing tensions between host and refugee communities, especially amidst rising economic pressures for everyone in Moldova. Clear two-way communication about the source, priorities and accountability measures of the response can help address such gaps.

Figure 12: Information interests regarding the refugee response (Moldovans)



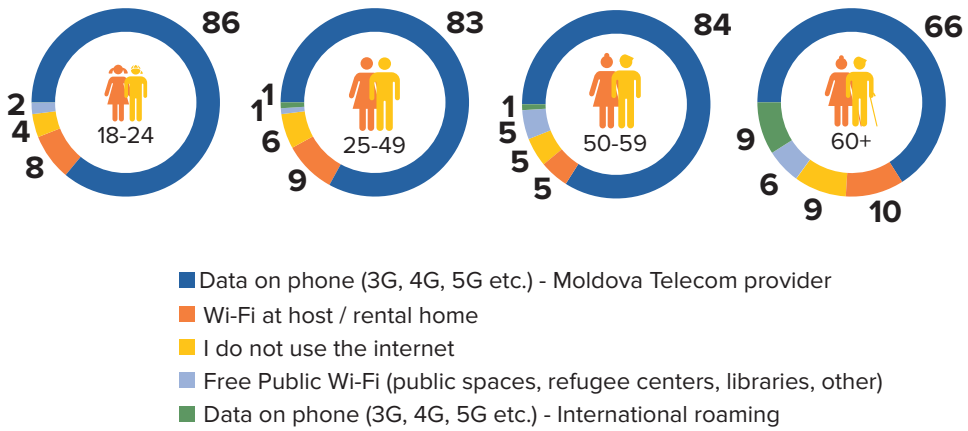
1.2 COMMUNITY-SPECIFIC BARRIERS TO INFORMATION

Beyond these gaps visible across the information environment, certain members of the refugee and host community in Moldova face additional challenges accessing information. This includes older refugees, people with disabilities (PWD), teens and Roma communities.

Digitally disconnected refugees

Given the high reliance on information on digital forums, having access to internet and a smartphone greatly improves a refugee's chances of having their information needs met. Most refugees do have internet access: 96 percent of refugee respondents who took our survey indicated having mobile phones and internet access, of which 79 percent have access to data through a Moldovan provider, which provides a high level of internet access. 40 percent reported having Wi-Fi at home. However, refugees who do not have access to the internet or smart phones may miss out on aid-related information and discussions on chat channels like Viber and Telegram and updates posted online by NGOs and government agencies.

Figure 13: Internet access modes by age. (Ukrainians)



Older refugees

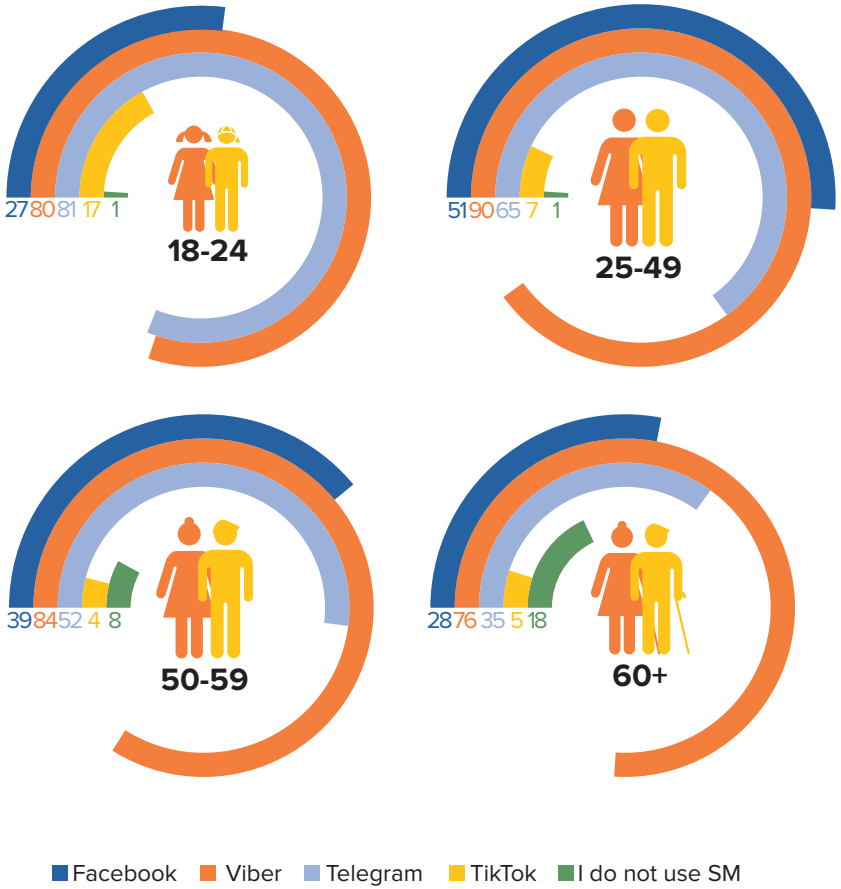
Older refugees were more likely than other age groups to still be relying on international roaming to access the internet (9 per cent of 60+ are using international roaming, and 66 per cent have adopted a Moldovan telecom provider sim) – this could place an additional financial burden on these refugees. In FGDs, older refugees mentioned relying less on digital sources for information than other age groups. Instead, they said they prefer to receive information face-to-face, either from relatives, friends or at local RAC centres. Older refugees comprise up to 15 percent of all refugees in Moldova, according to estimates by Help Age International in late 2022. Health-related information is particularly crucial for this community: HelpAge found that 82 percent of older refugees had at least one pre-existing health condition. Ensuring information relevant to such communities is available offline will help address these needs. Over a third (34 percent) of Ukrainian survey respondents stated that they felt that older people face greater challenges accessing information than other age groups. Highlighting services for older refugees in online spaces can ensure such information trickles down through relatives and friends who are present online.

People with disabilities

PWDs also face unique experiences accessing information. Vision-impaired refugees in FGDs mentioned that informational materials provided by NGOs are often not designed to accommodate sight difficulties, making it hard for them to benefit from informational material available online and in printed formats. Instead, they tend to rely on friends and family to relay information which can make it difficult to tailor information to their needs or access sensitive information. A volunteer in an FGD mentioned that a woman with a hearing impairment had to rely on her child to communicate with RAC centre staff to ensure she received necessary information.

Beyond information formats, specialised support to PWDs may be more difficult to obtain because of limitations in referral processes between NGOs. A woman in an FGD in Cahul reflected on her experience trying to get her disability documented so she could receive support:

Figure 14: Preferred social media or messaging platform by age (Ukrainians)



> *"I went around offering a photocopy of my documents to prove the severity of my disability. NGOs told me there was no need. And then you hear that some people were receiving aid based on their disability... I gave up."*
>
> ***[Ukrainian woman, Cahul]***

The feedback highlights the importance of better communicating the eligibility requirements for specialised aid, such as that available for people with disabilities. Communicating information using a variety of mediums (e.g., printed, audio, visual and easy-to-read formats) can ensure no one is left behind. Volunteers mentioned needing more information about how to support PWDs and their carers.

Teens and young people

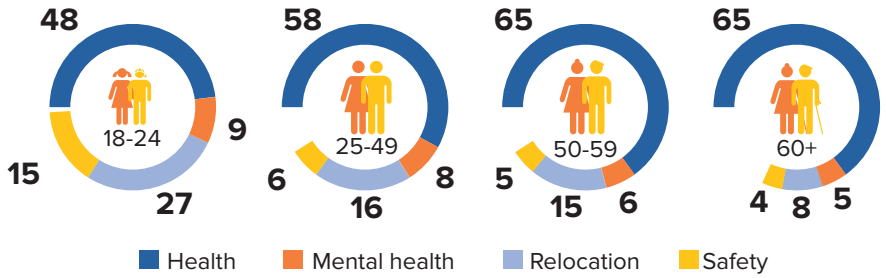
Younger refugees have unique information needs that may not be being addressed in the current information ecosystem. This includes both adolescents (particularly those between the ages of 11 and 13) and teens (aged 14 to 17). In FGDs, teens expressed interest in information about part-time jobs, vocational opportunities and other extra-curricular activities after feeling bored and frustrated about the lack of activities available in smaller towns in Moldova. Importantly, a sense of social isolation was particularly apparent among kids living in private accommodation with their families compared to those living in RACs or with host families.

> *"There are no movie theatres, no McDonald's, no large shopping malls. We have nothing to do. There are only coffee shops and chess courses."*
>
> ***[Ukrainian teen, Bălți]***

Teens also prefer different communication channels to adult refugees. While there are many Viber, Telegram and Facebook groups providing information about refugee services, younger people told us they prefer to use platforms like, for example, TikTok and do not want to join groups designed for adults. This points to the need for more specialised channels of information for young people to connect them to relevant services promote opportunities for social connection and create a safe space to share their distinct challenges. Such information gaps also mean Ukrainian teens may be less aware of specialised services such as sexual and reproductive health services (SRH).

Younger refugees were more interested in information about safety and less aware of national emergency contact numbers. In FGDs, younger respondents (13 or younger) said they would call their parents in an emergency whereas teens (between 14 and 17) said they would call their friends.

Figure 16: Information-related needs by age. (Ukrainians)



Roma refugees

Language barriers also present limitations for 10 percent of respondents who reported either not understanding the language information was provided in (six percent) or not being able to read or write in the language provided (four percent). Typically, refugee-related information is offered in Russian, with Ukrainian offered less frequently.

Roma refugees tend to face difficulties given a general lack of information provided in Romani and reduced internet access. A needs assessment conducted by Internews and partners in Moldova in September 2022 found that literacy difficulties are most common for women, older people and PWDs from Roma refugee communities. They also reported feeling most confident communi-

cating and receiving information in Romani, which is not offered by most media[7] and government sources, and seldomly by NGOs. However, organisations providing services to the Roma community are increasingly hiring moderators that help to translate the needs of the community and connect them with services. The research also found that many Roma families from Ukraine share a single phone owned by the father, which may create difficulties for women and girls in accessing digital information.

Undocumented refugees

Men who crossed into Moldova irregularly face additional risks both online and offline. They must rely on informal pathways for entry and do not have freedom of movement and cannot qualify for NGO support. As a result, they are more limited to relying on the information available in their immediate vicinity or online (if they have internet). Their precarious legal situation also makes them more at risk of being targeting for scams and being exposed to misinformation.

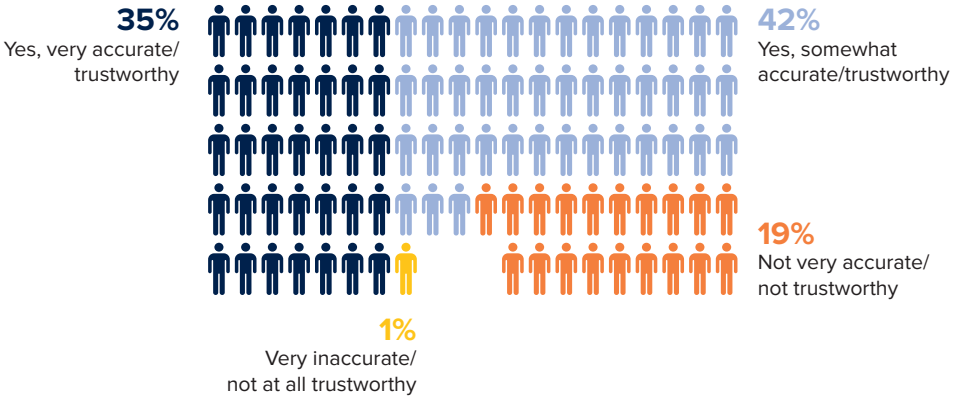
[7] Radio Patrin is a great example of a radio station that broadcasts exclusively in Romani and offers information for settled and newly arrived Roma communities.

1.3 APPROACHES TO VERIFYING INFORMATION

Approaches among Ukrainians

People reported good habits in their approaches to verifying information and identifying misinformation. The phrase "trust it, but always check it" was commonly referenced by refugee participants in FGDs. People tend to use different offline and online methods, including verifying information with NGO volunteers and their own networks. Older refugees residing in RAC centres mentioned relying on their children, their neighbours and administrators in local RAC centres to verify information they were unsure of. Posts that include links and invitations to join other websites or platforms are not commonly trusted, and people known to be involved in the refugee response (such as volunteers or chat group administrators) operators, are sought out to confirm information, indicating that people have a high degree of trust for such information providers. For more details on how refugees and Moldovans trust different information sources, see **Section 2.3: Trust.**

Figure 19: Do you feel refugee-related information on social media is accurate and trustworthy? (Ukrainians)



There are gender differences in behaviours around assessing information. Men were more likely to mention they would double check information received from humanitarians. They also rely more heavily on friends and family for information compared to women (26 compared to 19 percent).

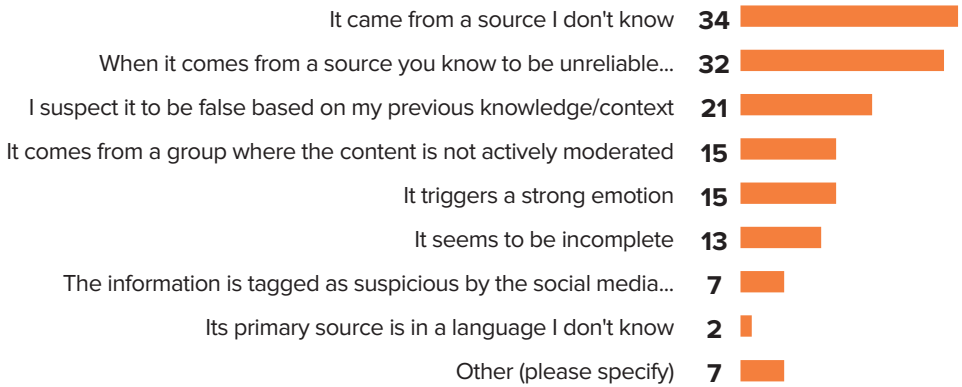
It is important to note that people commonly self-report good information verification practices, when they may not use them in practice. This is akin to telling people you exercise regularly even though you do not, because of how you would like people to perceive you. As a result, promoting information literacy is still important even when high levels of information literacy are reported by the community.

Approaches among Moldovans

Over 60 percent of Moldovan respondents mentioned their level of trust in a source was key to deciding if a piece of information was true or not. 17 percent mentioned relying primarily on local or national governments for refugee information, and a further 30 percent mentioned relying on Moldovan media. However, this also leaves a significant portion of people who rely on more informal sources. For instance, 17 percent of Moldovans mentioned relying on friends and family as their main information source on refugee-related issues. If these respondents consider their personal networks trusted sources, the above feedback indicates that they may not be verifying information they receive from them as much as they may for other, unknown sources. This presents the risk that false or unverified information is spread among Moldovan communities.

Figure 20: Have you heard any information about refugees or the response you think might be untrue? (Moldovans)

Figure 21: What made you think it might not be true? (Moldovans)



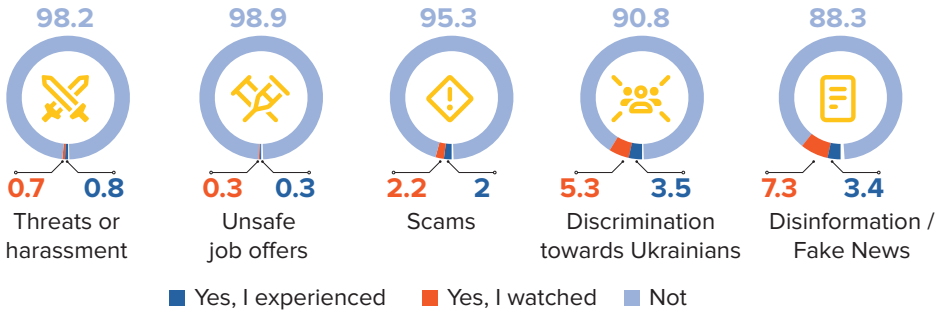
1.4 RISKS IN THE INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM

Despite positive indications of information literacy among refugees, risks are still present for refugees in this context. Misinformation is an issue impacting both refugee and host populations. Moldova for Peace regularly collects rumours from refugees on social media platforms. In September 2022, 48 percent of those collected were about cash assistance, while a further 35 percent referenced aid voucher programs.

Cases of fraud were also mentioned during field research. A moderator of a Viber group with over 1,000 Ukrainians banned crowdfunding campaigns after receiving several requests to advertise fundraisers but being unable to verify them. Another volunteer participant highlighted that scams targeting refugees are widespread on communications channels:

> *"It is treacherous. One girl applied [to renew her documents] after losing her child's vaccination card. It turned out they were fakes. There are many such 'services.'"*
>
> ***[Volunteers, Chișinău]***

Figure 22: Have you received or witnessed negative behaviour on social media while in Moldova? (Ukrainians)



While most Ukrainians did not reflect experiencing poor treatment online in surveys, disinformation (11 percent) and discrimination (nine percent) were the most common forms of negative behaviour. Ukrainians between the ages of 18 and 24 appear more exposed (14 percent, compared to only five of those over 60). This may reflect young peoples' more regular presence online. Efforts to inform refugees about how they can report cases of harassment can be targeted to younger age groups to help address this trend.

Service providers interviewed for this research mentioned incidences of refugees being sexually harassed or offered goods in exchange for sexual services. An operator of a Viber group in Comrat also mentioned that people commonly share their personal information on chats including photos of personal documents to prove their identity, without knowing that doing so may put them at risk. Malicious use of personal data can present risks for anyone, but particularly for people facing other forms of marginalisation, such as single mothers and undocumented refugees. Further awareness raising on data protection, scamming risks and ways to reduce such risks could be helpful for both group members and administrators.

Section 2:
Information Landscape

This section details the existing information suppliers present in the refugee response in Moldova. We aim to give an overarching picture of both information providers which cater to refugee needs, as well as a brief overview of the media consumption habits of Moldovan citizens. This section highlights the main sources of information, preferences among Ukrainians and Moldovans for different sources, levels of trust in information providers and related social dynamics.

2.1 PRIMARY INFORMATION SUPPLIERS

The Moldovan government

The government shares information relevant to the refugee response on their official website, on collaborative platforms such as Dopomoga (further described below) and through statements and interviews with local media. In February 2022, the government launched a crisis cell (later renamed the Joint Management Centre) to coordinate with United Nations (UN) agencies and relief organisations. The Centre also hosted a communications team who worked to inform Moldovans about the evolving response. Despite such efforts, Moldovan volunteers in an FGD expressed sometimes being confused with the official information provided by the government about the refugee response in Moldova.

The Bureau of Migration and Asylum is responsible for communicating information related to the legal status of refugees and migrants in Moldova and shares information via its website, Facebook page, at border crossing points and via their telephone hotline. The bureau also has physical offices in Chisinau, Cahul, Comrat and Balti that people can visit to find out more detailed information.

In February 2023, the Moldovan Government and UNHCR launched a communications campaign to increase awareness about the recently approved Temporary Protection Status (TPS) available to Ukrainian refugees. This campaign included contributions from refugees on their information needs. The campaign offers online and offline communication materials to help refugees make informed decisions about their legal status. This research was completed before the TPS measures were approved. While we recorded a relatively low interest among refugees about asylum and legal information (10 percent) at the time, interest may have increased in the wake of the TPS announcement.

Moldovan media

Moldovan media operates on television (TV), radio and online, covering breaking news as well and investigative reporting. National outlets have correspondents who work around the country. Some outlets, including TV8, Newsmaker and Ziarul de Gardă (ZDG) cover the war on the ground from Ukraine and track migration movements at border crossings. Several Moldovan outlets are also heavily involved in investigative reporting, with some of the most notable examples being Rise and ZDG.

While diverse, Moldovan media is extremely polarized, with some estimates that 70% of media outlets are backed by political parties or businesses with political interests. According to a study conducted by Thompson Reuters Foundation in 2021, 33 per cent of people are unaware there are any independent media outlets in Moldova. The same study looked at media consumption habits, social media was the main source for news (72 per cent use daily and 84 per cent at least weekly) and search engines (61 per cent daily and 80 per cent weekly). This was followed by TV (70 per cent weekly) and news aggregators (63 per cent weekly). Only 29 per cent used radio to access information each week, and even fewer turned to newspapers (11 per cent). Interestingly, they found that a higher proportion of women accessed TV V (79 per cent vs. 60 per cent), while slightly more men than women accessed radio (34 per cent vs. 25 per cent).

According to a study conducted by iData in 2022, Moldova 1 is the most watched television station in Moldova, followed by Prime TV and Jurnal TV. Moldova 1 is the country's public broadcaster. It receives official information from the Moldovan Government and via the state-owned information agency Moldpres.

Financing is a challenge, particularly for independent media, which tend to rely on international donor support, subscription and membership models and crowdfunding campaigns.[8] The International Research and Exchange Board (IREX) rates Moldovan media as 'somewhat vibrant' in its Vibrant Information Barometer published in 2022.

Language

Typically, Moldovan media provides coverage in Romanian and Russian. However, the commonality and quality of Russian publications varies from outlet to outlet. Newsmaker is a Moldovan outlet which commonly publishes news in Russian, and even appears to have a stronger following for its Russian reporting than Romanian.[9] Regional media outlets which offer regular reporting in Russian include Nokta in UTA Găgăuzia, TUK in Taraclia, Bas TV in Besarabeasca, Studio-L in Causeni and Observatorul de Nord in Soroca.

While Russian is common in Moldovan media output, Ukrainian is less so. Moldova 1 began to deliver news in Ukrainian when refugees arrived in 2022, whereas Ukrainian is more limited among other outlets.[10]

Disinformation

Efforts to combat disinformation has been a common component of Moldovan media since before the conflict in Ukraine. According to IREX's recent study, disinformation spread by political figures sometimes overshadows factual information published by Moldovan media and has been on the rise amidst political developments in 2022. International agencies, including Internews, have made efforts to support independent media's efforts to counter disinformation through capacity building and grants. While disinformation is present at the national level in Moldova, a recent report by the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) has shown that propaganda is particularly visible in information spaces in Găgăuzia.

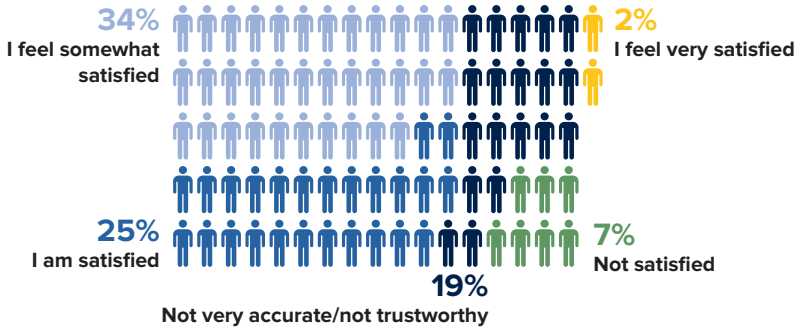
One of the longest running initiatives to counter disinformation is the Stopfals project, which is led by the Association of the Independent Press. The project is supported by IWPR and other international donors.[11] Stopfals fact checks heavily shared, unverified pieces of information online. Mediacritica also addresses disinformation by building information literacy through quizzes, analyses and other educational activities.

In December 2022, the Moldovan Government accused six Moldovan TV channels of spreading disinformation in relation to the Ukrainian war and suspended their licenses.[12] The decision sparked outcries from members of the public, as well as members of the international community. The European Union's (EU) ambassador to Moldova urged the government to clarify the reasoning for the suspensions further. Transparency around these kinds of decisions are crucial for ensuring people in Moldova can trust official and verified sources of information, whether it be governmental or journalistic sources.

Reporting on refugee issues

Moldovan media have reported heavily on the war in Ukraine since the war started. However, reporting on the refugee response has dropped steadily after an initial wave of reporting in early 2022. Just 20 per cent of respondents had seen a story about refugees in the last week. Our research found very few instances of media providing information designed for the refugee community specifically. One outlet which has stood out is Newsmaker, which received an award in December of 2022 for its coverage of refugee-related issues. This is an inaugural humanitarian reporting award, launched with the support of Internews to encourage respectful and ethical reporting on the refugee crisis and refugee needs and perspectives.

Figure 23: How satisfied are you with the amount and quality of coverage of refugee issues by Moldovan media? (Moldovans)



[8] As highlighted in IREX's 2022 report: VIBE_2022_Moldova (1).pdf (irex.org)

[9] Newsmaker hosts 130,000 followers on its Russian-language Facebook page compared to 23,000 followers on its Romanian-language Facebook page. Newsmaker receives training and other support from Internews.

[10] Panelists supporting IREX's research about Moldova's media landscape indicated that despite being a language commonly used by ethnic minorities in Moldova, Moldova 1 is the only outlet to provide coverage in Ukrainian. This is consistent with feedback we received from Ukrainians who mentioned an over-emphasis on Romanian language as one reason they seldom rely on Moldovan media for information.

[11] Other donors include the European Union (2017-2019), the Open Information Partnership (2020) and the United States Embassy in Moldova.

[12] Namely, Orhei TV, Accent TV, RTR-Moldova, NTV-Moldova, TV6 and Primul.

Moldovan media do not appear to coordinate closely with humanitarian experts for their reporting and key informants shared that they sometimes struggle to know who to call (which agency or which person), or to receive a response to their requests for information. However, this misses an opportunity: Media are a key source of information about the refugee response for Moldovan citizens, 30 per cent told us that this is their preferred platform for this kind of information. A better-informed media can help to shed light on how the aid response functions — a topic of significant interest among Moldovans in our study, and address issues of social cohesion by accurately highlighting refugee perspectives an experiences. Moldovan media can also play a critical role in informing Moldovan citizens about how to access services relevant to them, apply for employment or volunteer to help.

Ukrainian refugees do not rely on Moldovan media for information related to the response: Only 6 percent of respondents mentioned Moldovan media as a primary source. According to responses, this is in part due to perceived language barriers (with content being primarily offered in Romanian), perceived irrelevance and because people still receive their news predominantly from Ukrainian outlets online.

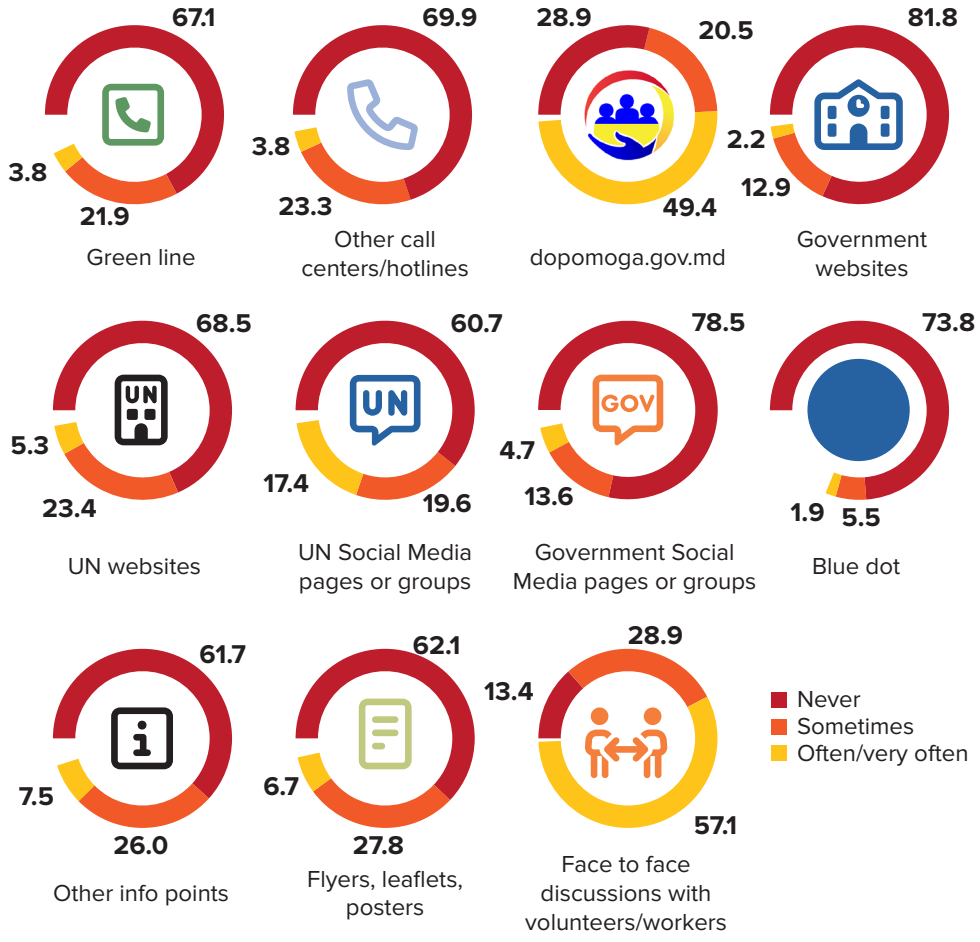
Of the Moldovans present for our survey who had seen stories about refugees in media, they most recalled news updates (24 percent), reports about humanitarian aid, and employment of refugees in Moldova (both five percent of responses). The content they recalled was primarily neutral or positive in its portrayal of refugees. The rarity of refugee-related coverage appears to be more of an issue in Moldova's information space than negative portrayals by media sources.

In January 2023, TV8, in collaboration with a Ukrainian NGO, the National Congress of Ukrainians in Moldova, launched a programme which aims to highlight experiences of Ukrainian refugees in Moldova and provide accurate information about the response. The programme, titled "Good afternoon, we are from Ukraine" is broadcast in Russian (with Romanian subtitles) and produced by a team of Ukrainian and Moldovan media producers. While viewership is difficult to discern because the programme is new at the time of writing, it holds the potential to positively impact understandings of refugee issues, and address issues of social cohesion given that TV8 was the fourth most watched TV channel in iData's 2022 survey.

Refugee Response key information channels

The refugee response in Moldova quickly established several key information platforms to ensure refugees and host communities could access information and ask questions about services. While a number of individual information providers exist, we will focus on the Refugee Response Green Line and Dopomoga as the two most well-known, central information platforms of the response.

Figure 24: Typical use of relevant information platforms. (Ukrainians)



The Refugee Response Green Line
The Green Line is a phone help line jointly operated by the Moldovan government and UNHCR. Call operators (both Ukrainian and Moldovans) provide basic information to callers on a range of topics, including legal and civil documentation issues, available aid services, travel and border crossing requirements. Callers are given the option to have information provided in Russian, Romanian or Ukrainian (English is rarely requested). The phone line is accessible to refugees, volunteers, aid workers and Moldovan citizens.

Operators provide information about refugee services provided by the Moldovan Government and aid agencies. However, according to a key informant working for the Green Line, sometimes gaps in information are present when relief agencies do not provide up-to-date information about their services. If operators cannot answer a question, they typically refer callers directly to the agencies for more detailed information.
In 2022, the service received an average of 1,500 calls per week: 74 percent of calls came from Ukrainians, 25 percent from Moldovans and 1 percent came from people with other nationalities. By the end of 2022, over 50,000 people had called the number since it was established in March of that year.

According to data provided by the Green Line, the most common inquiries by refugees in 2022 were regarding food assistance (41 percent), cash assistance (33 percent) and housing (seven percent). Moldovan callers more commonly called to inquire about cash assistance (65 percent), and housing to a lesser extent (six percent). Such feedback is generally consistent with the feedback we received through FGDs and survey responses about information gaps.

While the Refugee Response Green Line is the most prominent phoneline in the country, there are dozens operated by different NGOs and relief agencies supporting the refugee response, some of which are specifically oriented towards certain services, such as the Keystone phoneline's focus on services for PWDs, whereas others are more generalised. An abundance of phonelines creates confusion: People are not always sure which phoneline to call, and sometimes call several before getting the information they need.

> *"They can't answer [our questions] about [cash] payments. They answer and say, 'call us back' There are no answers... my eye will begin to twitch soon!"*
>
> ***[Ukrainian, Bălți]***

Dopomoga
Dopomoga.gov.md is a website created on February 26, 2022 to provide information regarding the Moldovan refugee response. The site provides information about border crossings, legal documentation and available refugee assistance, and provides relevant contact information and phone numbers.

The site was initially established by an individual, and later collaborated with the government to become an official information platform. The website was advertised on posters at border crossings and served as the landing page for free Wi-Fi points, quickly becoming a central information source for refugees.

As of November 2022, the site had received 425,000 unique users (averaging 40,000 unique users a month) . However, according to site administrators, the site's prominence has also made it a target of cyber-attacks, with seven attempts to bring the site down in the past year.

Anyone can submit information to the website about a relevant service through an online form. This information is reviewed before it goes on the website. Site administrators regularly check and update the site and remove out of date information.

While Dopomoga was mentioned by most respondents as being a key information source, in FGDs, some expressed confusion about the difference between the Dopomoga.gov.md site and Dopomoha.md. Dopomoha is a portal run by Moldova for Peace where people can request aid and initiatives can offer support. Both sites actively promote the other and there is a clear link between the platforms.

As Dopomoga.md aims to deliver information about the entire response nationally, refugees noted that it sometimes lacks detail on services available outside of the capital. In Bălți, an additional website was created for refugees living there called dopomogabalti.md. It is not clear from the site if there is an association or integration with the main Dopomoga site, or if there are plans to launch similar localised sites in other areas that host a high concentration of refugees.

Moldova for Peace

Moldova for Peace (MPP) is a non-profit civic initiative which operates Under the umbrella of Laolaltă to support Ukrainian refugees in Moldova. It runs the Dopomoha platform and several facilities in Moldova, including a community centre and volunteer academy. MPP implements activities through more than 300 volunteers who provide information to local communities through face-to-face activities, and through informational channels on Viber and Telegram. We highlight it in our research because the Dopomoha platform and other information platforms which MPP operates were commonly cited as an information source for research participants.

Dopomoha.md is as an online platform which allows refugees and Moldovan citizens to submit requests for assistance, including food, non-food items, accommodation and other forms of support. MPP also operates the largest refugee-focussed Facebook group in Moldova, "Ajutor Ucraineni in Moldova."The group connects more than 95,000 refugees, volunteers and aid workers. The MPP's Informational Unit actively monitors the page, answers questions, connects people with services and advertises upcoming events at MPP's community centre.

MPP also operates a rumour tracking project in support of the Accountability to Affected People (AAP) Taskforce in Moldova. The Informational Unit monitors pages used by refugees to identify rumours, misinformation and information gaps, and regularly reports findings to the AAP Taskforce.

Local and international NGOs

Responding agencies in Moldova use a variety of approaches to inform refugees about their services including SMS blasts, posters and leaflets, face-to-face communications and phonelines. In early 2022, the AAP Working Group was established as a key coordination mechanism for information sharing, community engagement and accountability activities. Below is a non-exhaustive list of some of the information and communication initiatives currently being offered in Moldova and feedback we received about them.

Refugees commonly rely on phonelines operated by NGOs and mentioned dozens of available hotlines beyond the Refugee Response Green Line. Each government ministry also operates their own Green Line. Refugees and service providers told us that while a website might be a first point of information, phone lines were preferred as they allowed you to clarify complex issues (like legal topics) and to tailor information to their experience. However, people did express some difficulties. There is an impression that the quality of information differs highly from one line to the next, with people receiving high-quality, detailed information at times and poor treatment other times. They also said phonelines tend to provide information about services available in Chișinău and less so about resources available elsewhere in Moldova. Some refugees reported being told they must travel to Chișinău to receive services when they called NGO phonelines. A Ukrainian woman in Cahul mentioned traveling over three hours on public transportation from Cahul to Chișinău to receive children's clothes:

> *"I needed to go to Chișinău [to receive the clothes]. I'm going to go with two children, but transport costs 1,200 Moldovan Lei (around 65 US dollars). It's as if they give [aid] out with one hand and take it with the other."*
>
> ***[Ukrainian woman, Cahul]***

People were unsure which NGO operated each line, creating uncertainty about which number to call. Some phone lines operate seven days a week, while others are only staffed at very specific times. Despite these difficulties, phone calls are the most common preference among refugees for accessing service information (49 percent), highlighting the importance of improving peoples' awareness about the different lines available and who operates them.

NGOs also use a range of innovative social media approaches to communicate with communities. Some organisations use specific groups and channels to inform refugees of services and announcements: IOM has recently begun hosting live sessions on social media and messaging platforms to allow refugees to ask questions to experts. Social media engagement is highly relevant consid-

ering that 48 percent of refugees told us they prefer receiving information via messaging apps, with another 16 percent preferring social media.

UNHCR also runs a help page which provides useful links to services and asylum-related information.

In terms of physical information points, RACs often double as an information hub for refugee services. Blue Dot Centres, jointly established by UNHCR and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), address the protection-related needs of refugee families and children. Moldova hosts 11 Blue Dot Centres. A map of centres throughout Moldova and the broader region can be found here. They serve the critical function of sharing reliable, updated and accurate information with refugees arriving to Moldova regarding services, documentation and family reunification.

The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) also runs Information Centres as well as a phoneline that provides specialised information assisting non-Ukrainian refugees in Moldova (also referred to as third country nationals), such as information about legal status and transportation services. The UN Population Fund (UNFPA) works with local partners to operate static and mobile Orange Safe Spaces for women, young people and older persons across Moldova. These sites offer a range of information services including sessions for adolescents about sexual and reproductive health (SRH), gender-based violence (GBV) prevention and emotional support. The spaces also offer workshops dedicated to recreation, arts and crafts and vocational skills.

Given that NGOs and governmental agencies are less prevalent in rural areas, refugees tend to rely more on local mechanisms such as RACs, local NGOs and personal networks. Where RACs are not present, people rely on local city halls, called Primarias which share information via social media, messaging sites and face-to-face. However as mentioned in Part 1: Information Gaps, the regularity and quality of information from tends to vary from place to place in more rural parts of the country.

Volunteers

Volunteers, both Moldovan and Ukrainian, serving as moderators for social media pages and channels and which support the response on a volunteer-basis present a crucial component of the information ecosystem in Moldova. Volunteers provide information on social media and are present on messaging applications such as Viber and Telegram. Moderators are responsible for identifying and eliminating spam, suspicious activity or hate speech from chats. Given the prevalence of misinformation in such forums, supporting volunteers in dealing with malicious content could help improve the information environment. They also share information face-to-face at refugee centres. Volunteers indicated an interest in closer coordination with other NGOs and volunteers to be better equipped to communicate the full range of services available. They also welcomed more information from the Ukrainian Embassy in Moldova regarding civil documentation and travel requirements.

2.2 PREFERENCES

Information Preferences among Ukrainians

When receiving and accessing information about refugee services, refugees most commonly prefer to receive information via phone calls, messaging apps such as Viber, Telegram and WhatsApp and through face-to-face discussions. In FGDs, Ukrainians noted using a combination of both online and offline sources to receive and confirm information.

Figure 25: Preferred methods to learn about refugee services. (Ukrainians)

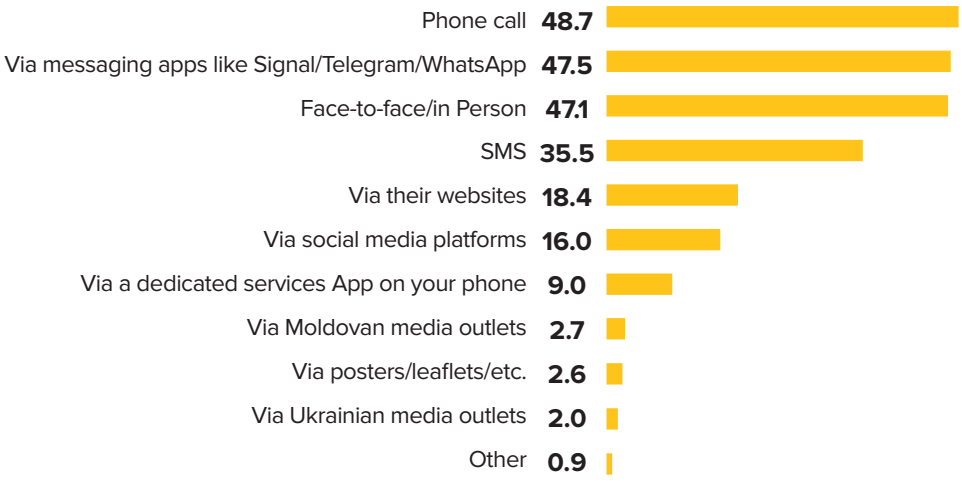
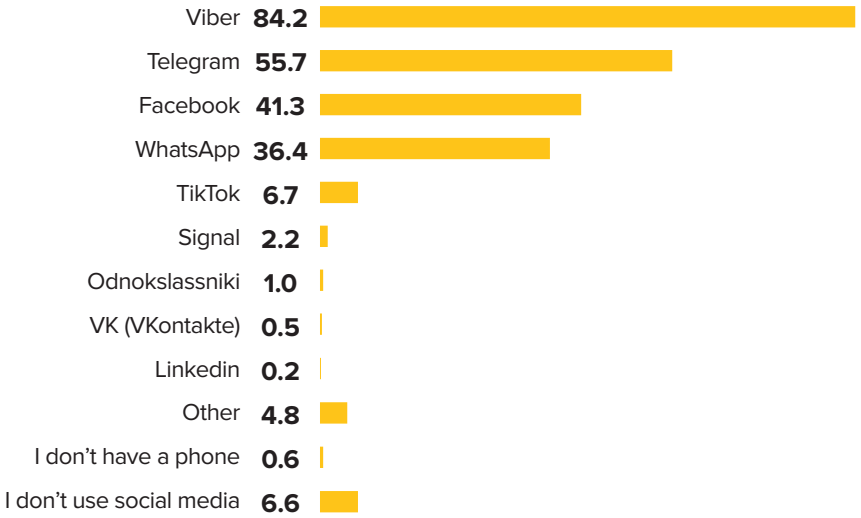


Figure 26: Most used social media and messaging platforms. (Ukrainians)



The messaging app Viber is the most common communication app used among Ukrainian refugees. People often set up unique groups for specific communities, such as for teens, mothers and other specific communities. In some areas, RACs set up their own Viber group to share details about aid provision, events and to discuss relevant topics. Such chats provide space for refugees to not only ask questions and receive information, but also to share their own experiences and feedback. However, such groups appear to be less common in rural areas. An informant in Comrat mentioned that people from nearby villages often request to enter Viber groups set up for refugees in Comrat because such groups do not exist in the villages where they reside.

Social media sites like Twitter and Facebook are comparatively less relevant for refugees than messaging applications like Viber and Telegram. In FGDs, refugees mentioned using Facebook groups and pages of NGOs to find more general information about aid services, while using Viber and Telegram channels more commonly for more specific, localised information.

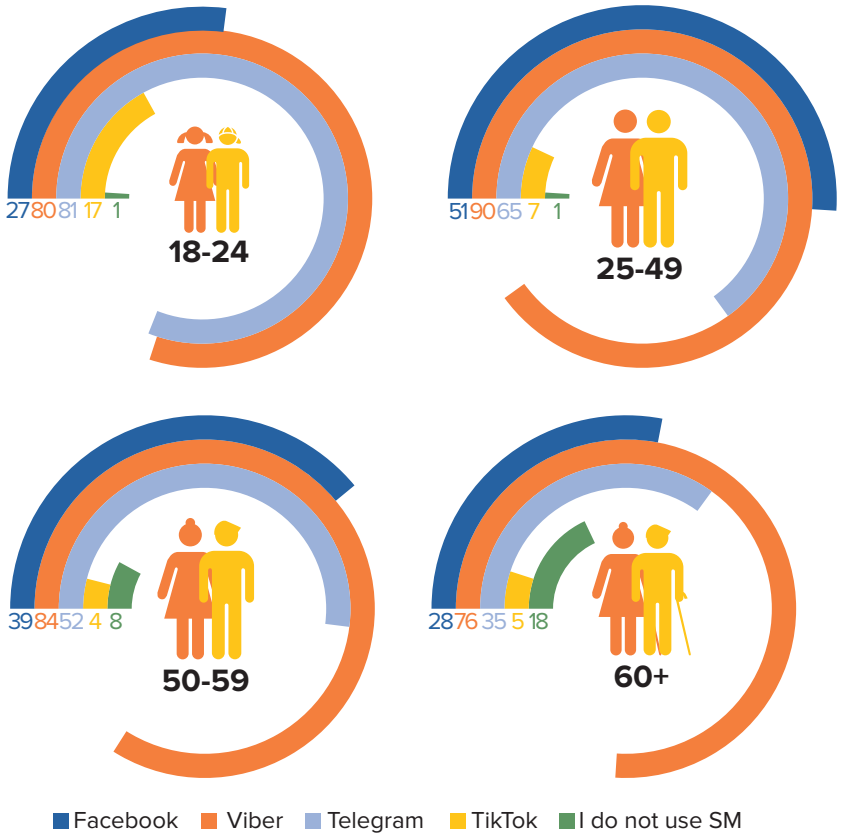
Figure 27: How often do you use social media to get refugee-related information? (Ukrainians)

Figure 28: Which groups or pages on social media have been the most useful for refugee-related information? (Ukrainians)

	Frequency	Percent
dopomoga.md	159	13.6
Мамы в Кишиневе/ Mothers in Chişinău on Viber	136	11.6
Украинцы в Бельцах/ Ukrainians in Balti on Viber	116	9.9
Беженцы в Комрате/ Refugees in Comrat on Viber	76	6.5
Украинцы в Кагуле/ Ukrainians in Cahul on Viber	76	6.5
Украинцы в Молдове/ Ukrainians in Moldova on Viber	26	2.2
Ajutor Ucraineni în Moldova; SOS Українці Молдова; Помощь Украинцам в Молдове / Help Ukrainians in Moldova on Facebook	18	1.5
Беженцы в Молдове/ Refugees in Moldova on Viber	18	1.5
Помощь беженцам в Молдове/ Help for refugees in Moldovan on Facebook	12	1

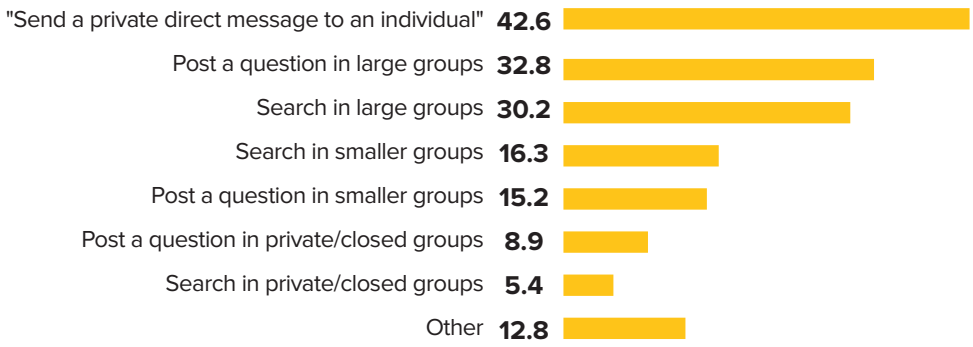
Preferences for different social media pages and sites is mixed among refugee respondents. While Dopomoga is not a social media group, it was referenced the most commonly among survey respondents (14 percent) who were not prompted with a list of options, indicating its high degree of relevance.

Figure 29: Preferred social media or messaging platform by age. (Ukrainians)



Facebook and Tik-Tok are more heavily used by younger Ukrainians in Moldova. Relying on social media to receive information also tends to decrease with age. 18 percent of refugees over 60 mentioned not using social media to receive refugee-related information at all, compared to eight percent of refugees from 50 to 59 years old and only one percent of people under 25. Comparatively, older refugees do tend to use information channels like Viber, albeit to a slightly lower extent (76 percent) than younger Ukrainians.

Figure 30: How do you prefer to find the answer to your question on social media? (Ukrainians)



Searching for information and requesting information entail different approaches. When they need to request information, Ukrainians prefer to ask sources directly, such as through a private messages (43 percent). Secondarily, they prefer to ask questions in larger groups (33 percent) and more rarely in smaller, or private groups. Larger groups are preferred to smaller ones because of the higher likelihood of a quicker response. Roma refugees commonly also use communications apps and social media but are less likely to use the groups and channels used by other Ukrainian refugees in Moldova, according to our past research.

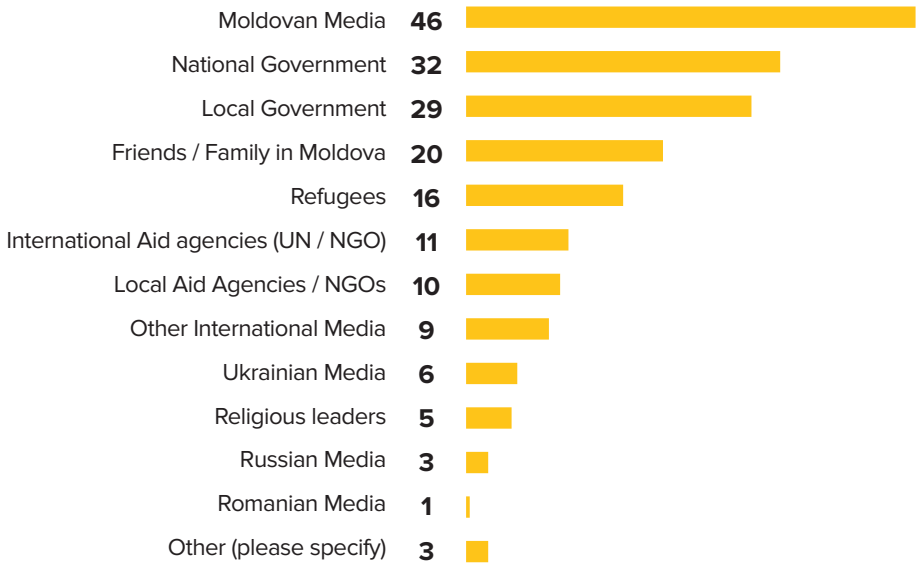
Preferred sources for Moldovans

In addition to the main common sources used (Figure 31), this research also investigated Moldovan's preferred channels for receiving information about the refugee response. Moldovan media stands out as the most used (30 percent) and most preferred (46 percent).

Social media is also an important platform for Moldovan citizens to access news and information in general. A 2021 study found that more than half of adults turn to Facebook for news and information (79 per cent), followed by YouTube (68 percent) and Viber (56 per cent) . Instagram (44 per cent), WhatsApp (41 per cent) and Russian platform Odnoklassniki (31 per cent) also rate highly.

Figure 31: Main sources for refugee-related information. (Moldovans)

Figure 32: Where would you prefer to look for refugee-related information? (Moldovans)



Language dynamics and preferences

While other host countries receiving Ukrainian refugees may face language barriers in communicating with refugees, many Ukrainians and Moldovans can communicate in Russian. While 72 percent of refugees report speaking Russian at home, over 90 percent prefer to use Russian when speaking to aid providers. Interestingly, Moldovan participants reporting speaking Russian at home almost as frequently as Romanian (46 percent compared to 49 percent). Aid operations in Moldova are typically conducted in Russian and the language has enabled Moldovans and aid actors to respond quickly and efficiently to the refugee influx in Moldova.

Despite presenting opportunities for social cohesion, the Russian language has also grown to be a sensitive issue for some communities in Moldova. Many Ukrainians we spoke to mentioned exclusively speaking in Russian in public — even when speaking with other Ukrainians — due to negative reactions from Moldovans when overheard speaking Ukrainian. These experiences also differ from place to place. Refugees in Bălți preferred speaking publicly in Russian, and some had received threats when speaking in Ukrainian. In Cahul, refugees faced the opposite challenge: Ukrainian participants mentioned being criticised by Moldovans when they were overheard speaking Russian and being urged to learn Romanian. This feedback is an important reminder that the use of Russian language holds different historical and social connotations in different parts of Moldova, and while it presents many opportunities for easy communication, it must also be approached sensitively.

The ease of communication in Russian may also overshadow some of refugees' preferences when it comes to different language options. Ukrainians in FGDs said they had not been given the option to speak in Ukrainian about aid services since arriving in Moldova. Also, a higher percentage of Ukrainian survey participants reflected preferring Ukrainian language for written information (12 percent) than for speaking about refugee-related information (six percent respectively). Of course, striking the right balance between different languages in aid responses can be difficult and requires resources and effort. Clear Global has created several resources offering specific guidelines on language use,

toolkits for interpreters, as well as a multilingual glossary on protecting from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) and guidelines for the use of plain language and toolkits for interpreters.

Refugees mentioned seldom using Moldovan media sources: Only three percent prefer to receive information from Moldovan media. In FGDs, Ukrainians discounted Moldovan media as irrelevant to them or as presenting too many language barriers. On the one hand, Russian information from aid actors – which tends to be tailored to refugee needs – is helpful for filling this information gap. However, it can also cause information to become siloed: Moldovans receive information in Romanian, and seldom about refugee issues. Refugees receive information (specifically, information which aid providers decide is most relevant to them) in Russian, while missing out on information about the wider array of events happening around them.

2.3 TRUST

Trust among Ukrainian communities

Across FGDs and surveys, refugees reflect a moderate to high degree of trust in the government, NGOs and other refugees. In FGDs, Ukrainians said they tend to trust chat channels and pages that have been established by refugees involved or affiliated with the refugee response over people who lack this network. As a result, they have a strong degree of trust for volunteers.

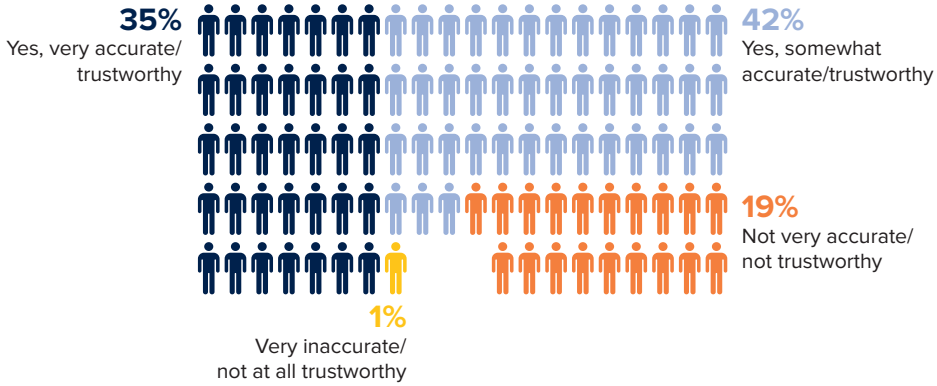
Women indicate a higher degree of trust in general compared to men and found refugees to be the most reliable (53 percent of women versus (vs) 43 percent of men), volunteers (37 vs 30 percent) and NGOs (25 vs 21 percent). Men appear to indicate more scrutiny towards different sources across the board.

While the quantitative data is mixed, the significant perception that information online is 'somewhat accurate and trustworthy' highlights their tendency to check most information with at least one other sources. As a result, people tend to rely on a combination of sources, comparing the quality and sourcing of different pieces of information to determine its trustworthiness. However, the significant rate of people perceiving information on social media as 'very accurate and trustworthy' does present some concern and highlights a continued need for awareness raising about the presence of mis- and disinformation in Moldova.

Whereas trust in support mechanisms like humanitarian agencies and the government appears generally strong, several perceptions evident among refugee

Figure 33: Most reliable sources according to respondents. (Ukrainians)

Figure 34: Do you feel that information on social media about refugee services is accurate and trustworthy? (Ukrainians)



communities hint that this trust may be eroding. The fear of being blacklisted from aid services provides perhaps the starkest example of how a lack of transparency about aid processes and decision-making is impacting trust in aid mechanisms. This fear also makes people hesitant to provide anything beyond positive feedback to aid providers. Even in FGDs, research participants tended to self-censor. Inconsistent information about cash assistance appear to also impact this trust:

> *"There is a suspicion that the lost [cash] payments are appropriated by someone. Why is there no consistency about when we receive pay-outs?"*
>
> ***[Ukrainian woman, Bălți]***

A general lack of transparency around how beneficiaries are chosen creates a sense that aid is provided selectively by NGOs and other service providers. For instance, there was a perception that people arriving from areas of Ukraine that had been spared direct conflict would be deprioritised for aid:

> *"This is practised: you get aid and are told not to tell others what is being distributed. There is a feeling that aid centres are committing fraud. On what basis do they decide who gets aid and who does not?"*
>
> ***[Ukrainian woman, Bălți]***

> *"All the help is provided using selective approach. [They refuse you aid] if you are not coming from a hot spot. Odesa is not considered a hot spot.*
>
> ***[KII with moderator of a Viber group for Ukrainians, Bălți]***

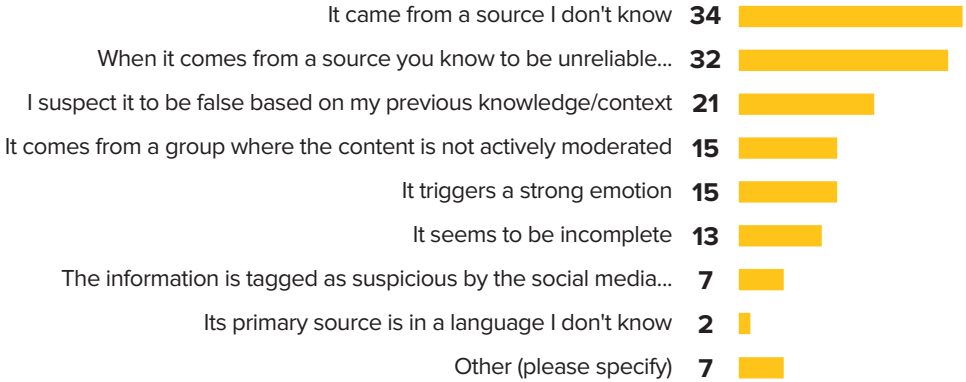
Limited availability of services in different parts of Moldova may discourage full transparency from aid providers. However non-transparent approaches can erode the trust that people have for humanitarian agencies and could lead to further discontent with the response. Open communication about aid limitations and clear descriptions of eligibility criteria for certain services could help preserve trust by creating a more open space for dialogue.

Trust among Moldovans

Survey participants indicated trust in refugee-related information: only 12 percent of respondents cited distrust of information as a barrier to refugee-related information. Although, 27 percent mentioned having heard information about refugees or the response that they thought may be untrue. Most commonly, participants said it came from a source they didn't know (10 percent), presenting the possibility for misinformation about refugees in information spaces used by Moldovans.

Figure 35: Have you heard any information about refugees or the response that you think might be untrue? (Moldovans)

Figure 36: What made you think it might not be true? (Moldovans)



In FGDs, Ukrainians mentioned that Moldovans thought funds for refugees were acquired through their own taxes or from state budgets allocated for Moldovan citizens. They think this contributes to a sense of distrust and frustration among Moldovans about the presence of refugees. Further clarity from the Moldovan Government about the funding structures which support the aid response can help dispel these rumours and increase trust.

Data privacy

There are also concerns among refugees about how their personal data is used, and people are unsure why NGOs collect such data. While this was not a primary information gap indicated by survey respondents, it was addressed in FGDs as a cause for concern:

> *There is a feeling that everyone knows our data, [NGOs] always ask for a passport to get aid.*
>
> ***[Ukrainian woman, Bălți]***

Clarifying the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) used by humanitarians to secure beneficiary data can help people feel more confident in disclosing information. Clarifying where disclosing such information online and in public forums may present risks to refugees is also important.

2.4 SOCIAL COHESION

Present conditions

Relations between Moldovans and Ukrainians vary across the country, as do opinions of refugees and the origins of the war in Ukraine. Public opinion among Moldovans about the war is almost evently split. Data from the Moldova Public Opinion Barometer has shown that around 30 percent of people in Moldova believe the war is a result of Russia defending its territory or an effort to rid Ukraine of Nazism since the start of the conflict, compared to 38 percent of people who think the war is an unjustified provocation. Amidst these debates, cases of discrimination and hostility from host communities — sometimes even from service providers — has impacted refugees' sense of stability and access to services, particularly outside of Chișinău.

Moldovans were quick to support refugees at the wake of the crisis, offering up housing and locally organised support. However rising inflation has increased the need for social support services among many Moldovan families. Whereas anti-Ukrainian sentiments could be fuelling some specific incidents of poor treatment, wider-reaching tensions caused by the worsening economy and growing needs can create frustrations about services made available to refugees amidst increasing scarcity. Perceptions of relative affluence of Ukrainian refugees appears to fuel such frustrations among Moldovans, and may present risks for certain communities. A Facebook group operator based in Geneva reflected seeing social media posts from Moldovans referencing the cars that Ukrainians drive in Moldova or appearances of Ukrainian women as an indica-

tion of their privilege compared to struggling Moldovans. Her and other operators of the group opted to vet posts before publishing them to the group to curb such speech.

In FGDs, some refugees expressed receiving rude treatment from Moldovans when calling phonelines to inquire about services or housing. They felt that the treatment indicated Moldovans' dwindling patience for the refugee presence in Moldova:

> *"The migration service laughed that we wanted to stay here, and recommended hotels for us to stay in. They also speak aggressively when we call their phoneline."*
>
> ***[Ukranian woman, Bălți]***

As a result, refugees feel that Ukrainians may be more empathetic to their needs and recommended getting Ukrainians more involved in information sharing and service provision. Indeed, some local authorities and RACs involve Ukrainians to help support their activities targeting refugees. Such initiatives have been met with positivity. However, some Ukrainians also feel that negative sentiments limit their opportunities to find work in local NGOs where Moldovans are heavily represented:

> *"Locals hire only their own volunteers. Why don't they take Ukrainians? Humanitarian aid is distributed at their discretion."*
>
> ***[Ukrainian man, Bălți]***

Such dynamics also give rise to rental discrimination. A Ukrainian woman in Bălți mentioned that after several failed attempts to find an apartment to rent on her own, she succeeded only after changing her approach:

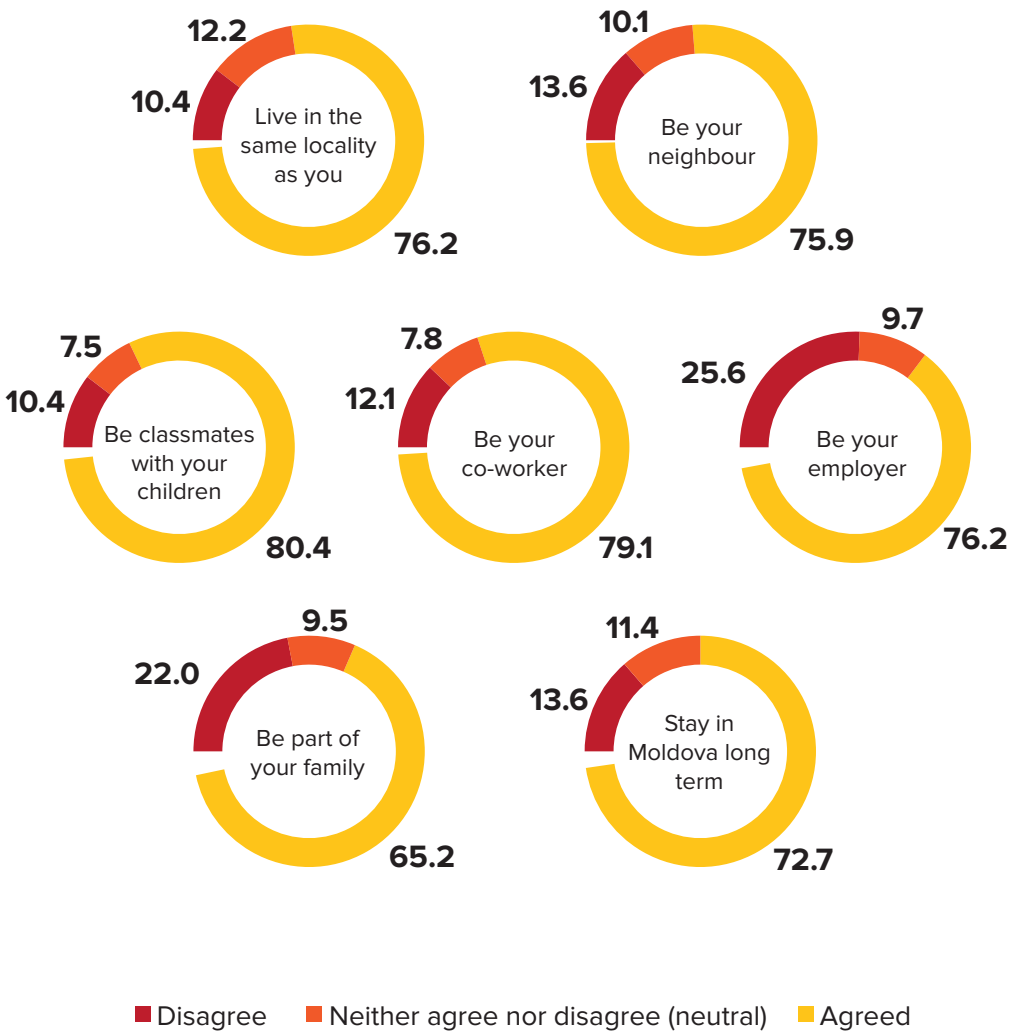
> *"I decided not to tell [the owners] that I'm from Ukraine. I asked a Moldovan guy to help me look for a place, and then I found one. "*
>
> ***[Ukrainian woman, Bălți]***

Pro-Russian sentiments among certain Moldovan communities also creates a sense of tension and fear, impacting peoples' sense of security:

> *"Bălți is a pro-Russian city. It's dangerous to drive a car with Ukrainian license plates here. A friend's car was smashed [due to her Ukrainian plates]. In Chișinău too cars were vandalised with phrases like 'get lost!' [When in public,] I don't say I am from Ukraine."*
>
> ***[Ukrainian, Bălți]***

In some cases, social tensions impact individual security. These dynamics appear worse in certain parts of Moldova. More Ukrainians present for surveys in Bălți reflected safety-related information as a key information gap more than elsewhere (19 percent compared to five percent in Cahul, three percent in Chișinău and 1 percent in Comrat). This fear was also palpable in FGDs there. One respondent highlighted how poor treatment can sometimes be targeted towards men who avoided the mandatory conscription:

Figure 37: To what extent do you agree that Ukrainians should be able to... (Moldovans)



> *"A Moldovan man yelled at a Ukrainian man: 'Why did you come here? You are a parasite, go to war!'"*
>
> ***[Ukrainian woman, Bălți]***

Such tensions appear to also impact trust in local institutions. Whereas respondents in Chișinău and Comrat indicated a general trust in local authorities and RAC employees, this trust was comparatively weaker in Bălți and Cahul, where social tensions are higher. Teens in Bălți expressed hesitation to contact police in an emergency and mentioned avoiding specific areas of town for fear of altercations.

Our survey data also indicated possible resistance to Ukrainian integrating more in Moldova in the future. Moldovans surveyed were comfortable with refugees residing near them and living permanently in Moldova. However, they more were reluctant to the idea of being employed by (26 percent disagreed) or related to a Ukrainian (22 percent). Interestingly, hesitations to being employed by a Ukrainian was highest among older women from Cahul and Comrat (specifically, those above 60 represented 61 percent of the 'disagree' responses) and lowest among younger men (ages 18 to 24) in Balti and Chișinău. Such sentiments should be addressed sensitively and quickly given growing interest among Ukrainians to find work in Moldova and the possibility of Ukrainians remaining in Moldova in the coming year.

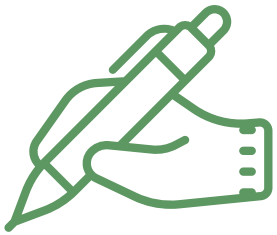
Responses among Ukrainians

These tensions, and fears of exacerbating them, create a sense of self-censorship among refugees, both with their Moldovan peers and with governmental and humanitarian service providers in some cases. People commonly avoid speaking Ukrainian in public, avoid political topics and generally try to avoid attracting attention. They are also hesitant to provide feedback which could be perceived as negative or ungrateful, creating difficulties for ensuring effective complaint and feedback mechanisms (CFM, further addressed in Part 3: Complaints and Feedback).

Fear of deportation also causes people to avoid contact with authorities in areas where pro-Russian sentiment is high, or where authorities appear inpatient to refugee needs. Such sentiments were particularly evident in Comrat and Bălți, and among men in Cahul who had entered the country irregularly. In Bălți refugees also expressed having limited trust in local authorities after having negative experiences with them, and were hesitant to contact them in an emergency as a result.

Existing social tensions create distance between host communities and Ukrainians and directly impact – and are impacted by – the information ecosystem. Such tensions could be further exacerbated or politicised in the run-up to the local elections in Moldova in 2023 or if economic conditions deteriorate further and should be monitored closely.

Refugees expressed interest in activities which support social cohesion, and which would help them develop Moldovan networks. However, they felt such opportunities were currently limited. Refugee-focused NGOs and initiatives could collaborate with Moldovan NGOs on activities which dually benefit Moldovan and Ukrainian communities, and which may naturally help improve social cohesion in the process. Advertising services and projects in both Ukrainian and Moldovan information spaces can also help bridge existing gaps. For instance, the NGO Healthy Cities offers aid to refugees and operates a community centre where young people (Ukrainian and Moldovan) can participate in recreational activities. Key informants from the NGO mentioned that more Moldovans tend to apply for such activities, so they additionally advertise opportunities in Ukrainian information circles to help encourage more equal participation.



Section 3: Complaints and feedback

A complaints and feedback mechanism (CFM) is a system that receives, processes and responds to concerns from the community on humanitarian services, assistance or behaviour. This community feedback is vital for an accountable response designed around community needs and preferences.

3.1 AVAILABLE MECHANISMS

Most individual NGOs collect feedback from people who benefited from their services through complaints and feedback mechanisms (CFMs). The response includes CFMs in the form of anonymous surveys, phone lines and feedback boxes which allow for handwritten responses. The Refugee Response Green Line also operates as a CFM for the overall refugee response with operators recording complaints in real-time and sharing them with UNHCR. Oftentimes, information provided through individual CFMs only influences individual programme design and is seldom shared between agencies. CFM mechanisms can also help improve accountability and transparency of aid operations overall when insights and trends are shared and addressed collectively.

3.2 BARRIERS TO FEEDBACK AND COMPLAINTS

Among Ukrainians

Overwhelmingly, refugees participating in the survey said they had never tried to make a complaint or suggestion (91 per cent) because they had nothing to complain about (86 per cent). The low uptick in using CFMs was also evident in FGDs where most Ukrainian respondents reported not having used formal CFMs. According to a key informant from the Green Line phoneline, the line has also struggled with gathering responses, only having received around 100 submissions since being established. Only in one case did an FGD participant mention filing a complaint at a local RAC centre, which did not appear to receive follow up attention:

Figure 38: Have you ever made, or wanted to make, a complaint or suggest changes to a service you received in Moldova? (Ukrainians)

Figure 39: If not, why? (Ukrainians)

We were given feedback forms, we wrote [our complaint] and put it in a box... I don't know where they took the box."

[Ukrainian woman, Cahul]

In other cases, research participants were not aware of CFM mechanisms or did not remember participating in feedback opportunities. Roma communities involved in previous research by Internews also mentioned lacking access to the platforms or mechanisms they would need to provide such feedback.

In general, people indicated a hesitation to provide feedback that may be considered ungrateful to the services that have been provided to them in the refugee response. Importantly however, Ukrainians also appeared relatively comfortable providing our Ukrainian researchers with feedback in FGD settings. In-person discussions, with other Ukrainians may help overcome hesitations to participate in CFMs – particularly if such conversations highlight the importance of such feedback to successful aid operations. FGD respondents commonly welcomed the creation of CFM mechanisms offline and online, as well as through phone surveys.

In addition to a desire to avoid appearing ungrateful for services provided, interview and assessment fatigue was also evident over the course of research, which may further discourage participants from providing feedback, even when the option is offered. There is also a general perception that NGOs are unfairly selective in determining beneficiaries. Refugees may not be aware that they can report such cases back to humanitarians, or that doing so could improve such behaviours.

Among Moldovans

Interestingly, most Moldovans reported having feedback that they would like to provide (75 percent of respondents). However, the reasoning for the hesitation among the remaining 25 percent was mixed: Most said it was not in their nature to complain (21 percent), felt that nothing would change (15 percent), or were hesitant due to safety concerns (10 percent). A further 12 percent responded they prefer not to answer. Five percent said they could not find the proper platform or person to submit a complaint, indicating that while they may be hesitant to use them, a large proportion of them are aware of such mechanisms.

Figure 40: What is the main reason you don't want to share your feedback? (Moldovans)

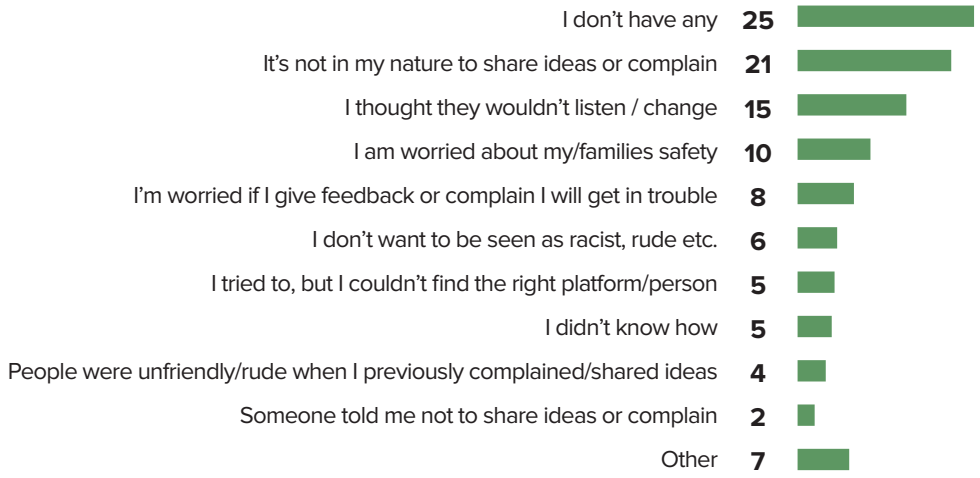


Figure 41: How would you prefer to share your feedback? (Moldovans)

Moldovans were more likely to share feedback or complaints with local government agencies (37 percent of responses), national government (21 percent), Moldovan media (15 percent) or friends and family (14 percent). They were less likely to report such complaints to international or local NGOs (nine and 10 percent of respondents mentioned willingness). Mixed feedback regarding hesitations, and a preference for mechanisms outside of the aid response could indicate a hesitation among Moldovans about structures they may be less familiar with, such as newly available NGO structures. Further investigation into people's lack of interest in NGOs feedback mechanisms could help identify meaningful ways to incentivise use of CFM mechanisms.

The importance of CFM and constructive criticism should be sensitively discussed with refugees and hosts. Hesitations to provide feedback may worsen if social tensions between refugees and Moldovan communities get more extreme. Particularly in cases where such mechanisms are managed by Moldovans, Ukrainians may opt out of providing feedback or provide feedback for fear of repercussions Further, the fact that NGOs do not bar refugees from aid can be clarified specifically to help people feel more comfortable that they will not experience repercussions should they provide negative feedback.