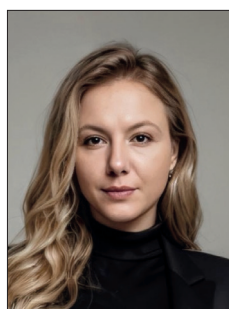


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SOCIAL PROTECTION FOR REFUGEES AND FOREIGN NATIONALS

Abstract: The social protection of refugees and foreign nationals represents a field of major importance for contemporary public policies, being grounded in the principles of human rights, solidarity, and non-discrimination. This study examines the legal and institutional framework governing social protection for refugees and foreign nationals, with a particular focus on the regulations and practices implemented in the Republic of Moldova. The objective of the research is to analyze the applicable international and national legal norms, assess the mechanisms ensuring access to social benefits and services, and identify the main challenges encountered in the socio-economic integration process of the beneficiaries.

The findings of the research highlight the existence of a regulatory framework that guarantees refugees and other categories of foreign nationals access to essential forms of social protection, including social services, healthcare assistance, and integration measures. At the same time, the study reveals persistent challenges related to the effective implementation of these rights, stemming from institutional constraints, linguistic and informational barriers, as well as the need to strengthen coordination mechanisms among public authorities and other relevant stakeholders.

From a theoretical perspective, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of the social protection of refugees and foreign nationals within the context of international and Europe-

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an standards. From a practical perspective, the conclusions may serve as a basis for improving the legal framework and public policies aimed at enhancing social inclusion and fostering the sustainable integration of refugees and foreign nationals in the Republic of Moldova.

Keywords: social protection, refugees, foreign nationals, social integration, social rights.

PROTECȚIA SOCIALĂ A REFUGIAȚILOR ȘI A CETĂȚENILOR STRĂINI

Abstract: Protecția socială a refugiaților și persoanelor străine reprezintă un domeniu de importanță majoră pentru politicile publice contemporane, fiind fundamentată pe principiile drepturilor omului, solidarității și nediscriminării. Studiul examinează cadrul juridic și instituțional al protecției sociale acordate refugiaților și persoanelor străine, cu accent asupra reglementărilor și practicilor existente în Republica Moldova. Obiectivul cercetării constă în analiza normelor internaționale și naționale aplicabile, evaluarea mecanismelor de acces la prestații și servicii sociale, precum și identificarea principalelor dificultăți întâmpinate în procesul de integrare socio-economică a beneficiarilor.

Rezultatele cercetării evidențiază existența unui cadru normativ care garantează accesul refugiaților și al altor categorii de străini la forme esențiale de protecție socială, inclusiv servicii sociale, asistență medicală și măsuri de integrare. Totodată, studiul relevă persistența unor provocări legate de implementarea efectivă a acestor drepturi, determinate de constrângeri instituționale, bariere lingvistice și informaționale, precum și de necesitatea consolidării mecanismelor de coordonare între autoritățile publice și actorii implicați.

Din perspectivă teoretică, cercetarea contribuie la aprofundarea cunoașterii privind protecția socială a refugiaților și persoanelor străine în contextul standardelor internaționale și europene. Din perspectivă practică, concluziile formulate pot servi drept bază pentru perfecționarea cadrului normativ și a politicilor publice destinate consolidării incluziunii sociale și integrării durabile a refugiaților și persoanelor străine în Republica Moldova.

Cuvinte-cheie: protecție socială, refugiați, persoane străine, integrare socială, drepturi sociale.

1. INTRODUCTION.

Each historical period brings its own challenges and particularities. The twenty-first century is marked by the intensification of global migration processes generated by armed conflicts, political instability, economic disparities, environmental factors, and humanitarian crises. Consequently, millions of people are forced to leave their countries of origin not merely in pursuit of better living conditions, but primarily to escape threats to their lives, safety, and fundamental rights. These developments have increased the responsibility of states and the international community to establish effective legal and institutional mechanisms capable of ensuring protection and support for displaced persons.

Within this context, social protection has become a fundamental component of migration and asylum policies. Access to social services, healthcare, social assistance, employment opportunities, and integration measures significantly influences the ability of refugees and other foreign nationals to achieve social inclusion and contribute to the economic and social development of host communities. Therefore, social protection should be viewed not only as a humanitarian obligation but also as a strategic instrument for promoting social cohesion and sustainable development.

The subject of this research is the social protection of refugees and foreign nationals, while the object of the study consists of the legal norms, institutional mechanisms, and practical measures regulating access to social protection in the Republic of Moldova.

The relevance of the topic is determined by the increasing number of foreign nationals residing in the country, the challenges generated by mixed migration flows, and particularly by the consequences of the armed conflict in Ukraine, which have significantly transformed the national migration landscape.

From a conceptual perspective, it is necessary to distinguish between the principal categories of persons benefiting from international protection. A refugee is a person who, in accordance with the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and national legislation, has a well-founded fear of persecution and is unable or unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of their country of origin. Humanitarian or subsidiary protection is granted to persons who do not qualify as refugees but who would face a real risk of serious harm if returned to their country of origin. An asylum seeker is a person whose application for international protection is still under examination, while beneficiaries of international protection include both recognised refugees and persons granted subsidiary protection. More broadly, the term foreign national refers to any person who does not possess the citizenship of the host state.

The issue of refugee protection and migrants' social rights has attracted increasing attention in international and national legal doctrine. Numerous studies have examined the relationship between migration governance, human rights protection, and access to social security systems. International organisations, including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Organization for Migration, have highlighted the importance of inclusive social protection mechanisms for displaced populations. At the same time, research dedicated specifically to the Republic of Moldova remains relatively limited, particularly regarding the practical implementation of social protection rights for refugees and other categories of foreign nationals following the migration developments triggered by the war in Ukraine. This gap justifies the need for a comprehensive analysis of the national framework and its compatibility with international standards.

Migration to the Republic of Moldova has become an increasingly significant phenomenon. The country currently hosts foreign nationals originating from more than 130 countries and cultures. According to official records, by the end of 2024, more than 21,000 foreign nationals and stateless persons holding valid residence documents were registered in the Republic of Moldova. Moreover, the large-scale displacement caused by the war launched by the Russian Federation against Ukraine in February 2022 generated unprecedented pressure on national institutions responsible for asylum and social protection. These developments created new challenges regarding access to social services, healthcare, social assistance, and long-term integration measures for beneficiaries of international protection.

Against this background, the present study aims to identify the legal framework governing social protection for refugees and foreign nationals in the Republic of Moldova, assess its compatibility with international and European standards, analyse existing implementation challenges, and formulate recommendations for improving the effectiveness of social protection mechanisms.

Research hypothesis. The study is based on the hypothesis that although the Republic of Moldova has developed a legal framework broadly aligned with international and European standards concerning the social protection of refugees and foreign nationals, significant challenges remain in the practical implementation of these rights, af-

fecting the effective access of beneficiaries to social services and integration measures. Strengthening institutional capacity, inter-agency coordination, and inclusion policies could contribute to improving the effectiveness of the national social protection system.

2. METHODS AND MATERIALS APPLIED.

To achieve the proposed objectives, we will employ several research and analytical methods, including legal, comparative, and empirical analysis.

34 semi-structured interviews were conducted between July and October 2025: (a) 24 interviews with beneficiaries (displaced persons from Ukraine in the Republic of Moldova), (b) 10 interviews with key informants (officials/experts from public institutions and non-governmental organizations/humanitarian agencies). The selection was purposive, completed by “snowballing”, starting from contacts facilitated by local social assistance structures and partner organizations involved in the response. Inclusion criteria for category (a): age ≥ 18 years; relevant legal status (temporary protection or other form of stay/protection); effective residence in the Republic of Moldova in the last 3 months; availability of informed consent.

Vary	Category	Number
Gender	Women	17
	Men	7
Age group	18–29	5
	30–44	11
	45–59	6
	60+	2
Legal status at the time of the interview	Temporary protection	18
	Other residence/protection status (e.g. temporary residence, asylum procedure)	6

3. MAIN RESULTS.

The situation of refugees from Ukraine in the Republic of Moldova has, since 2022, triggered a significant mobilisation of national and international social protection mechanisms. According to data published by UNHCR, the Republic of Moldova has become one of the main countries of transit and stay for those displaced by the conflict, with over 127,000 Ukrainian refugees registered on its territory at the beginning of 2025¹. In parallel, UNHCR estimates indicate that since the onset of the crisis, more than two million people have passed through Moldova, while between 133,000 and 160,000 have remained in the country at various stages of the humanitarian response².

International regulatory framework

The social protection of refugees and foreigners is grounded in international legal instruments that establish binding standards for the international community. At their

¹ UNHCR. (2025a). Republic of Moldova – Operational Update (March 2025). United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, available: <https://www.unhcr.org>, accessed at: 16.01.2026.

² UNHCR. (2024a). UNHCR welcomes Norway's renewed support for refugees from Ukraine in Moldova, available: <https://www.unhcr.org>, accessed at: 16.01.2026.

core lies the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, together with the 1967 Protocol, which extends the applicability of the rights it sets out. The Convention includes relevant provisions regarding the socio-economic treatment of refugees, particularly those related to access to public assistance and relief (Art. 23), social security (Art. 24), as well as the right to education, housing, and employment – all of which directly intersect with social protection.³ The 1967 Protocol removed geographical and temporal limitations, making the protection regime universally applicable.

At UN level, the rights of refugees and foreigners are also regulated by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights⁴, which in Articles 22–25 provides that refugees, as members of society in the host state, are entitled to social security and have access to the economic, social, and cultural rights necessary for a dignified life. They have the right to work, to freely choose their occupation, and to fair working conditions, being protected against unemployment and wage discrimination. Refugees must also receive fair remuneration ensuring an adequate standard of living for themselves and their families, supplemented where necessary through social protection measures.

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights further elaborates states' obligations regarding the right to social security (Art. 9), health (Art. 12), education (Art. 13), and an adequate standard of living (Art. 11), all of which are directly relevant to refugees⁵. Moreover, although non-binding, the Global Compact on Refugees (2018)⁶ promotes expanding refugees' access to social services, contributory social protection systems, and national inclusion mechanisms.

The International Labour Organization has also played an important role in shaping social protection standards, through instruments such as ILO Convention No. 97⁷, ILO Convention No. 143 on migrant workers⁸, and Recommendation No. 202⁹ on social protection floors, promoting equal access to benefits, services, and non-discriminatory working conditions for all workers, including migrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers. UNHCR has likewise developed technical guidance for integrating refugees into national social protection systems, facilitating alignment with global practice.

In the Republic of Moldova, a complex normative framework on refugee protection has been developed and gradually integrated into national strategies for employment and social assistance.

National regulatory framework

Law No. 270/2008 on Asylum in Republic of Moldova¹⁰ regulates the status of refugees, asylum-seekers, and beneficiaries of international protection, granting access to fundamental rights such as education, healthcare, housing, and social services. The law places an obligation on the state to ensure adequate living conditions and access to so-

³ Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, concluded in Geneva on 28 July 1951.

⁴ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted on 10 December 1948.

⁵ International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, adopted on 16 December 1966.

⁶ Global Compact on Refugees (UNHCR), adopted on 17 December 2018.

⁷ ILO Convention No. 97 on Migration for Employment, adopted on 1 July 1949.

⁸ ILO Convention No. 143 on Migrant Workers – Provisions concerning Abuses in the Field of Migration and Equality of Opportunity and Treatment, adopted on 9 December 1978.

⁹ ILO Recommendation No. 202 on Social Protection Floors, adopted in 2012.

¹⁰ Law No. 270 of 18.12.2008 on Asylum in the Republic of Moldova. Published: 13.03.2009 in the Official Gazette No. 53–54.

cio-economic integration.

Law No. 274/2011 on the Integration of Foreigners in Republic of Moldova¹¹ guarantees the foreigners mentioned in Art. 2(1) access to the social assistance and social insurance system under the same conditions as Moldovan citizens.

The Law on the Public Social Insurance System¹² enables foreigners and refugees to be insured under similar conditions to citizens, subject to residency or employment criteria.

The **Law on Mandatory Health Insurance**¹³ stipulates that foreigners specified in Article 2 paragraph (1) letters a)-c) of Law No. 274/2011 on the Integration of Foreigners in the Republic of Moldova, beneficiaries of temporary protection and asylum seekers who are employed in the Republic of Moldova on the basis of an individual employment contract concluded under Moldovan legislation, foreigners holding the right of permanent residence in the Republic of Moldova, as well as beneficiaries of international protection, have the same rights and obligations regarding mandatory health insurance as citizens of the Republic of Moldova, in accordance with the legislation in force, unless otherwise provided by international treaties.

Foreigners who have been granted the right of temporary residence in the Republic of Moldova for the purpose of family reunification, studies, humanitarian, voluntary or religious activities, as well as those residing as digital nomads, are required to obtain health insurance individually by paying the mandatory health insurance premium, similar to citizens of the Republic of Moldova who pay the fixed-rate premium, unless otherwise provided by international treaties.

Social protection also includes access to public services and specific benefits, such as:

- Social assistance and cold-season support, granted on the basis of income assessment;
- Childcare allowances and family benefits;
- Local-level social services, including counselling, placement centres, and services for vulnerable persons;
- Comprehensive medical care for recognised refugees, and limited medical assistance for asylum seekers.

The institutional framework for providing social protection to refugees is ensured by a set of institutions: the Bureau for Migration and Asylum, responsible for legal status; the National Social Insurance House and the National Health Insurance Company, responsible for social and health insurance; the National Employment Agency, through the network of Territorial Labour Office Services, which facilitates access to the labour market; and local public authorities, which provide community-based services.

According to Government Decision No.21/2023 on granting temporary protection to displaced persons from Ukraine, as subsequently amended, several categories of social assistance measures are available to beneficiaries of temporary protection¹⁴:

¹¹ Law No. 274 of 27.12.2011 on the Integration of Foreigners in the Republic of Moldova. Published: 31.12.2020 in the Official Gazette No. 372–382.

¹² Law No. 489 of 08.07.1999 on the Public Social Insurance System. Published: 06.01.2000 in the Official Gazette No. 1–4.

¹³ Law No. 1585 of 27.02.1998 on Mandatory Health Insurance. Published: 30.04.1998 in the Official Gazette No. 38–39.

¹⁴ Government Decision No. 21/2023 on Granting Temporary Protection to Displaced Persons from Ukraine. Published: 26.01.2023 in the Official Gazette No. 21–22.

- they may access social assistance measures funded by international organisations, in accordance with the procedures and conditions jointly approved by the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection and the General Inspectorate for Migration under the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

- they may access financial assistance provided by international organisations, based on eligibility criteria jointly developed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection and the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

- they have access to cash assistance programmes offered by international organisations to support vulnerable persons during the cold season.

- families with children, as well as unaccompanied children, are provided with social assistance through the territorial social assistance agencies. They may benefit from this support, including financial aid, to prevent and/or overcome risk situations and ensure the child's upbringing and education within a family environment.

- they may access emergency medical care, primary healthcare services - including compensated medicines and medical devices - specialised outpatient medical care, and free medical examinations for public health reasons, within healthcare institutions, in accordance with the list of medical services established by the Ministry of Health.

Under these conditions, it becomes evident that refugees' access to social assistance programmes is restricted by the existing regulatory framework. Ukrainians who have applied for and been granted refugee status through the national asylum system enjoy more rights than beneficiaries of temporary protection, including access to social assistance programmes and the provision of medical care.

A central element of the social assistance offered to refugees is the multipurpose cash assistance (MPC) programmes. These programmes constitute the main form of socio-economic support provided to refugees in the Republic of Moldova, as they allow the coverage of essential needs, from food and transport to medicines, rent, or basic utilities. According to UNHCR data, as of 15 April 2022, approximately 18,000 Ukrainian refugees were already enrolled in the MPC programme and had received bank cards to access the assistance¹⁵. Subsequently, following the strengthening of partnerships between UNHCR, UNICEF and civil society organisations, the number of beneficiaries increased rapidly: by July 2022, more than 61,000 refugees were receiving monthly cash support.

Social assistance programmes continued in the subsequent years, adapting to the socio-economic context and the vulnerabilities identified. In 2024, UNHCR reported that 49,368 refugees directly benefited from cash assistance programmes, a figure that exceeded 52,000 beneficiaries by the end of the year within the support schemes designed to cover essential expenses¹⁶. Given that the total population of Ukrainian refugees in the Republic of Moldova during the same period was estimated at approximately 120,000 –130,000 persons, it follows that a significant proportion - roughly one-third to one-half - benefited from some form of social assistance through MPC mechanisms.

With regard to broader social services (accommodation, counselling, protection, healthcare, community support), the Regional Refugee Response Plan (RRP) for Moldova for 2025–2026 estimates that between 90,000 and 100,500 refugees will continue to ben-

¹⁵ UNHCR. (2022). Cash for Protection in Ukraine – Moldova Factsheet (15 April 2022). United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, available: <https://www.unhcr.org>, accessed at: 16.11.2025.

¹⁶ UNHCR. (2024b). Moldova – Cash Assistance Programme Update 2024. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. <https://www.unhcr.org>, accessed at: 18.11.2025

efit from such services, alongside vulnerable members of host communities¹⁷. These figures illustrate the scale of interventions in the field of social protection and the ongoing relevance of programmes coordinated by UNHCR, UN partners, and national authorities.

Comparative analysis

In order to situate the Moldovan model of temporary protection and social assistance within a broader European framework, a comparative perspective is necessary. Romania and Poland provide particularly relevant reference points, as both are European Union Member States implementing the Temporary Protection Directive activated in 2022 in response to the war in Ukraine. At the same time, they differ in scale, institutional capacity, and socio-economic positioning within the displacement geography of the region. Poland has functioned primarily as a major destination country hosting a large refugee population, while Romania represents a neighbouring state with structural and socio-economic characteristics closer to those of the Republic of Moldova.

The comparison allows for the examination of differences in legal design, financing structures, access to labour markets and social services, as well as the balance between nationally funded schemes and externally supported humanitarian mechanisms. The table below highlights key institutional and socio-economic indicators in order to assess the extent to which Moldova's mixed model - combining national regulatory responsibility with significant international financial support - differs from EU-based welfare integration models.

Romania and Poland are chosen because: (i) they are EU states that apply temporary protection based on the same European instrument activated in 2022; (ii) they have different roles in the geography of displacement (Poland the main destination state, Romania a neighboring state with a comparable regional socio-economic profile); (iii) they allow the assessment of design differences between integration into public schemes financed predominantly internally (EU) and the mixed model of the Republic of Moldova.¹⁸

Comparative table of key indicators

Indicator	Republic of Moldova	Romania	Poland
Main legal basis	National temporary protection regime (from 2023), extended until March 1, 2027	EU temporary protection activated in 2022 + national implementing acts	EU Temporary Protection activated in 2022 + "Special Law" for Ukrainian citizens
Duration and extension	Extended until March 1, 2027 (with extension/update mechanism)	Successive extensions of EU temporary protection	Successive extensions of EU temporary protection

¹⁷ UNHCR. (2024c). Regional Refugee Response Plan for Refugees from Ukraine 2025–2026 (Moldova Chapter). United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, available: <https://www.unhcr.org>, accessed at: 18.11.2025.

¹⁸ Council Directive 2001/55/EC of 20 July 2001 on Minimum Standards for Giving Temporary Protection in the Event of a Mass Influx of Displaced Persons and on Measures Promoting a Balance of Efforts Between Member States in Receiving Such Persons and Bearing the Consequences Thereof. (2001). Official Journal of the European Communities, available: <https://www.refworld.org/legal/reglegislation/council/2001/en/17729>, accessed at: 11.12.2025.

Access to work	Right to work without a special permit; services of the ANOFM	Rights of access to the labor market under temporary protection	Extended access to the labor market (special regime)
Health	Access to primary/emergency medical services (and related mechanisms)	Access to services, according to the national implementation regime	Access to health services, according to the special regime and the public system
Social assistance financed from the national budget	Predominantly through services (infrastructure, vulnerable cases), with budgetary constraints	Public support measures and services included in national plans	Public support measures and benefits, including family benefits and services
Externally funded social assistance	Explicit: access to measures/services funded by international organizations (including cash)	Complementary (RRP/partners), not the core of public services	Complementary (RRP/partners), but many services are internal
Multi-purpose cash transfers	Mostly through humanitarian actors; transfer value may be adjusted depending on funding	Variable public support transfers and programs; complementary humanitarian support	Transfers/benefits through public system; complementary humanitarian support
Managing the risk of asylum overcrowding	Special regime + digitalization for resource management and avoiding overload	EU temporary protection reduces pressure on asylum	EU temporary protection reduces pressure on asylum
Risks of exclusion	Digital/administrative barriers; vulnerabilities (childcare, language)	Administrative barriers; territorial differences	Administrative barriers; pressure on housing; local social tensions
Social cohesion	The need for inclusive programs for refugees and hosts, supported through partnerships	Cohesion programmes within the regional response	Signs of increasing tensions in 2025; need for cohesion programs

Table 1. Comparative indicators of temporary protection and social protection (Moldova vs Romania vs Poland).

The legal and policy sources for temporary protection in the EU and extensions are documented in the legal literature and European instruments, and for the Republic of Moldova, the practical functioning (work, access to services, the role of international funding) is reflected in official communications and operational guides.

Overall, the comparative overview demonstrates that while the Republic of Moldova has aligned its temporary protection framework with European standards in terms of access to work, basic health care, and protection mechanisms, its model differs significantly in financing structure and institutional capacity. Unlike Romania and Poland, where pub-

lic welfare systems represent the core mechanism of refugee integration, Moldova relies more heavily on externally funded humanitarian assistance, particularly in the area of multipurpose cash transfers. At the same time, all three states face common challenges related to administrative capacity, risks of social exclusion, and pressures on social cohesion. The comparison therefore highlights both Moldova's institutional adaptability and its structural vulnerabilities, underscoring the importance of strengthening sustainable, nationally financed integration mechanisms in the medium and long term.

4. DISCUSSION.

Overall, the data show that the Republic of Moldova has implemented a robust humanitarian response, particularly through cash-based social assistance, positioning it among the European countries with the highest number of MPC beneficiaries relative to the general population. They also indicate a consistent trend of expanding social services for Ukrainian refugees, both in the form of financial support and through integrated services in protection, health, and community assistance.

The social benefits provided by the state are essential for meeting basic needs, reducing protection-related risks, and supporting self-sufficiency. According to UNHCR's Rapid Socio-Economic Assessment¹⁹, approximately 15% of refugees are classified as extremely vulnerable due to multiple specific needs within their households.

However, in interviews conducted with Ukrainian refugees residing in the Republic of Moldova, many reported facing several difficulties when seeking social assistance.

Among these challenges are:

- a lack of information regarding the services available to Ukrainian refugees, as well as the eligibility criteria for these services;
- difficulties in identifying persons with special needs and persons with disabilities, either through early medical assessments or by social workers, as well as challenges in recognising disability certificates issued by the Ukrainian state;
- language barriers;
- long waiting times;
- lack of required documentation - refugees' access to social assistance programmes is restricted by the regulatory framework, meaning that Ukrainians who have applied for and been granted refugee status through the national asylum system have more rights than beneficiaries of temporary protection, including access to social assistance programmes and medical care;
- limited responsiveness of social assistance officers, particularly in localities far from the capital, who are not always receptive to the needs of refugees;
- discriminatory attitudes within the host society, with some locals perceiving refugees as being privileged compared to Moldovan citizens, even though local residents themselves face difficult socio-economic conditions.

Access to Education and Child Protection

Education is one of the most significant dimensions of social integration and long-term resilience for refugee populations, particularly children. In the Republic of Moldova, access to education for refugee children from Ukraine presents a complex and still

¹⁹ Implementation of Temporary Protection Granted on the Territory of the Republic of Moldova to Displaced Persons from Ukraine, available: https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2024-11/studiul_pt_progrese_2024redone_1.pdf, accessed at: 16.12.2025

largely unresolved challenge. Despite the efforts made by the Ministry of Education and Research, together with international partners under the Refugee Response Plan framework, the number of Ukrainian children formally enrolled in the Moldovan national education system remains strikingly low. As of mid-2024, only approximately 2,325 school-aged Ukrainian children were enrolled in Moldovan schools, including 727 in early education settings, out of an estimated 50,000 school-aged Ukrainian refugees residing in the country.²⁰

The dominant preference among refugee families is for Ukrainian online schooling, which allows children to maintain continuity with the Ukrainian curriculum and retain the prospect of re-integration into the Ukrainian education system upon return. While this preference is entirely understandable from the standpoint of identity and future planning, it carries serious risks for child development. Research conducted jointly by interagency partners indicates that children studying exclusively online report significant deficits in social interaction, reduced opportunities for language acquisition in Romanian, and increased feelings of isolation. This situation has direct implications not only for educational attainment but also for the mental and emotional wellbeing of children caught in protracted displacement. The Education Working Group, co-led by UNICEF and the Ministry of Education and Research, has been working to develop a roadmap for integrating refugee children more systematically into the formal Moldovan education system, including through bilingual classroom support and bridging programmes that acknowledge children's existing Ukrainian educational background.

Child protection has also emerged as a critical area of concern within the broader social protection framework. Partners operating under the Child Protection Sub-Sector Working Group have provided training to newly hired government child protection specialists and to Border Police staff, recognising that children in transit or entering Moldova unaccompanied are particularly vulnerable to trafficking, exploitation, and abuse. By mid-2024, 149 government child protection specialists and 77 Border Police officers had received such training, strengthening the capacity of national institutions to identify and respond to cases of children at risk. Nevertheless, the overall child protection system remains fragile and under pressure, as the demand for services has grown substantially while available human and financial resources have not kept pace. The absence of a unified tracking mechanism for children enrolled in online Ukrainian schooling further complicates efforts to monitor their wellbeing, leaving a significant gap in the system's ability to detect and address early warning signs of vulnerability.

Labour Market Integration

Access to the labour market is among the most important instruments through which refugees can achieve economic self-reliance and gradually reduce their dependence on humanitarian assistance. In the Republic of Moldova, refugees with temporary protection status and other legal statuses are formally entitled to work without requiring a separate work permit, and the National Employment Agency operates Territorial Labour Office Services that offer support in employment matching. Despite this legal provision, actual labour market integration of Ukrainian refugees remains limited. According to data from the Socio-Economic Insights Survey (SEIS) conducted by UNHCR in partnership

²⁰ Ukraine Situation – Moldova: Inter-Agency Operational Update Q2, ReliefWeb, 13 September 2024, available: <https://reliefweb.int/report/moldova/ukraine-situation-moldova-inter-agency-operational-update-q2-13-sept-2024>, accessed at: 20.01.2026.

with REACH in 2024, the employment rate among working-age refugees stood at approximately 21%, placing Moldova in the middle range among European countries hosting Ukrainian refugees.²¹

Several structural factors explain this relatively low employment rate. First, the demographic profile of refugees in Moldova is distinct from that of other host countries: Moldova hosts a higher proportion of elderly refugees than elsewhere in Europe, with approximately 13.6% aged 60 or over, and only 61.4% of refugees are of working age between 18 and 60. This demographic composition, combined with the fact that the majority of refugees are women – many of whom carry disproportionate caregiving responsibilities for children and elderly family members – significantly constrains labour market participation. Second, the language barrier is a persistent obstacle: proficiency in Romanian is widely regarded by Moldovan employers as a prerequisite for employment, yet many refugees have limited knowledge of the language. Third, there is a notable mismatch between the skills and professional backgrounds of refugees – many of whom hold higher education qualifications and seek positions in professional or managerial sectors – and the predominantly low-skill, manual labour opportunities that Moldova's economy tends to offer. Fourth, refugees often prefer flexible, part-time, or remote employment arrangements in order to manage caregiving duties, while Moldovan employers generally prefer more traditional and fixed working conditions.

Among refugees who are employed, wages tend to fall well below the national average. According to SEIS 2024 findings, refugee households earn significantly less than the Moldovan host population, with both groups earning below Moldova's 2024 average net salary of 13,000 MDL per month, a figure that itself reflects a labour market shaped by widespread informality, underreporting of incomes, and predominantly low-skill occupations. The consequence is that, for more than half of refugee households, multi-purpose cash assistance from UNHCR and partner organisations remains the primary source of household income – a situation that points to both the inadequacy of current employment integration pathways and the risks posed by the gradual reduction of humanitarian funding. Legal constraints specific to temporary protection status further compound the problem: current legislation does not fully extend access to national health insurance, social assistance programmes, and self-employment opportunities to temporary protection holders, limiting their ability to transition from humanitarian dependency toward economic self-sufficiency.²²

Housing, Accommodation and Socio-Spatial Integration

Adequate and affordable housing represents one of the most pressing unmet needs identified by Ukrainian refugees in Moldova. In the early phase of the crisis, the government, in coordination with UNHCR and humanitarian partners, established a network of Refugee Accommodation Centres (RACs) providing free collective shelter. These centres offered an immediate solution for the most vulnerable arrivals, including unaccompanied minors, elderly persons, and people with disabilities. However, as the crisis has become increasingly protracted, pressure on these facilities has grown, while many refugees who

²¹ UNHCR / REACH. (2024). Republic of Moldova: Socio-Economic Insights Survey (SEIS) 2024. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, available: <https://reliefweb.int/report/moldova/republic-moldova-socio-economic-insights-survey-2024-december-2024>, accessed at: 22.01.2026.

²² Ukraine Situation Regional Refugee Response Plan 2025–2026, Moldova Chapter (UNHCR), available: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/120717>, accessed at: 22.01.2026.

had initially found private accommodation have exhausted their savings and face mounting housing insecurity.

The Moldovan rental market, particularly in Chisinau, has come under considerable strain as a result of the refugee influx, with rents rising in a context where refugees' purchasing power and access to income remain limited. The Regional Refugee Response Plan for 2025–2026 explicitly identifies affordable housing as one of the most significant structural gaps in the protection architecture, alongside long-term healthcare access. The Basic Needs Working Group has worked closely with the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection to manage the consolidation of accommodation facilities in a manner that does not disadvantage the most at-risk persons. Nevertheless, gaps remain significant: a substantial proportion of refugees living in private rented accommodation report severe housing cost burden, and a meaningful share of households spend the majority of their income on rent, food, and healthcare combined – leaving virtually no margin for savings, investments in integration, or emergency preparedness.²³

Mental Health and Psychosocial Support

The psychological dimension of displacement is frequently underestimated in policy discussions that focus predominantly on legal status, financial assistance, and access to tangible services. Yet the evidence gathered through successive surveys in Moldova points to a significant and growing mental health burden among the refugee population. According to the SEIS 2024 findings, approximately 21% of refugee household members reported experiencing emotional distress that affected their daily functioning and quality of life. However, only 36% of those experiencing such distress had been able to access any form of mental health or psychosocial support (MHPSS) services – revealing a substantial gap between need and provision.²⁴

These numbers are not surprising given the cumulative trauma experienced by persons who have fled active armed conflict, often losing family members, homes, and livelihoods, and who continue to live in a state of profound uncertainty about when and whether safe return will become possible. The problem is compounded by the pre-existing structural weaknesses of Moldova's mental health system, which was already underfunded and under-resourced before the onset of the crisis, and which now serves a substantially larger and more complex patient population. UNHCR and its partners have sought to address this gap through community-based psychosocial support activities, child-friendly spaces, and capacity-building programmes targeting health workers. Organisations such as Project HOPE, operating through the Moldova Project, established nine child-friendly safe spaces that served over 9,000 Ukrainian refugees and host community members between 2022 and 2025. The 2025–2026 Regional Refugee Response Plan explicitly commits to aligning MHPSS interventions with Moldova's National Mental Health Programme 2023–2027, recognising that sustainable solutions must be built on national systems rather than remaining wholly dependent on humanitarian project cycles.

²³ Ukraine Situation Regional Refugee Response Plan 2025–2026, Moldova Chapter (UNHCR), available: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/120717>, accessed at: 22.01.2026; REACH, Rental Market Assessment, January 2024.

²⁴ UNHCR / REACH. (2024). Republic of Moldova: Socio-Economic Insights Survey (SEIS) 2024, available: <https://reliefweb.int/report/moldova/republic-moldova-socio-economic-insights-survey-2024-december-2024>, accessed at: 22.01.2026.

Economic Contribution of Refugees and the Question of Mutual Benefit

A dimension that deserves greater prominence in academic and policy discussions is the economic contribution that refugees make to Moldovan society. Public discourse in Moldova — as in many other host countries — often frames the presence of refugees primarily in terms of costs and burdens. This framing overlooks a more nuanced picture. According to UNHCR data published in February 2026, since 2022 Ukrainian refugees residing in Moldova have contributed over MDL 1.6 billion to the national economy through taxes paid and social insurance contributions made.²⁵

This figure is particularly notable given the structural barriers to formal employment that refugees face and the fact that many of those who do work are concentrated in lower-wage sectors. It suggests that, even under conditions of significant disadvantage, refugees make a tangible contribution to state revenues and to the social insurance system. As Moldova faces its own demographic pressures — including an ageing population, high emigration of working-age citizens, and a shrinking domestic labour force — the potential for refugees with diverse skills and professional backgrounds to contribute to economic development becomes increasingly relevant. The International Labour Organization has recognised this potential in its Decent Work Country Programme for Moldova, emphasising that inclusive employment policies benefiting both refugees and vulnerable Moldovan workers can simultaneously address structural labour market challenges and strengthen social cohesion. This perspective transforms the refugee question from a purely humanitarian problem into a development opportunity, provided that integration pathways are designed to allow refugees to work to their actual capacity rather than being confined to the informal economy.

Funding Sustainability and the Transition from Humanitarian to Development Approaches

Perhaps the most structurally significant challenge confronting the Moldovan social protection system is the question of funding sustainability. Between 2022 and 2025, the Republic of Moldova received over USD 785 million in international support to manage the consequences of the Ukrainian refugee crisis — a sum that, while remarkable in absolute terms, represents a per capita burden that is proportionally far greater than that borne by larger and wealthier European states.²⁶ However, international funding has been declining. The Moldova Refugee Response Plan received USD 243 million against a requested USD 425 million in 2023, and the trajectory for subsequent years points toward further reductions, with USD 206 million requested for 2025 and a projected USD 159 million for 2026. This declining resource environment has already had observable consequences: several international non-governmental organisations have closed their operations in Moldova, and a number of assistance programmes have been scaled back or discontinued. More than half of refugee households continue to depend on multi-purpose cash assistance as their primary income source, making them acutely exposed to the effects of funding reductions.

²⁵ UNHCR. (2026). Four Years Since the Full-Scale Invasion: Refugees from Ukraine in Moldova Still Need Protection and Support. Press Release, 24 February 2026, available: <https://www.unhcr.org/md/en/news/press-releases/four-years-full-scale-invasion-refugees-ukraine-moldova-still-need-protection/>, accessed at: 01.03.2026.

²⁶ UNHCR. (2026). Four Years Since the Full-Scale Invasion: Refugees from Ukraine in Moldova Still Need Protection and Support. Press Release, 24 February 2026, available: <https://www.unhcr.org/md/en/news/press-releases/four-years-full-scale-invasion-refugees-ukraine-moldova-still-need-protection/>, accessed at: 01.03.2026.

The recognition of this structural vulnerability has prompted a strategic reorientation in how the refugee response in Moldova is conceptualised. The Government of Moldova, with the support of UNHCR and other development partners including the World Bank and the European Union, has developed a Mechanism for the Phased Integration of Foreigners, embedded within the National Development Plan for 2025–2027. This mechanism represents a deliberate shift from a predominantly humanitarian mode of response toward a development-oriented model in which refugees are progressively included in national social protection systems, public services, and economic frameworks rather than being managed through parallel, externally financed structures. The mechanism provides a structured framework for coordination, outlining specific steps and timelines for integrating refugees into national systems, and serving as a blueprint for joint planning between humanitarian and development actors. Whether this transition can be accomplished within the time and resource constraints available – and without creating protection gaps for the most vulnerable – remains one of the central questions for Moldovan social protection policy in the coming years.²⁷

Social Cohesion: Solidarity Under Pressure

Social cohesion between refugee and host communities is both a precondition for and an outcome of effective social protection. In Moldova, public attitudes toward refugees from Ukraine have been broadly supportive: survey data from 2024 indicates that approximately 72% of Moldovans stated they would accept Ukrainians as neighbours. The government's response has also been praised internationally as one of the most humane and well-coordinated among smaller states facing a disproportionate refugee burden. However, the same survey data reveal that acceptance is not uniform. It varies significantly by region, political affiliation, and the extent to which communities have themselves been affected by the economic strain of the crisis. In particular, residents of areas where humanitarian assistance for Ukrainians has been most visibly concentrated tend to hold more positive attitudes, while populations in other areas – including some rural communities facing their own poverty and service deficits – can harbour resentments rooted in perceptions of unequal treatment.²⁸

As the situation becomes increasingly protracted and the initial solidarity of the emergency phase gradually fades, sustaining social cohesion requires deliberate and sustained investment. The 2025–2026 Regional Refugee Response Plan identifies social cohesion as one of its three strategic objectives, committing partners to support community-led activities, inter-community dialogue, sports and cultural events, and youth entrepreneurship programmes that create common spaces and shared experiences for refugees and Moldovans alike. Special attention is paid to the integration challenges of minority groups within the refugee population, including Roma refugees from Ukraine, who face compounded forms of marginalisation based on both their refugee status and their ethnic identity. Regional dialogues on the protection and inclusion of Roma refugees have been convened, providing a platform for exchanges between Roma communities,

²⁷ Ukraine Situation Regional Refugee Response Plan 2025–2026, Moldova Chapter (UNHCR), available: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/120717>, accessed at: 22.01.2026; Government of Moldova, National Development Plan 2025–2027, Mechanism for the Phased Integration of Foreigners.

²⁸ Migration Policy Institute. (2025). Moldova Shoulders Disproportionately Large Ukrainian Population, in the Shadow of the European Union and Russia, December 2025, available: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/moldova-ukrainian-refugees>, accessed at: 25.01.2026.

civil society, and national authorities. The principle underpinning these efforts is that social protection and social cohesion are mutually reinforcing: a community that feels included and respected is more likely to support the presence and rights of newcomers, while refugees who feel welcomed and integrated are more likely to contribute positively to the social fabric of the host community.²⁹

5. CONCLUSION.

The social protection of refugees and foreign nationals represents not only a legal obligation derived from international treaties and national legislation, but also a moral and strategic responsibility of the host state. An analysis of the normative, institutional, and practical framework of the Republic of Moldova reveals significant progress in integrating international standards, as well as in developing national mechanisms adapted to recent realities, particularly those generated by the Ukrainian refugee crisis. Nevertheless, the persistence of certain gaps – differences in treatment between various legal statuses, limitations in accessing social benefits, bureaucracy, lack of information, language barriers, and discriminatory attitudes – indicates the need to strengthen the system and improve coordination among the institutions involved.

In this context, a comprehensive and forward-looking approach is required, one that aims both to streamline administrative instruments and to reinforce social inclusion. It is essential to continue the harmonisation of the legal framework so that all categories of beneficiaries of international protection and other forms of legal residence enjoy more equal access to social benefits and essential services. At the same time, interinstitutional cooperation must be enhanced through clear information-sharing mechanisms, uniform procedures, and periodic training for officials in order to avoid divergent interpretations and administrative bottlenecks.

Socio-economic integration should be viewed as a strategic investment in the cohesion and development of society, involving not only the state but also the private sector, international organisations, and local communities. Simplifying administrative procedures, digitalising services, and creating accessible information platforms in multiple languages can significantly reduce the vulnerabilities experienced by refugees. Meanwhile, local communities and employers should be encouraged to play an active role in refugee integration through support programmes, awareness-raising campaigns, and public-private partnerships.

Ultimately, the Republic of Moldova has the capacity to develop a sustainable model of integration and social protection, consistent with its European aspirations and its international commitments. Strengthening the legal framework, improving interinstitutional cooperation, enhancing integration programmes, reducing bureaucracy, and engaging communities are necessary steps towards transforming the current system into one that is inclusive, equitable, and grounded in respect for human dignity. Through the implementation of these measures, social protection for refugees can become not merely an assistance mechanism, but a tool for sustainable social and economic development benefiting both foreign nationals and Moldovan society as a whole.

²⁹ Ukraine Situation Regional Refugee Response Plan 2025–2026, Moldova Chapter (UNHCR); UNHCR Moldova Fact Sheet, September 2024, available: <https://reliefweb.int/report/moldova/unhcr-moldova-fact-sheet-september-2024>, accessed at: 22.01.2026.

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