ISRICM-EU

Innovative Solutions for Refugee Integration and Crisis Mitigation in EU Member States

A003.013 Good practices research

Research Report
Good Practices and Social Innovations in Refugee Integration: The Case of Bulgaria (Focus on Ruse Region)

ISRICM-EU: Innovative Approaches to Mitigate the Societal Consequences of Russia's War of Aggression Against Ukraine within EU countries
ESF-SI-2024-UA-01-0006

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I. Introduction

1. General Context

The war in Ukraine has generated the largest refugee crisis in Europe since the Second World War, reshaping migration patterns and testing the capacity of host states. Millions of people—primarily women, children, and the elderly—have fled to EU countries, requiring rapid adaptation of housing, education, labour, and health systems. Bulgaria, though not a top destination, has emerged as both a **transit and host country** due to its proximity to Romania and Ukraine. Since 2022, over **250,000 Ukrainians** have entered Bulgaria under the EU Temporary Protection mechanism[1], gaining access to residence, education, healthcare, and employment. However, limited resources and social infrastructure make balancing emergency relief with sustainable integration especially challenging.

Within this context, the **Ruse region** plays a pivotal role. As a Danube border city connected to Romania, Ruse is one of the main entry points for refugees. Beyond being a transit hub, it has hosted thousands of arrivals, supported by municipal authorities, NGOs, and international organisations. This makes Ruse an important **case study** for analysing how national policies are implemented locally and how community initiatives contribute to integration.

2. Key Demographic Data

Demographic patterns illustrate the vulnerability of the refugee population. Approximately **87% are women and children**, reflecting restrictions on male conscription-age Ukrainians leaving the country. This results in high numbers of single-parent households and children requiring immediate schooling, healthcare, and psychosocial support. Unaccompanied minors and children with disabilities add further complexity, demanding specialised services. Such characteristics highlight the need for **tailored integration policies** in Bulgaria.

3. Main Challenges for Bulgaria

The refugee influx has exposed weaknesses in Bulgaria's systems:

[1] The EU Temporary Protection Directive (2001/55/EC) establishes minimum standards for giving immediate protection in the event of a mass influx of displaced persons, granting residence rights, access to the labor market, housing, healthcare, and education.

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- **Housing**: State support is restricted to **60 days** unless refugees are considered vulnerable, creating risks of instability and homelessness. Strict municipal criteria (e.g., five-year residency) further limit access.
- **Labour market**: While legal access is guaranteed, barriers include language, non-recognition of Ukrainian qualifications, and bureaucratic hurdles, often leading to underemployment.
- **Education**: As of November 2023, **3,786 refugee children** were enrolled in Bulgarian schools, yet many depend on online Ukrainian education. Language support and special-needs assistance remain insufficient.
- **Healthcare**: Although formally accessible, refugees face long waiting times, costs for medicines, and limited mental health services. **23% report psychosocial issues**, with only 46% seeking help.
- **Social inclusion**: Fragmented policies and lack of coordination increase risks of marginalisation, particularly for women with childcare responsibilities and youth without training opportunities.

4. Objectives of the Research

This study addresses these challenges through four objectives, each linked to the thematic chapters:

1. **Analyse housing policies and innovations** (Chapter II), comparing Bulgarian schemes with EU good practices such as *Startblok* (Netherlands), *CURANT* (Belgium), and *Curing the Limbo* (Greece).
2. **Assess integration in Ruse** (Chapter VIII), focusing on entry dynamics, Blue Dot centres, and the Local Anti-Trafficking Commission.
3. **Identify transferable good practices** (Chapters II & V), including European housing, education, and child-protection models.
4. **Provide operational recommendations** (Chapter X), supported by evaluation indicators (Chapter IX), with targets such as **three evaluation sessions** and **80% stakeholder satisfaction**.

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5. Methodology

The methodology of this research combines both quantitative and qualitative approaches in order to ensure a comprehensive understanding of refugee integration in Bulgaria, with a focus on the municipality of Ruse. It draws upon multiple data sources and comparative case studies, while also incorporating evaluation mechanisms that allow for both statistical analysis and stakeholder perspectives.

5.1 Desk research: international, national, and local sources

The first methodological step consisted of desk research. A wide range of documents and reports were consulted, including publications by **UNHCR, UNICEF, and the European Commission**, as well as Bulgarian government strategies and assessments conducted by **non-governmental organisations** such as Caritas, the Bulgarian Red Cross, and the Foundation for Access to Rights (FAR). These sources provided the baseline for analysing housing policies, labour market access, healthcare provision, and educational integration.

5.2 Comparative analysis with other EU countries

The second component of the methodology is comparative analysis. Given that Bulgaria is not alone in responding to Ukrainian displacement, this study examines integration practices in selected EU countries, namely the **Netherlands, Belgium, Austria, and Greece**. These cases were chosen because they showcase **innovative housing and social integration models**—such as *Startblok Riekerhaven* (Netherlands), *CURANT* (Belgium), *Globaler Hof* (Austria), and *Curing the Limbo* (Greece)—which offer potential lessons for Bulgaria. The comparative approach enables the identification of transferable practices that may help address structural challenges at both national and municipal levels.

5.3 Quantitative indicators

Quantitative data have been collected and analysed to measure the scale and effectiveness of integration measures.

- **Three evaluation sessions** are conducted during the course of the project, providing numerical evidence of progress across key areas.
- **Data on education, employment, health, and housing** is systematically monitored, including enrolment rates of refugee children in schools, labour market participation, access to healthcare services, and stability of accommodation. These indicators allow for a measurable assessment of policy effectiveness.

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5.4 Qualitative indicators

Quantitative data are complemented by qualitative methods, which capture the lived experiences of refugees and the perceptions of stakeholders.

- **Stakeholder feedback**, including from NGOs, municipal authorities, and service providers from Ruse region is systematically collected, with the target of achieving at least **80 percent satisfaction** regarding integration programmes.
- **Interviews and focus groups with refugees** is further enrich the analysis, ensuring that the perspectives of women, children, and vulnerable groups are included. This approach allows the study to go beyond statistics and provide a nuanced understanding of social integration processes.

6. Structure of the Report

The report is organised into ten chapters, each addressing a specific dimension of refugee integration. The structure follows a logical progression, beginning with housing—often the first and most urgent need for displaced populations—and moving through employment, health, education, rights, humanitarian support, and local case studies, before concluding with evaluation and policy recommendations. This organisation ensures both thematic depth and coherence, linking the Bulgarian experience with broader European good practices.

Chapter II: Housing policies and social innovations

This chapter examines the Bulgarian state accommodation programme, municipal housing policies, and the challenges of accessing private rental markets. It also analyses European good practices, such as co-housing models in the Netherlands and Belgium, and discusses their applicability to the Bulgarian context, with a focus on Ruse.

Chapter III: Labour rights and employment

This section explores refugees' access to the labour market under temporary protection, the role of employment services, and obstacles such as language and qualification recognition. It incorporates findings from EU labour rights reports and highlights NGO initiatives that support entrepreneurship and skills development.

Chapter IV: Health and wellbeing

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The chapter reviews healthcare access for refugees, with particular attention to vulnerable groups such as children, the elderly, and persons with chronic illnesses. It discusses barriers such as cost, language, and waiting times, and integrates data showing that **23 percent of refugees report psychosocial problems**, with only 46 percent seeking help.

Chapter V: Education of children and youth

This part assesses school enrolment trends, noting that **3,786 Ukrainian children were enrolled in Bulgarian schools as of November 2023**, and identifies challenges in language acquisition and special-needs support. It also draws on the 2024 UNHCR participatory assessment and the EU Practitioners' Handbook on unaccompanied minors to highlight innovative approaches.

Chapter VI: Rights, status, and inclusion

The chapter analyses the legal framework for refugee protection in Bulgaria and reviews the role of NGOs such as Caritas, the Bulgarian Red Cross, and FAR in supporting social inclusion. It examines issues of legal assistance, rights awareness, and gender equality.

Chapter VII: Humanitarian support and vulnerable groups

This section focuses on services provided to particularly vulnerable groups, including women, children, unaccompanied minors, the elderly, and persons with disabilities. It discusses humanitarian programmes, social protection measures, and the role of community volunteers.

Chapter VIII: Local integration factors (Ruse)

Here, the case study of Ruse is presented. As a major entry hub, Ruse illustrates both the strengths and limitations of Bulgaria's refugee response. The chapter highlights the presence of Blue Dot centres, the Local Anti-Trafficking Commission, and municipal housing policies, showing how national frameworks translate into local realities.

Chapter IX: Evaluation and indicators

This chapter presents the mixed-method evaluation framework. It outlines the quantitative indicators—such as school enrolment rates and housing stability—as well as qualitative measures, including stakeholder feedback and refugee testimonies.

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Chapter X: Conclusions and recommendations

The final chapter synthesises findings and proposes actionable recommendations. These include extending housing support, simplifying labour market entry, improving access to healthcare and psychosocial services, and strengthening educational integration. Recommendations are linked to specific indicators, ensuring accountability and applicability at both national and municipal levels.

II. Housing Policies and Social Innovations

1. Introduction to Housing as a Key Dimension of Integration

Housing is universally recognised as the foundation of successful refugee integration. Without stable accommodation, access to education, employment, and healthcare becomes fragmented and precarious. In Bulgaria, the refugee housing challenge has been shaped by both short-term emergency programmes and the lack of sustainable long-term solutions. This chapter analyses the Bulgarian housing system for refugees, explores its limitations, and examines innovative practices—both national and European—that can inform future strategies.

2. The State Accommodation Programme

2.1 Evolution of the programme

In the immediate aftermath of the war in Ukraine, Bulgaria established a hotel-based accommodation scheme, funded through the EU Temporary Protection mechanism. Initially generous, it covered food and shelter for all refugees. However, reforms introduced in **May 2025** significantly restricted the scheme: support is now limited to **60 days**, except for those classified as vulnerable [2](pregnant women, children under 12, unaccompanied minors, the elderly, and persons with disabilities or chronic illnesses).

2.2 Cost implications

After the 60-day period, refugees must either cover housing costs themselves or relocate. Daily rates range from **16.43 to 19.72 BGN (apx. 10 euro) per person**, which for many families is unsustainable given the limited labour market opportunities (see Chapter III). This creates a risk of secondary displacement or homelessness.

[2] Vulnerable groups are defined under Bulgarian regulations as pregnant women, children under 12, unaccompanied minors, elderly persons, and individuals with disabilities or chronic illnesses.

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3. Access to Private Rental Markets

3.1 Legal framework

Refugees with temporary protection have the same rights as Bulgarian citizens to rent private housing. Contracts must be written, signed in duplicate, and registered with the municipality, allowing for address registration—a requirement to access services.

3.2 Barriers to access

Despite equal rights in theory, practical barriers persist:

- **Affordability**: upfront costs include a deposit plus one month's rent in advance.
- **Discrimination**: some landlords are reluctant to rent to refugees.
- **Bureaucracy**: address registration requires the landlord's cooperation.
- **Instability**: short-term leases undermine long-term security.

4. Municipal Housing Policies in target region - Ruse, Bulgaria

4.1 Eligibility requirements

Municipal housing exists in principle but is highly restrictive. In **Ruse**, for example, applicants must demonstrate at least **five years of continuous residence** in the municipality. Such criteria automatically exclude newly arrived refugees, making municipal housing effectively inaccessible.

4.2 Local disparities

Housing policies vary across municipalities, but the pattern of exclusion is consistent. This highlights the need for legal reforms or targeted refugee-specific programmes to bridge the gap.

5. Social Innovations and Good Practices

International examples demonstrate how housing can be a driver of integration rather than a barrier:

- **Startblok Riekerhaven (Netherlands)**: Co-housing project where young locals and young refugees share housing, with emphasis on peer-to-peer support.
- **CURANT Project (Belgium)**: Unaccompanied refugee minors live with local "buddies," combining housing with mentorship.
- **Globaler Hof (Austria)**: Social housing integrated with multicultural neighbourhood initiatives.

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- **Curing the Limbo (Greece)**: Provides affordable housing to refugees in exchange for community service, linking accommodation with civic engagement.
- **Dupnica (Bulgaria)**: Local project combining urban renewal with social housing and integration activities—an example of how Bulgarian municipalities can pilot innovative approaches.

These practices illustrate the potential of **co-housing, mentorship models, and community-based housing** to address both accommodation and integration simultaneously.

6. Challenges and Gaps

Despite these lessons, Bulgaria's housing landscape for refugees is marked by:

- Short-termism (60-day limit).
- Lack of dedicated refugee access to municipal housing.
- Insufficient collaboration between state authorities and NGOs.
- Overreliance on emergency hotel accommodation, which is costly and unsustainable.

7. Implications for Other Policy Areas

The housing issue is deeply interconnected with other dimensions analysed in this report:

- **Employment (Chapter III)**: Without stable housing, access to the labour market is precarious.
- **Health (Chapter IV)**: Frequent relocations disrupt access to healthcare providers.
- **Education (Chapter V)**: Housing instability undermines children's ability to attend school regularly.
- **Social inclusion (Chapter VI)**: Segregated or temporary housing hinders community-building and long-term integration.

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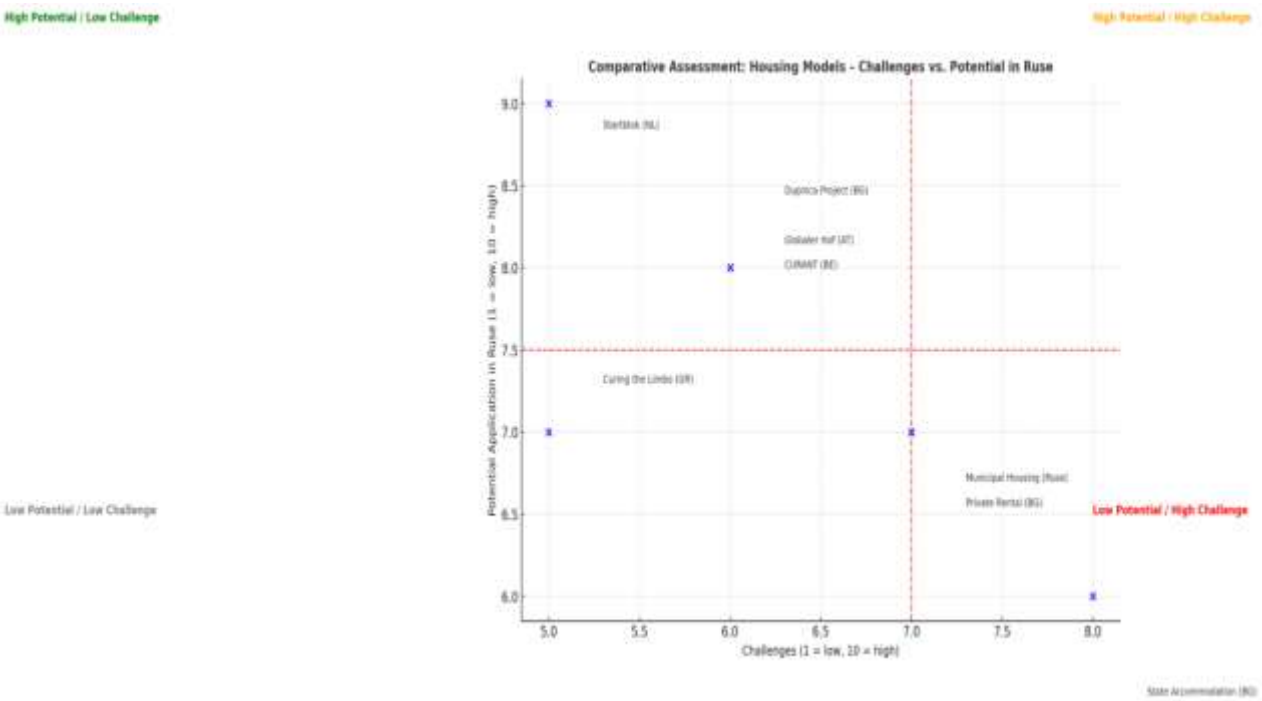
8. Towards Sustainable Housing Policies in Bulgaria

Addressing the housing challenge requires moving from emergency response to sustainable strategies. Recommendations include:

- Expanding eligibility for municipal housing or introducing refugee-specific criteria.
- Incentivising landlords through subsidies or guarantees to reduce discrimination.
- Piloting **co-housing projects** in urban centres like Ruse, combining accommodation with mentorship and community engagement.
- Strengthening NGO–municipal partnerships for housing management.
- Learning from European models to design context-sensitive, cost-effective solutions.



Interpretation of the Comparative Graph created for Ruse target region

The graph provides a comparative assessment of housing models, positioned according to their **level of challenges** (X-axis) and **potential for application in Ruse** (Y-axis). The four quadrants allow for a quick visual classification:

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- **High Potential / Low Challenge (green quadrant)**
  Models located here represent the most promising options for Ruse. For example, *Dupnica's urban renewal project* illustrates how Bulgarian municipalities can integrate social housing with community development. Its relatively low level of implementation challenges, combined with strong potential for replication, makes it highly relevant.

- **High Potential / High Challenge (orange quadrant)**
  This quadrant includes innovative models such as *Startblok Riekerhaven* (Netherlands) and *CURANT* (Belgium). Both have significant transformative potential, particularly in engaging youth and combining housing with mentorship. However, they require substantial resources, institutional commitment, and cultural adaptation to succeed in the Bulgarian context.

- **Low Potential / Low Challenge (grey quadrant)**
  These models are less strategic for Ruse. While they may be easier to implement, their overall impact on long-term integration is limited. For example, maintaining short-term hotel accommodation may solve immediate needs but does not create pathways to stability or community inclusion.

- **Low Potential / High Challenge (red quadrant)**
  This quadrant signals models that combine heavy implementation barriers with limited potential impact. Strict municipal housing schemes, such as the current five-year residency requirement in Ruse, fall into this category. They are difficult to access for refugees and provide little support for integration.

Key insight:
The analysis shows that Ruse would benefit most from **adapting innovative yet feasible models**—particularly the Dupnica pilot within Bulgaria and elements of European co-housing initiatives. These approaches can reduce housing insecurity, strengthen community ties, and serve as a foundation for integration in employment, education, and health.

III. Labour Rights and Employment

1. Introduction

Access to the labour market is a central element of refugee integration. Employment not only provides financial independence but also fosters social inclusion, language acquisition, and personal dignity. In Bulgaria, refugees under the **EU Temporary Protection Directive** are granted the right to work without a permit, placing the

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country in line with European standards. Nevertheless, structural and practical barriers continue to limit their participation, resulting in underemployment and economic vulnerability.

2. Legal Framework and Rights

2.1 Access to employment under temporary protection

Ukrainian refugees in Bulgaria benefit from automatic access to the labour market. They are not required to obtain additional work permits, which in theory allows them to enter employment under the same conditions as Bulgarian citizens. Registration with the **Labour Bureau** provides access to vacancies, vocational training, and counselling.

2.2 Limitations of benefits

Although access is guaranteed, social protections are conditional. For example, unemployment benefits are available only to those who have been registered at the Labour Bureau for **nine consecutive months** without refusing a job offer. Refugees who decline employment proposals are deregistered for six months, reducing their social security and employment prospects.

3. Barriers to Labour Market Integration

3.1 Language requirements

The Bulgarian language remains the primary obstacle. The majority of employers demand fluency, which newly arrived refugees lack. Language courses are available but often insufficient in scale and duration.

3.2 Recognition of qualifications

Professional diplomas and skills acquired in Ukraine are not always recognised. This forces many skilled professionals into low-wage or informal jobs, resulting in a significant “brain waste.”

3.3 Bureaucratic and structural challenges

Despite legal access, administrative procedures can be slow and complex. Refugees often face difficulties in navigating paperwork, opening bank accounts, or understanding contractual obligations.

3.4 Gendered barriers

Given that **87% of refugees are women and children**, many female refugees face additional obstacles such as childcare responsibilities, lack of childcare services, and higher risks of workplace discrimination.

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4. Current Employment Trends

According to surveys by NGOs and EU institutions:

- A growing number of refugees have registered with Labour Bureaus, but actual employment rates remain lower than among the host population.
- Many employed refugees are concentrated in **low-skilled sectors** such as hospitality, retail, or seasonal agriculture.
- Employment contracts are often short-term, reflecting insecurity and limited upward mobility.

5. Good Practices and Social Innovations

Several initiatives, both in Bulgaria and abroad, offer models for overcoming barriers:

- **On-the-job training and employer-supported language courses**: Some Bulgarian companies have begun offering tailored programmes that combine work with Bulgarian language learning.
- **Entrepreneurship support**: NGOs such as *https://refugee.bg/* provide guidance for refugees wishing to start businesses, although bureaucratic obstacles remain.
- **Mentorship models (EU examples)**: In countries such as Austria and Belgium, mentorship programmes pair refugees with local professionals to facilitate job entry and recognition of qualifications.
- **EU-funded labour rights projects**: The 2024 European Commission report on migrant labour rights in Bulgaria highlights the need for stronger safeguards against exploitation, particularly for temporary and seasonal workers.

6. Challenges and Gaps

Despite these initiatives, integration remains incomplete:

- Limited scale of language training.
- Weak protection of labour rights (risk of informal work and exploitation).
- Insufficient childcare and gender-sensitive employment policies.

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- Disconnect between labour market demand and refugee skills.

Barriers	Current Responses	Recommendations
Language requirements	Limited Bulgarian language courses provided by NGOs and some employers.	Expand free Bulgarian language courses linked to specific jobs.
Recognition of qualifications	Slow and inconsistent recognition of diplomas; few pilot projects for validation.	Develop fast-track recognition systems for healthcare, IT, education sectors.
Bureaucratic and structural challenges	Registration with Labour Bureau; counselling services available but not always accessible.	Simplify administrative processes; provide multilingual guidance at Labour Bureaus.
Gendered barriers (childcare, discrimination)	NGO support for women; ad hoc childcare initiatives but insufficient coverage.	Introduce subsidised childcare; promote gender-sensitive employment policies.
Concentration in low-skilled sectors	Employment mostly in hospitality, retail, agriculture with short-term contracts.	Create vocational training and mentorship programmes to match skills with demand.

7. Implications for Other Policy Areas

Labour market challenges are closely linked to other integration domains:

- **Housing (Chapter II)**: Unstable housing undermines the ability to maintain employment.
- **Health (Chapter IV)**: Mental and physical health issues affect employability and productivity.
- **Education (Chapter V)**: Lack of Bulgarian language support in schools delays integration of children, which in turn restricts parents (especially women) from joining the workforce.

8. Recommendations

To strengthen refugee labour market integration in Bulgaria, particularly in Ruse, the following measures are recommended:

- Expand **free Bulgarian language courses** linked directly to employment opportunities.
- Develop **fast-track systems for recognition of qualifications** in key sectors (healthcare, education, IT).
- Provide **childcare support** to facilitate women's participation in the labour market.
- Promote **public–private partnerships** for job placements and vocational training.
- Strengthen **labour rights enforcement** to prevent exploitation and ensure fair working conditions.

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IV. Health and Wellbeing

1. Introduction

Health and wellbeing are crucial aspects of refugee integration, directly influencing quality of life, employability, and social participation. For displaced populations, access to healthcare goes beyond emergency treatment: it includes continuity of care, affordability of medicines, mental health services, and reproductive health. In Bulgaria, the health dimension of integration has been shaped by both progress—such as improved access rates—and persistent gaps that disproportionately affect vulnerable groups.

2. Access to Healthcare

2.1 General access

Refugees under temporary protection in Bulgaria have access to the national healthcare system. According to recent UNHCR surveys, **83% of refugee households accessed healthcare in the previous month** (a slight decline from **88% in 2023**).

2.2 Barriers to care

Despite formal rights, several challenges remain:

- **Financial burden**: Families with chronic conditions or disabilities spend up to **12–15% of household income** on healthcare.
- **Geographical disparities**: Services are concentrated in urban centres, leaving rural refugees underserved.
- **Language difficulties**: Communication with doctors often requires translation support.

3. Vaccination and Preventive Health

3.1 Vaccination coverage

Immunisation levels among refugee children remain below WHO targets. For example, measles vaccination coverage reached **83%**, still below the **95% threshold** needed for herd immunity.

3.2 Preventive measures

NGOs and health authorities collaborate to provide immunisation campaigns, but outreach is uneven, particularly in rural areas and among mobile refugee families.

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4. Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS)

4.1 Prevalence

Mental health issues are a significant concern. Data show that **23% of refugees report mental health problems**, and **36% of households** experience at least one member with psychological distress.

4.2 Low uptake of services

Only **46% of those affected seek help**, due to stigma, lack of awareness, and language barriers.

4.3 Innovations

Some schools and community centres in Bulgaria have integrated psychosocial support programmes, combining education with counselling, an approach also supported by UNICEF.

5. Reproductive Health

Access to reproductive health services is uneven. Around **5% of refugee women** report difficulties accessing prenatal or maternal health services, citing long waiting times, transport barriers, and consultation fees. This gap poses risks to maternal and child health, especially among single mothers.

6. Challenges and Gaps

- Rising healthcare costs for vulnerable households.
- Underfunded mental health services.
- Insufficient language support in medical settings.
- Uneven access to vaccinations and preventive care.
- Lack of reproductive health outreach programmes tailored to refugee women.

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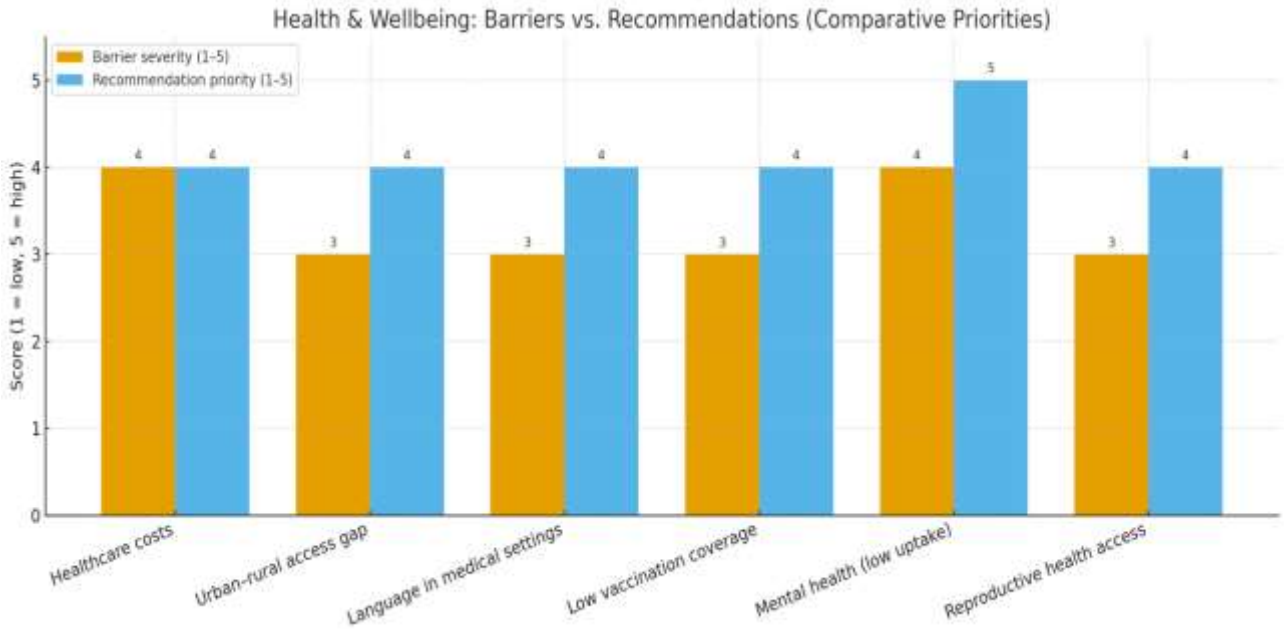

Comment:

The figure illustrates the relative severity of health-related barriers faced by refugees compared to the priority of corresponding recommendations. The alignment of high-severity issues (such as healthcare costs and mental health needs) with high-priority recommendations highlights the urgency of policy intervention in these areas.

7. Implications for Other Policy Areas

- **Employment (Chapter III):** Poor health or lack of childcare directly reduces labour market participation.
- **Education (Chapter V):** Children with unaddressed health or psychosocial needs face greater barriers to school integration.
- **Social inclusion (Chapter VI):** Mental health stigma and poor access can deepen social isolation.

8. Recommendations

- Expand **multilingual health services** and medical interpretation.
- Subsidise medicine and healthcare costs for vulnerable households.
- Strengthen **mental health services**, integrating counselling into schools and community hubs.
- Increase vaccination coverage through mobile clinics and outreach campaigns.

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- Develop reproductive health programmes targeting refugee women, particularly in rural and underserved areas.

V. Education – Children and Youth

1. Introduction

Education represents one of the most significant arenas for refugee integration. For children and young people, access to education ensures not only the continuity of learning but also the acquisition of the host country's language, cultural orientation, and opportunities for future employment. Schools serve as critical spaces where refugee families first engage with local communities, making them key entry points for wider integration. In the Bulgarian context, the education of Ukrainian refugee children is both a success story and a persistent challenge: while enrolment levels have steadily increased, structural and social barriers still hinder equal access and quality learning opportunities.

2. Access to Schooling

2.1 Enrolment levels

By November 2023, **3,786 Ukrainian children** had been enrolled in Bulgarian schools[3], representing an important step toward inclusion. Yet, the total number of refugee children in Bulgaria is significantly higher, meaning that a large proportion either continues online learning through Ukraine's system or remains outside formal education altogether.

2.2 Barriers to enrolment

- **Administrative complexity**: Families report difficulties navigating school enrolment procedures, especially in municipalities with limited administrative capacity.
- **Capacity constraints**: Schools in Sofia, Ruse, Varna, and Plovdiv face overcrowding, limiting their ability to admit new students.
- **Family uncertainty**: Some parents hesitate to enrol their children due to uncertainty about their length of stay in Bulgaria.

[3] Bulgarian Ministry of Education and UNHCR monitoring data, November 2023.

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- **Economic barriers**: Costs of school supplies, transport, and extracurricular activities are not always covered, creating inequalities between Bulgarian and refugee students.

3. Language Support and Integration

3.1 Bulgarian as a foreign language

Language acquisition remains the greatest challenge to full integration. While the Ministry of Education has launched programmes for Bulgarian as a second language, their coverage is uneven. Many schools lack trained teachers, teaching materials, or funding for additional classes.

3.2 Social integration in schools

Social integration is equally important. Ukrainian children often stay in separate clusters, which slows down linguistic and cultural adaptation. NGO-run mentorship programmes, peer tutoring, and intercultural extracurricular activities have shown positive results but remain limited in scope. There isn`t a long term strategic integration policy in Bulgarian schools which have to be fallen by teachers and school psycologies.

3.3 Good practices

- **Homework support clubs** organised by NGOs help bridge the language and curriculum gap.
- **Peer mentorship** pairs refugee students with Bulgarian peers to encourage socialisation.
- **Teacher training** in intercultural competence is piloted in some municipalities but needs scaling up nationally.

4. Special Needs and Psychosocial Support

Refugee children with disabilities, trauma, or learning difficulties face disproportionate challenges. Bulgarian schools are under-resourced in terms of specialists: psychologists, counsellors, and speech therapists are in short supply.

- UNICEF's **Blue Dot Centres** established in 2022 provided safe spaces and psychosocial support but cannot cover the entire refugee child population.

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- Participatory assessments conducted by UNHCR (2024) highlight children's voices, showing widespread anxiety, difficulties in adapting, and desire for extracurricular opportunities.

The lack of systemic psychosocial support in schools risks undermining both learning outcomes and children's long-term wellbeing.

5. Higher Education and Youth Opportunities

5.1 Access to universities

Ukrainian youth often face bureaucratic and financial barriers in higher education. Recognition of Ukrainian diplomas can be slow, and tuition fees remain a barrier for many families.

5.2 Scholarships and support

Some universities, with EU funding, have introduced **scholarships, tuition waivers, and preparatory language courses**, particularly in sectors facing labour shortages such as IT, engineering, and healthcare. However, coverage is limited and competitive.

5.3 Vocational training

Vocational education and training (VET) remains underdeveloped in Bulgaria but represents a key opportunity. Employers in construction, hospitality, and care sectors express willingness to train refugee youth, but policy incentives are lacking.

6. European Models and Good Practices

European practices provide useful lessons for Bulgaria:

- **Austria**: Offers intensive German-language support combined with mainstream education.
- **Germany**: Operates "welcome classes" that transition students into mainstream schooling.
- **Greece – Curing the Limbo**: Links education with civic participation and community engagement.
- **Belgium**: Combines language learning with extracurricular mentorship to foster integration.

These experiences demonstrate the importance of **bridging programmes** and highlight the risks of segregated approaches.

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7. Challenges and Gaps

- **Language support remains insufficient** despite growing demand.
- **Limited capacity of schools** in high-demand municipalities.
- **Under-resourced psychosocial services** for children with trauma or special needs.
- **Unequal access to higher education**, particularly for those without recognised diplomas.
- **Risk of exclusion**: children who remain outside the Bulgarian education system risk long-term marginalisation.

8. Implications for Other Policy Areas

- **Employment (Chapter III):** Parents are less able to work if children are not integrated into schools.
- **Health (Chapter IV):** Schools without adequate psychosocial support fail to address children's wellbeing.
- **Social inclusion (Chapter VI):** Education is the most effective pathway to building connections between refugees and host communities.

9. Recommendations

- Expand **Bulgarian language programmes** in all municipalities hosting refugee children.
- Provide **systematic psychosocial support** through school-based psychologists and counsellors.
- Introduce **bridging curricula** to connect Ukrainian and Bulgarian systems.
- Establish **scholarships and preparatory courses** for refugee youth in universities and VET programmes.
- Encourage **peer-to-peer mentorship** and intercultural extracurricular activities.

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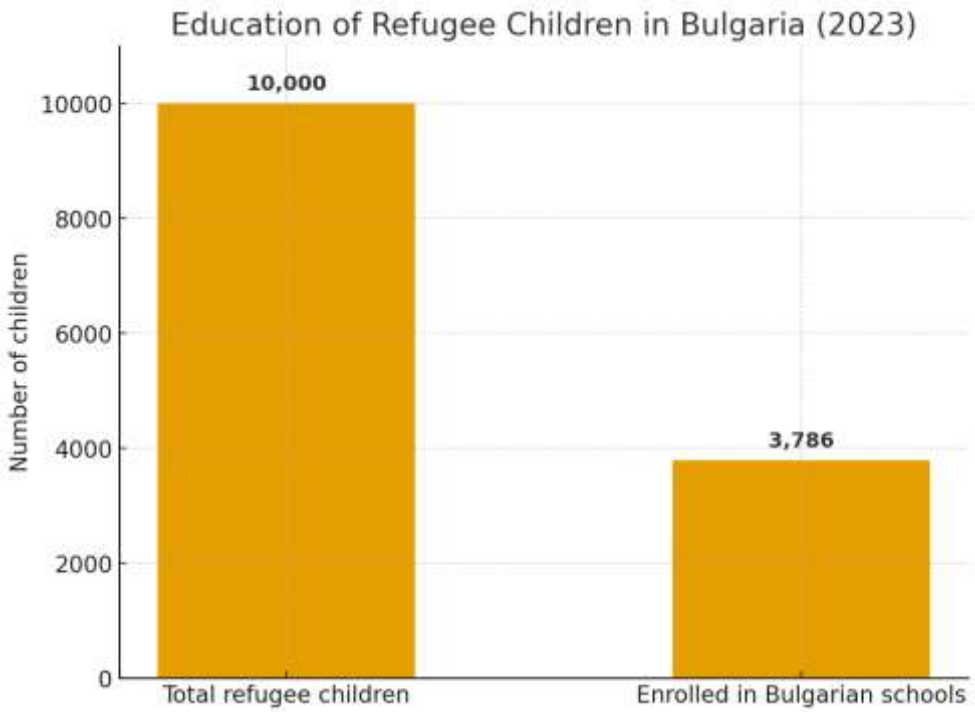

Comments of graphic

The graph highlights the significant gap between the estimated number of Ukrainian refugee children in Bulgaria (around 10,000) and those enrolled in Bulgarian schools (3,786 as of November 2023). This means that a majority of refugee children remain outside the national education system, relying instead on online Ukrainian schooling or receiving no formal education at all. The consequences are twofold:

1. **Educational inequality** – children outside the Bulgarian system risk long-term exclusion from higher education, vocational training, and the labour market.

2. **Integration gap** – schooling is a primary pathway to learning Bulgarian and interacting with peers, and those outside the system remain socially isolated.

The data underline the urgency of scaling up enrolment support, expanding language programmes, and introducing bridging curricula. Without such measures, the educational gap risks becoming a structural barrier to integration for an entire generation of refugee children and youth.

VI. Rights, Status, Support, Inclusion

1. The Role of Legal Rights in Refugee Integration

Legal rights form the essential framework that determines whether refugees can effectively access housing, healthcare, education, and employment. While

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humanitarian assistance addresses immediate needs, it is the legal status that guarantees continuity and opens pathways toward long-term inclusion. In Bulgaria, the EU Temporary Protection Directive has provided Ukrainian refugees with residence, work rights, and access to services since March 2022. Yet, the translation of rights from policy to practice is uneven. Administrative barriers, insufficient coordination, and gaps in communication often mean that refugees are unable to fully exercise the rights they are formally entitled to. Understanding this gap between legal entitlements and practical inclusion is therefore crucial for evaluating Bulgaria's integration system.

2. Legal Framework

The EU Temporary Protection Directive, activated in March 2022[4], provides Ukrainian refugees in Bulgaria with the right to reside legally for the duration of the directive, direct access to the labour market without a work permit, and access to education for children, healthcare under national conditions, and certain forms of social assistance.

Temporary protection, while critical in the short term, does not create an automatic pathway to permanent residence or citizenship. Refugees may live in prolonged uncertainty, unsure of whether they will be allowed to remain. This lack of security discourages investments in integration such as entering higher education, seeking long-term employment, or buying property. For children, it raises questions about their future prospects after finishing Bulgarian schools.

The Bulgarian government has transposed EU provisions into national legislation but struggles with implementation. Municipal authorities often lack resources or training to process applications efficiently. The result is a fragmented system where access depends on local administrative capacity rather than consistent national standards.

3. Access to Social Services and Rights Awareness

Refugees often face long queues, complex paperwork, and insufficient translation support when applying for healthcare, school enrolment, or housing. For families already in precarious situations, these bureaucratic hurdles can delay or prevent access to basic services.

Civil society organisations bridge many of these gaps. Caritas, the Bulgarian Red Cross, and the Foundation for Access to Rights (FAR) provide legal advice, interpretation, and assistance in preparing documents. Without their intervention, many refugees would not be able to exercise their rights effectively.

[4] The Council of the European Union activated the Directive on 4 March 2022 in response to the war in Ukraine (Council Implementing Decision (EU) 2022/382).

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Information gaps remain one of the biggest challenges. Many refugees do not know what services they are entitled to. Initiatives like the "Handbook for Ukrainians in Bulgaria" (Svobodna Evropa, 2023) and awareness campaigns by UNHCR and UNICEF have improved outreach, but coverage remains uneven, especially in rural areas and among newly arrived families.

4. Gender and Social Inclusion

Because 87% of refugees are women and children, gender-sensitive policies are essential. Women face dual responsibilities: caring for children and elderly relatives while trying to enter the labour market. The lack of childcare facilities or flexible employment options leaves many excluded from training and work. Gender-based violence and exploitation risks also increase in conditions of economic vulnerability. Social inclusion therefore requires policies that address both protection and empowerment of women, ensuring equal access to rights and opportunities.

5. Risks of Discrimination and Marginalisation

Legal protection alone does not eliminate the risk of exclusion. In Bulgaria, discrimination and marginalisation remain challenges across several domains. In housing, landlords often refuse to rent to refugees or demand higher deposits. In employment, refugees are channelled into precarious, low-wage jobs despite their qualifications. In health, refugees with mental health issues face stigma and a lack of specialised services. In education, refugee children risk isolation without sufficient language and integration support. These interlinked challenges demonstrate how limited access to rights in one sector can reinforce exclusion in others, creating cycles of marginalisation.

6. Role of Local Communities

Municipalities, NGOs, and community volunteers are frontline actors in refugee inclusion. In Ruse, for instance, the Local Anti-Trafficking Commission provides protection against exploitation and human trafficking, while NGOs offer counselling, housing support, and community activities. Grassroots initiatives—such as intercultural workshops, language cafés, and volunteer mentorship programmes—help refugees build relationships with local residents. These bottom-up efforts are essential in complementing national frameworks, but they remain fragile without sustainable funding and stronger institutional backing.

7. Challenges and Gaps

The main challenges can be summarised as follows: legal uncertainty over the duration and future of temporary protection; bureaucratic complexity in accessing entitlements,

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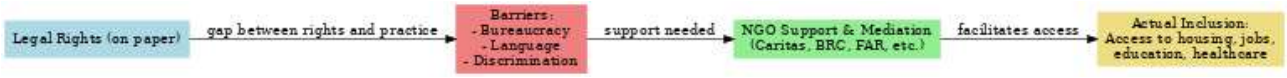
particularly for vulnerable families; lack of a clear pathway from temporary protection to long-term residency or citizenship; gender-specific vulnerabilities insufficiently addressed in national policies; and dependence on NGOs, whose services often replace rather than complement state structures.

8. Recommendations

To address these gaps, several measures are recommended. Registration procedures should be simplified and supported by multilingual staff in all administrative offices. Pathways from temporary protection to long-term residency must be developed to reduce uncertainty and encourage long-term investment in integration. Gender-sensitive policies should be strengthened, including subsidised childcare and protection for survivors of gender-based violence. The state should provide sustainable funding for NGOs that deliver legal and social services, ensuring that their work becomes part of an institutionalised framework rather than an ad hoc solution. Finally, community-led initiatives should be supported to foster inclusion and reduce prejudice at the local level.



VII. Humanitarian Support and Vulnerable Groups

1. From Emergency Aid to Sustainable Support

Humanitarian assistance has been the first response to the mass arrival of refugees from Ukraine, providing shelter, food, and basic protection. In the Bulgarian context, initial support relied heavily on hotel-based accommodation schemes, international aid, and volunteer initiatives. While these measures were crucial in preventing immediate hardship, they were never designed to last. As the displacement became protracted, the limits of short-term humanitarian aid became evident: temporary shelters, food vouchers, and emergency healthcare could not substitute for durable housing, stable income, and long-term access to services.

This shift from emergency aid to sustainable support is particularly relevant for vulnerable groups. Women, children, elderly people, and persons with disabilities require continuity of assistance to avoid slipping into deeper poverty and marginalisation. Ensuring that humanitarian aid is systematically linked to housing,

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employment, education, and healthcare policies is therefore not only a moral imperative but also a strategic necessity for successful integration.

2. Humanitarian Support Structures in Bulgaria

State programmes

The Bulgarian state initially relied heavily on hotel-based accommodation funded by the EU Temporary Protection scheme. While effective for immediate shelter, this solution has proven unsustainable in the long run (see Chapter II). State support for food, clothing, and basic needs has been more limited, often relying on EU funds and NGO contributions.

International organisations

- **UNHCR** provides financial assistance to vulnerable households, coordinates protection services, and supports national institutions in policy implementation.
- **UNICEF** established *Blue Dot Centres* in 2022 in partnership with UNHCR and local authorities, offering safe spaces, psychosocial support, and referrals to specialised services.
- **IOM** focuses on safe mobility, anti-trafficking measures, and return programmes.

Local NGOs and volunteers in Ruse region

- Caritas Ruse
- IOM Bulgaria
- Bulgarian Red Cross (Ruse branch)
- UNHCR / Compass Network
- Bozhurite (СНЦ „Божурите“)
- UNICEF + Ruse Municipality
- SOS Children’s Villages Bulgaria
- Fund Dobro

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- Equilibrium Association
- Foundation for Access to Rights (FAR)
- Right to Childhood Foundation

3. Identification of Vulnerable Groups

The following groups are at heightened risk:

- **Women and single mothers**, often carrying sole responsibility for children and elderly relatives, while facing barriers to employment.
- **Children**, including unaccompanied minors and those with disabilities, who require specialised education and psychosocial support.
- **Elderly refugees**, particularly those with chronic illnesses and limited mobility.
- **Persons with disabilities**, facing barriers in housing, healthcare, and accessibility of public spaces.
- **Victims of trafficking or exploitation**, particularly women and youth at risk near border regions such as Ruse.

4. Case Study: Ruse Region

Ruse has served as both a major entry point and a humanitarian hub. The **Local Anti-Trafficking Commission** in Ruse plays a central role[5] in protecting vulnerable refugees from exploitation. Local NGOs, supported by international donors, provide shelters, legal advice, and integration activities. However, challenges remain, particularly in ensuring long-term housing solutions and stable funding for protection programmes.

5. Gaps and Challenges

- Humanitarian aid remains heavily **short-term focused**, leaving long-term needs unmet.
- Strong reliance on **EU and donor funding**, making programmes unstable.
- Weak **coordination** between national institutions and NGOs reduces efficiency.
- **Unequal coverage** across the country: vulnerable groups in rural or smaller municipalities often remain underserved.

[5] The Local Anti-Trafficking Commission is a municipal body under the National Commission for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings, responsible for prevention, victim protection, and coordination with NGOs and law enforcement.

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6. Implications for Integration

Humanitarian support is not separate from integration—it is its foundation. Without adequate assistance, vulnerable groups are unable to access housing, employment, education, or healthcare. The protection of women, children, elderly, and other at-risk groups is therefore a prerequisite for sustainable social inclusion.

7. Recommendations

- Ensure **stable state funding** for services targeting vulnerable groups, reducing reliance on short-term donor projects.
- Expand **Blue Dot Centres** and other safe spaces to more municipalities, ensuring national coverage.
- Strengthen **child protection systems**, including guardianship for unaccompanied minors.
- Improve **coordination mechanisms** between state agencies, municipalities, and NGOs to avoid duplication and service gaps.
- Introduce **inclusive housing and healthcare policies** that explicitly address the needs of persons with disabilities and elderly refugees.
- Scale up **anti-trafficking measures**, particularly in border regions, combining prevention with victim support.

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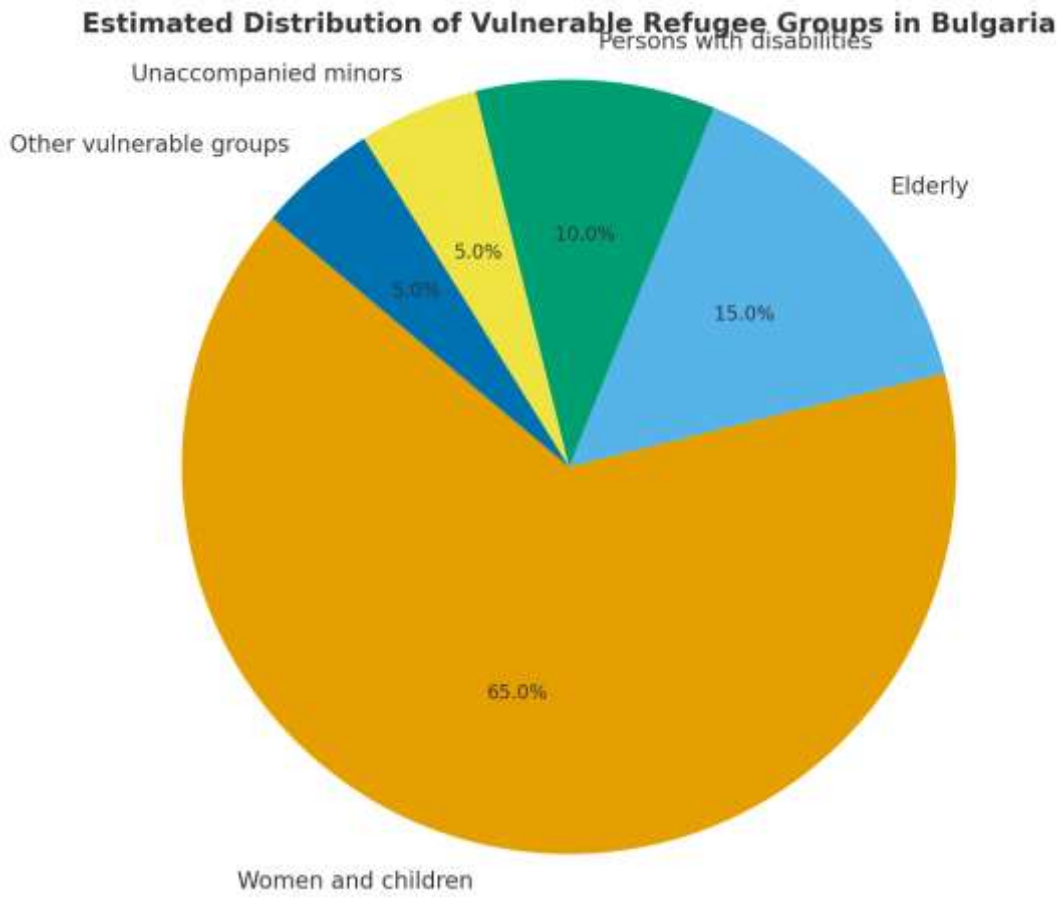

Women and children: ~65%
Elderly: ~15%
Persons with disabilities: ~10%
Unaccompanied minors: ~5%
Other vulnerable categories (trafficking survivors, extreme poverty, etc.): ~5%

VIII. Local Integration Factors – Ruse Municipality

1. Strategic Role of Ruse

Ruse, located on the Danube River and directly connected to Romania through the Danube Bridge, has been a major entry point for refugees since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. Its position as a **border city** has made it both a transit hub and a settlement area. Thousands of Ukrainian refugees have passed through Ruse, with a significant number choosing to stay temporarily or long-term. The city therefore serves as a microcosm of Bulgaria's overall response, where national policies intersect with local implementation and community initiatives.

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2. Housing and Accommodation in Ruse

Housing remains one of the greatest challenges for refugee integration in Ruse.

- **Hotel accommodation schemes** provided an immediate solution but were temporary and unsustainable.
- **Municipal housing** is technically available, but eligibility requires five years of residency, excluding most refugees.
- **NGO and church initiatives** have filled part of the gap by offering temporary apartments and shared housing solutions.
  The housing crisis highlights the tension between national policy limitations and local humanitarian efforts.

3. Labour Market Opportunities and Barriers

Ruse has a relatively dynamic labour market, with opportunities in manufacturing, logistics, and services. Refugees with temporary protection can legally work, but in practice they encounter several barriers:

- Language difficulties limit access to skilled employment.
- Recognition of qualifications is slow and bureaucratic.
- Many refugees, especially women, are pushed into low-paid or informal jobs due to childcare responsibilities.
  Local NGOs and the Labour Bureau provide some training and counselling, but initiatives remain fragmented.

4. Education and Child Integration

Refugee children in Ruse face similar challenges to those in other Bulgarian cities but with added pressure due to limited school capacity. Enrolment rates are improving, yet:

- Bulgarian language acquisition remains a major barrier.
- Psychosocial support is insufficient, particularly for children affected by trauma.
- Extracurricular activities run by NGOs and volunteers play a vital role in promoting integration and socialisation.

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5. Health and Social Support

Healthcare services are formally available under temporary protection, but refugees often face difficulties with registration, costs of medication, and communication with doctors.

- NGOs and the **Blue Dot Centre** established in Ruse have provided psychosocial support and referrals.
- Elderly refugees and persons with disabilities remain underserved, especially in terms of long-term care.

6. Protection and Anti-Trafficking Measures

As a border city, Ruse has been at the forefront of anti-trafficking efforts. The **Local Anti-Trafficking Commission** plays a central role in prevention and victim protection. Partnerships with NGOs and law enforcement have helped reduce risks, but limited resources hinder capacity for sustained action.

7. Community Involvement and Civil Society

Civil society and volunteers in Ruse have been key actors in supporting integration. Local initiatives include:

- Volunteer language courses.
- Community kitchens and donation campaigns.
- Intercultural workshops and events that foster contact between Bulgarians and Ukrainians.
  These initiatives highlight the importance of local solidarity in complementing national and international frameworks.

8. Challenges and Lessons from Ruse

- **Housing**: Lack of sustainable solutions beyond temporary accommodation.
- **Employment**: Language barriers and childcare responsibilities hinder labour participation.
- **Education**: Schools under strain, limited support for special needs.
- **Healthcare**: Access uneven, particularly for vulnerable groups.
- **Coordination**: National policies not always aligned with local capacities.

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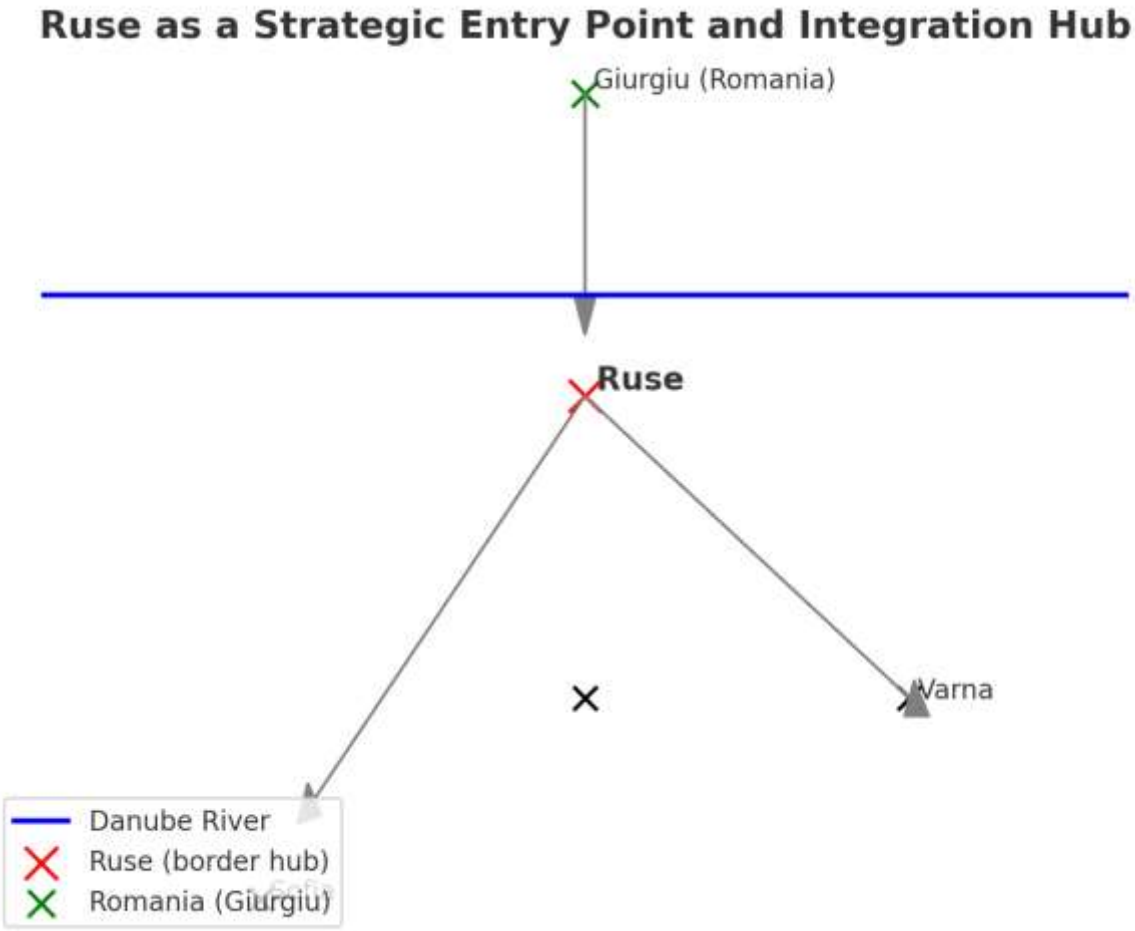
9. Recommendations for Ruse and Beyond

- Adapt municipal housing policies to include refugees and reduce residency requirements.
- Expand Bulgarian language courses and link them with vocational training.
- Provide targeted funding for psychosocial and special educational support in schools.
- Strengthen healthcare outreach for elderly and disabled refugees.
- Ensure stable funding for the Local Anti-Trafficking Commission and community initiatives.
- Use Ruse as a **pilot city** for innovative integration models that can be replicated across Bulgaria.



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IX. Evaluation and Indicators

1. Purpose of Evaluation

Evaluation is an essential component of refugee integration strategies, as it ensures that policies and programmes are not only implemented but also effective. In the Bulgarian context, monitoring is particularly important given the limited resources, uneven institutional capacity, and high reliance on external funding. A robust evaluation framework helps assess whether interventions in housing, employment, education, health, and humanitarian support are delivering tangible results and whether vulnerable groups are adequately protected.

2. Quantitative Indicators

2.1 Evaluation sessions

- **Three structured evaluation sessions** are conducted during the implementation of the integration programme.
- Each session brings together policymakers, municipal officials, NGOs, international organisations, and refugee representatives to assess progress.

2.2 Sectoral data collection

- **Housing**: number of refugees accommodated beyond the initial 60-day period; percentage accessing long-term solutions.
- **Employment**: proportion of refugees employed; share of women in the workforce; recognition of qualifications.
- **Education**: enrolment rates of refugee children in Bulgarian schools; participation in language support classes.
- **Health**: percentage of refugees accessing healthcare; vaccination coverage among refugee children; use of psychosocial services.

3. Qualitative Indicators

3.1 Stakeholder satisfaction

- Target: **80% satisfaction rate** among stakeholders (refugees, NGOs, local authorities) regarding the effectiveness of integration programmes.
- Collected through structured feedback forms, interviews, and participatory workshops.

3.2 Refugee perspectives

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- Focus groups and interviews with refugees will provide insight into lived experiences, highlighting barriers that may not appear in official statistics.
- Particular attention to vulnerable groups such as single mothers, unaccompanied minors, elderly, and persons with disabilities.

4. Data Sources and Tools

- **International organisations**: UNHCR, UNICEF, IOM, and EU databases.
- **National institutions**: Bulgarian Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health.
- **Local authorities**: municipalities such as Ruse, Sofia, Varna.
- **Civil society organisations**: data from NGOs directly engaged in service provision.

Tools include structured surveys, digital monitoring platforms, and participatory evaluation methods ensuring refugee voices are central.

5. Challenges in Evaluation

- **Fragmented data systems** across institutions create inconsistencies.
- **Limited capacity** at municipal level to collect and analyse data.
- **Short-term funding cycles** hinder long-term monitoring.
- **Reluctance among refugees** to participate in evaluations due to distrust or survey fatigue.

6. Recommendations for Evaluation Design

- Develop a **centralised monitoring system** at national level, integrating data across ministries and municipalities.
- Involve **refugees as active participants** in evaluation, not only as respondents but as co-designers of surveys.
- Ensure **transparency and public reporting**, increasing trust in institutions.
- Link evaluation results to **policy adjustments**, ensuring feedback leads to concrete change.

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X. Conclusion

1. Overall Conclusions

The Bulgarian response to the influx of Ukrainian refugees illustrates both the strengths and limitations of a country with constrained resources but strong humanitarian commitment. Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022, Bulgaria has provided temporary protection to more than 250,000 refugees, the vast majority being women and children. This legal framework has granted access to housing, education, healthcare, and employment, but the practical exercise of these rights remains uneven.

Key findings from the research can be summarised as follows:

- **Housing (Chapter II):** Hotel-based accommodation was effective in the short term but unsustainable. Long-term solutions are scarce, and municipal housing policies exclude most refugees.
- **Labour and employment (Chapter III):** Refugees have the legal right to work, yet face barriers such as language, childcare responsibilities, and recognition of qualifications.
- **Health and wellbeing (Chapter IV):** While 83% of refugee households accessed healthcare, financial and linguistic barriers persist, and mental health remains under-served.
- **Education (Chapter V):** Nearly 3,800 children were enrolled in Bulgarian schools, but thousands remain outside the system, creating risks of exclusion.
- **Rights and inclusion (Chapter VI):** Temporary protection provides entitlements but not a pathway to permanent residence, creating long-term uncertainty.
- **Humanitarian support (Chapter VII):** NGOs, international organisations, and volunteers play a vital role, particularly in supporting vulnerable groups.
- **Local case study – Ruse (Chapter VIII):** The region exemplifies the intersection between national policy and local capacity, highlighting both innovations and structural gaps.
- **Evaluation and indicators (Chapter IX):** A framework based on three evaluation sessions and both quantitative and qualitative indicators is essential for accountability and continuous improvement.

Overall, Bulgaria's refugee integration system reflects a tension between emergency-driven solutions and the need for sustainable, long-term policies. Without systemic

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reforms, refugees risk remaining in precarious situations, dependent on short-term humanitarian assistance rather than integrated into society.

2. Policy Recommendations

Based on the analysis, the following cross-sectoral recommendations are proposed:

Housing

Shift from hotel-based emergency accommodation to long-term, affordable housing schemes.
Adapt municipal housing criteria to include refugees, reducing residency requirements.
Explore public–private partnerships and EU-funded pilot projects for inclusive housing models.

Employment

Expand Bulgarian language training linked to vocational programmes.
Simplify recognition of Ukrainian qualifications and reduce bureaucratic barriers.
Provide childcare support to enable women's participation in the labour market.

Health

Subsidise healthcare and medicine costs for vulnerable families.
Increase investment in mental health and psychosocial support, especially in schools.
Expand vaccination campaigns with mobile outreach services.

Education

Scale up Bulgarian language classes nationwide.
Introduce bridging curricula to align Ukrainian and Bulgarian systems.
Provide scholarships and preparatory courses for refugee youth in universities and vocational education.

Rights and Inclusion

Develop a pathway from temporary protection to long-term residency.
Strengthen gender-sensitive policies, including childcare and protection against gender-based violence.
Support community-led initiatives to build social cohesion.

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Humanitarian Support and Vulnerable Groups

Ensure stable, predictable state funding for services targeting vulnerable groups. Expand *Blue Dot Centres* and child protection systems. Strengthen anti-trafficking measures, especially in border regions.

Local integration (Ruse case study)

Use Ruse as a pilot city for innovative integration models that can be replicated nationwide.
Provide targeted funding to municipalities to strengthen local integration capacity.

Evaluation

Implement a centralised monitoring system across institutions. Conduct three evaluation sessions and ensure systematic inclusion of refugee voices. Use feedback to adjust policies dynamically and transparently.

3. Final Reflection

The Bulgarian case demonstrates that refugee integration is not only a humanitarian responsibility but also a long-term investment in social cohesion and economic resilience. With adequate support, refugees contribute skills, labour, and cultural diversity that enrich host societies. By transforming temporary measures into sustainable policies, Bulgaria can both protect vulnerable populations and strengthen its own social systems for the future.

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