



Position and needs of children and mothers displaced from Ukraine in Serbia

Dr Tanja Pavlov, Vladimir Petronijević
GROUP 484



Save the Children

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FROM UKRAINE IN SERBIA**

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Abbreviations

ADRA	Adventist Development and Relief Agency
APR	Business Registers Agency
ENIC/NARIC	European Network of Information Centres - National Academic Recognition Information Centres
EU	European Union
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GSI	Group for Minority Education, Social Inclusion and Protection from Violence and Discrimination
HEART	Healing and Education Through the Arts
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IEP	Individual educational plan
LGU	Local Government Unit
JRS	Jesuit Refugee Service
ICSO	International Civil Society Organization
MESTD	Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development
NSHC	Novi Sad Humanitarian Center
NES	National Employment Service
CSO	Civil society organization
PIN	Psychosocial Innovation Network
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PPS	Pedagogical and Psychological Service
RFZO	Republic Fund for Health Insurance
RS	Republic of Serbia
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
ZUOV	Institute for the Advancement of Education

Summary

The war in Ukraine has brought **a new category of people on the move—people displaced from Ukraine, which led to the activation of the temporary protection mechanism in Serbia for the first time.** Unfortunately, due to the ongoing war in Ukraine, they have been staying in Serbia for three years. **At the end of January 2024, there were approximately 4,200 displaced persons from Ukraine, and by the end of February, 1,809 had received temporary protection** (UNHCR, 2024). This situation has necessitated an assessment of the adequacy of the temporary protection system for them, particularly for mothers and children, as well as the functionality of national integration policies.

The research was conducted from the beginning of December 2023 to the end of May 2024.

The goal of the research was **to develop guidelines and recommendations for decision-makers, practitioners, and other relevant stakeholders for improving access to and the quality of the realization of the right to education, culture, healthcare, and labor market integration** for children and mothers displaced from Ukraine, under the highest international and regional standards.

The research included **displaced mothers and children from Ukraine, from both asylum centers and private accommodations** and key representatives from **institutions, civil society organizations** (both international and domestic, as well as Ukrainian associations). **The research encompassed 101 people.**

The methodology included analysis of relevant documents, literature, and data, as well as focus group discussions (8) and interviews (24) in Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Vranje, but there were also mothers and children from Kragujevac, Kraljevo, and Subotica.

The research findings indicate that the greatest difficulties arise in the areas of **healthcare and labor market integration**, due to systemic shortcomings.

The Law on Healthcare does not recognize displaced persons from Ukraine under temporary protection **as foreigners entitled to healthcare at the expense of the Republic of Serbia's budget.** Therefore, access to this right is inadequate, incomplete, and often left to the discretion of various stakeholders within the healthcare system. It is necessary to **amend Article 236 of the Law on Healthcare** to include individuals granted temporary protection as a category of foreigners, or to seek an **authentic interpretation from the National Assembly** to determine whether they can be considered a vulnerable category in the context of this law. **They should be included in the mandatory health insurance system.** Special attention should be given to the **mental health of mothers and children**, as well as **their vulnerability to gender-based violence and human trafficking.**

Regarding the right to employment, the challenge lies in **their exclusion from the system, including limited access to active employment measures.** This exclusion results in **employers being unaware of the human potential of displaced mothers (and other displaced persons) from Ukraine.** Therefore, **it is necessary to ensure that displaced mothers (and other displaced persons) are registered with the National Employment Service, conduct an analysis of active employment policy measures to identify obstacles preventing those under temporary protection from accessing them, and consider measures specific to foreigners.** Additionally, **good practices for mediating between displaced women and employers should be continued.**

Mothers and children from Ukraine under temporary protection exercise cultural rights poorly. They experience trauma and stress due to the war in Ukraine and their loved ones who remained there. They are completely focused on events in Ukraine and return, not on integration and inclusion in cultural and social life in Serbia. The lack of financial resources and the struggle for economic survival put culture on the level of luxury. Nevertheless, **we believe that it is important to strengthen this component, since the exercise of cultural rights is important for personal development, but also for the development of intercultural dialogue and social cohesion, which are necessary for the development of society.** This requires a **strategic approach by the Ministry of Culture** so that it takes into account the difficult situation in which they find themselves (as well as economic priorities), but also their “dispersion” in smaller towns in Serbia. For that reason, it is best to implement this aspect **in cooperation with educational institutions, cultural institutions and civil society organizations, with a more active role of the National Council of the Ukrainian National Minority.**

For the education of displaced children from Ukraine, there is a consensus that it is implemented well, i.e., that the **process meets educational needs**, from enrollment, through the organization of classes, and the success of students, to grading. The only obstacle perceived is the lack of knowledge of the Serbian language, that is, the lack of a preparatory period for the inclusion of children in school. However, there is neither systemic monitoring, nor research into the educational achievements of Ukrainian children, as well as other refugees and migrants, and no comparison with the educational achievements of local children. Most challenges are related to meeting **emotional and social needs**. There are displaced children who attend only online Ukrainian schools and have no social contact with local children. Some children who attend classes in Serbian schools, experience discrimination because of their Ukrainian origin, and there are examples of some of them giving up schooling in Serbian schools due to peer violence. The mental health of these children is particularly at risk. It is also a question of how burdened children are who attend Ukrainian and Serbian schools at the same time. Many children have experienced trauma and are still going through traumatic experiences, since their fathers and relatives remained in the war environment, and they need continuous monitoring and psychological support. For that reason, the **Ministry of Education should strengthen the already established support system for refugee and migrant children in the education process**¹ at several levels: **introducing a preparatory period** for learning the Serbian language, getting to know the cultural specificities of Serbian society and the education system, as well as more intensive monitoring of their emotional state and psychosocial needs; **raising the capacity of all schools** while using the capacity of schools and teachers who have experience and good practices in working with migrants and refugees, especially in meeting the emotional and social needs of migrant students. A strategic approach requires **regular monitoring of the number, socio-demographic characteristics and success of displaced children from Ukraine** (as well as other refugees and migrants) and **cooperation with the academic community** in conducting research in the field of migrant and refugee education. It is **important to provide special support to children and mothers at key transition points in education** – enrollment in preschool institutions and the first year of elementary and high school, as well as enrollment in higher education institutions.

¹ The support system for refugee and migrant children in the education process was defined in 2017 by *Professional Guidelines for the Inclusion of Refugee/Asylum-Seeking Children in the Education System of the Republic of Serbia* and a handbook for its implementation.

1. Introduction

The report was developed within the project *Integration of Immigrant Communities in Serbia – New Challenges and Opportunities*, implemented by Group 484 in collaboration with the international organization *Save the Children*. **The project aims, as the title suggests, to identify the needs, challenges, and potentials of individuals displaced from Ukraine, with a focus on mothers and children.** We aim to adequately respond to their needs and promote the development and utilization of their potential **through direct work with them and local communities**, but also to **influence the improvement of national integration policies** and facilitate access to rights for new immigrant communities.

Serbia is traditionally a transit country for refugees and migrants seeking protection and dignified life in Europe and arriving via the Balkan route, which is part of the Eastern Mediterranean route. The transit nature of these movements is indicated by a small number of children and adults who have entered the procedure for seeking asylum in Serbia. However, **the war in Ukraine has brought a new category of people on the move, who are provided with special protection – temporary protection.** Unfortunately, due to the ongoing war in Ukraine, they have been staying in Serbia for the third year, which requires questioning the adequacy of the temporary protection system for them, as well as the functionality of national integration policies. Therefore, **the project began with research aimed at defining guidelines and recommendations based on data for relevant decision-makers, practitioners, and other stakeholders who enhance access and quality in the realization of rights to education, cultural rights, healthcare rights, and labor market inclusion for children and mothers**, under the highest international and regional standards. We also **aim to familiarize mothers and children displaced from Ukraine with their rights and the possibilities for their realization.**

The research was conducted from early December 2023 to the end of May 2024. In order to compare their access to the mentioned rights, **two groups of mothers and children from Ukraine participated in the research – one group from private accommodation and the other from the Vranje Asylum Center. Key stakeholders crucial to the realization of the mentioned rights**, including institutions, international and domestic civil society organizations, and associations of Ukrainians, **were also involved in the research.**

The report is structured into six chapters: summary, introduction, research context, methodological framework, research findings, and concluding remarks. **Research findings are divided into four chapters based on the realization of four rights – education, culture, healthcare, and labor.** For each right, there is an overview of the **legal, strategic, and institutional framework for its realization; perception of its realization by three groups of stakeholders – displaced persons, institutions, and civil society; and a summary of challenges and solutions.** **Quotes from evaluation participants** were used to **accurately convey their voices** while preserving their anonymity.

In this report, the masculine gender is used for simplicity of reading, but it would be more appropriate if it were written in the feminine gender, given that more than half of the report is intended for women, mothers, girls, and young women, who were the majority of the research participants. In any case, we want to emphasize the importance of gender-sensitive language and to keep it in mind even though we have used one gender in the text.

We owe special thanks to the women, children, and youth displaced from Ukraine who openly discussed the advantages and disadvantages of life in Serbia and shared their insights on enhancing services tailored to them, with the desire to assist their compatriots, peers, and other migrants.

We thank all the research participants who daily invest efforts to improve the realization of rights for displaced persons from Ukraine (and migrants from other countries) and who generously and sincerely shared their experiences, challenges and good practices. Together, we have assessed our progress and identified areas for further improvement in developing a society where everyone “feels at home”.

We extend our gratitude to everyone who enabled us to get in touch with the newly arrived neighbors from Ukraine, who cared about having their voices heard while also protecting them from abuse.

Thanks to our partner organization Save the Children, whose support has been invaluable throughout the development and implementation of the research (and the project as a whole), including the writing of this report. Without their financial support, none of this could have been achieved.

2. Research context

Since February 2022, like most EU countries, Serbia **has been preparing to receive a significant number of displaced persons who had to leave Ukraine as a result of the war.** Due to its geographical distance and the EU's "open-door policy" for displaced persons from Ukraine, Serbia did not become a country bearing the brunt of this refugee crisis. Instead, in that period, Serbia primarily served as a transit country for Ukrainian citizens.

Since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, more than 335,500 Ukrainian citizens have entered Serbia.² **By the end of January 2024, there were about 4,200 displaced persons from Ukraine in Serbia, and by the end of February, 1,809 had been granted temporary protection.**³ If we take into account the fact that the UNHCR states that there are currently 6.3 million displaced persons from Ukraine⁴, the number of those who have found refuge in Serbia is not of too much statistical significance.

In Vranje, the only asylum center in Serbia was established for the accommodation of displaced persons from Ukraine, with a capacity of 250 places.⁵ According to the data of the **Commissariat, there are 49 people staying in the Vranje Asylum Center, of which 12 are children from Ukraine,** ages: 5-6 years 1 child, 7-8 years 1 child, 9-10 four, 13-14 three and 15- 16 three children.⁶

However, behind the statistical assessments and evaluations of large and small numbers **lie human destinies, primarily of women and children, who deserve all societal attention and support.**

Like EU countries, Serbia has addressed the **status of displaced persons from Ukraine through the activation of provisions regulating temporary protection.** This is the first time in the history of Serbia's international refugee protection system that the temporary protection mechanism has been activated and due to the mass influx of displaced persons, the Serbian government issued a general decision granting temporary protection to a group of displaced persons. The Government of Serbia made such a decision in March 2022 and extended it for the second time in March 2024, thereby **bringing the temporary protection of displaced persons from Ukraine into its third year of implementation.** It should also be borne in mind that a certain number of citizens who came from Ukraine did not seek temporary protection, but have temporary residence in Serbia based on employment, family reunification, education, etc.

Under the European standards contained in the Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection, persons under temporary protection in Serbia are guaranteed a range of rights: residence during the period of temporary protection; a document confirming their status and right to residence; healthcare in line with regulations governing the healthcare of foreigners; access to the labor market during the period of temporary protection, in accordance with regulations governing the employment of foreigners; free elementary and high school education in public schools, under specific regulations; legal assistance under conditions prescribed for asylum seekers; freedom of religion under the same conditions as citizens of the Republic of Serbia; and collective accommodation in designated facilities.

However, **to date, there has been only one analysis of the implementation of the temporary protection mechanism,** based on the analysis of the normative framework of the Republic of Serbia and a comparative analysis with EU law, particularly the *EU Temporary Protection Directive*, as well as a survey of 38 individuals with approved temporary protection.⁷ Challenges were identified in the **areas of employment** (jobs below qualifications and the expiration of personal work permits amid the interruption of temporary protection) and **healthcare** (unrecognized by legal resolution). Therefore, we aimed to **further determine the challenges and best practices in realizing the rights of displaced persons from Ukraine** under temporary protection, mothers and children. Additionally, we sought to view **this issue from the perspective of three key groups of stakeholders – Ukrainian mothers and children, institutions, and the civil sector.**

2 [UNHCR: 108,828 migrants and refugees entered Serbia last year \(serbianmonitor.com\)](https://serbianmonitor.com/en/108828-migrants-and-refugees-entered-serbia-last-year)

3 [UNHCR: 108,828 migrants and refugees entered Serbia last year \(serbianmonitor.com\)](https://serbianmonitor.com/en/108828-migrants-and-refugees-entered-serbia-last-year)

4 UNHCR Reporting, <https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/situations/ukraine-situation>

5 [Centri za azil i prihvatni centri | Komesarijat za izbeglice i migracije Republika Srbija \(kirs.gov.rs\)](https://kirs.gov.rs/en/centri-za-azil-i-prihvatni-centri-i-komesarijat-za-izbeglice-i-migracije-republika-srbija)

6 01/02/2024, email of the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration.

7 [Godinu dana primene privremene zaštite u Republici Srbiji – uporedna analiza i preporuke – www.azil.rs](https://www.azil.rs/en/godinu-dana-primene-privremene-zastite-u-republici-srbiji-uporedna-analiza-i-preporuke)

3. Methodological framework

3.1. Research objectives and methodology

The research was planned as a research study combining desk research and field research – data collection through focus group discussions and interviews.

Desk research involved the review of legal and strategic documents relevant to the four mentioned rights, research on migrant integration, academic and media articles, and data collected through written requests sent to relevant stakeholders. Ten responses to written requests were received.

Focus group discussions (FGD) and interviews were conducted based on prepared protocols in the form of semi-structured interviews. FGDs were conducted separately with mothers (one) and children (three) of different ages (younger elementary school students, older elementary school students, youth) displaced from Ukraine in private accommodation, and similarly with mothers (one) and children (two) in the Vranje Asylum Centre. FGDs were also held with representatives of three schools in Vranje – one with school principals and one with teachers and representatives of PPS. Interviews were conducted with representatives of institutions, international and domestic civil society organizations (CSOs), and Ukrainian associations. FGDs and interviews were conducted in person, online, or via telephone. A total of 8 focus groups and 24 interviews were organized.

3.2. Research participants

A total of 101 people participated in the research 76 female and 25 male:

- 21 representatives from 14 state institutions, 17 women and 4 men;
- 4 representatives from 4 Ukrainian associations, 1 woman and 3 men;
- 5 representatives from 4 academic institutions, all women;
- 23 representatives from 12 CSOs and international organizations, 19 women and 4 men;
- 19 representatives from 3 schools in Vranje (two elementary and one high school), 3 schools in Belgrade (two elementary and one high school), and 1 high school in Novi Sad, 15 women and 4 men. Efforts were made to include three schools that were not part of UNICEF's program for supporting migrant and refugee inclusion in schools.
- 17 children and youth displaced from Ukraine (8 in the asylum center – 4 boys and 4 girls, and 9 in private accommodation – 5 boys and 4 girls), 8 girls and 9 boys. The age of boys in the asylum center is 10, 15, 18, and 20 years, and the age of girls is 8, 10, and two are aged 17. The age of boys in private accommodation is two aged 8, two aged 13, and one aged 16, and the age of girls is 8, 14, and two are aged 17. Children from the asylum center mostly came from Kyiv (two from the Zakarpatska Region), and those in private accommodation from Kharkiv, Kyiv (2), Odesa, Rivne, Severodonetsk (2), Zhytomyr (2), and they live in Belgrade (5), Kraljevo (2), Novi Sad (1), and Subotica (1).
- 12 mothers displaced from Ukraine (7 in the asylum center and 5 in private accommodation). **Mothers in the asylum center** mostly came from Kyiv (2), but also from Donbas and Kherson regions. By profession, they are accountant, food technologist, lawyer, kindergarten teacher, two pensioners (with children and grandchildren), and one unknown profession. They are not employed. **Mothers in private accommodation** fled from Kyiv, Kharkiv (2), Rivne, and Zhytomyr. They are aged between 37 and retirement age. Currently, they reside in Belgrade (2), Kragujevac, Kraljevo, and Novi Sad. They are all employed in positions such as accountant, waitress, medical representative of a pharmaceutical company (also a pastry chef), history professor (and graphic designer), and transport worker (nurse). Their ages range from 34 to 39 years. All mothers in private accommodation who participated in the research have a regulated status through temporary protection.

The limitation of the methodology primarily stems from the **convenient sample of mothers and children displaced from Ukraine**, which we obtained in cooperation with the Commissariat and JRS. These are those who sought support and it is possible that they experienced more challenges, but also support, than those we did not include in the research. Additionally, large cities, Belgrade and Novi Sad, were included, and Ukrainians were identified in 22 places in Serbia⁸. The fact that representatives of a certain number of ministries⁹ (4) and schools (13) did not respond (positively) to letters and/or phone calls should also be taken into account. We tried to **overcome these limitations by analyzing three perspectives** – displaced population, institutions, and civil society.

8 08/04/2024, online interview, ICSO.

9 The MUP refused to provide data on the number of Ukrainians who entered Serbia since the beginning of the Russian aggression against Ukraine. There was no response from the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Tourism and Youth and the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights.

4. Research findings

4.1. Education

4.1.1. Legal, strategic, and institutional framework for education of students displaced from Ukraine

In the Republic of Serbia, in accordance with the **International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Their Families** and the **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child**, as well as the **Constitution of the Republic of Serbia and national regulations**, all children have equal rights to free access to education, regardless of their status. They are enrolled in school through a simplified procedure, aimed at the best interest of the child.

According to Article 71 of the **Constitution of the Republic of Serbia**, every individual has the right to education, which is free and compulsory in elementary school, while high school education is only free. Additionally, all citizens are guaranteed access to higher education under equal conditions. The **Law on the Fundamentals of the Education System** (Article 110) prohibits activities that lead to endangering, belittling, discriminating against, or segregating individuals or groups based on various characteristics such as race, nationality, ethnic origin, language, religion, sex, physical or mental abilities, developmental disorders, health status, age, social or cultural origin, economic status, political orientation, or any other characteristics defined by law as grounds for prohibiting discrimination.¹⁰

At the core of the **Strategy for the Development of Education in the Republic of Serbia by 2030¹¹ and its corresponding action plans for 2021-2023¹² and 2023-2026¹³** lies inclusive education. “The vision for further improving inclusion and justice is for all children to learn and develop their competencies through quality inclusive education by 2030, contributing to their well-being and encouraging their active participation in the community. Education in the Republic of Serbia must be provided for all children, students, and adults alike, based on principles of social justice and equal opportunities without discrimination.” The vision will be realized through further development and implementation of legal and strategic frameworks and their alignment with international standards; further development of management and financing of inclusive education; maintenance and improvement of additional support systems for children from vulnerable social groups, including “children on the move”.

The two general goals of the Strategy are 1) Increased quality of teaching and learning, equity and accessibility of pre-university education and strengthened the educational function of educational institutions and 2) Improved accessibility, quality, relevance and equity of higher education. Under both general goals, there are specific goals significant for the inclusion of refugees and migrants: 1.4: Improved accessibility, fairness and openness of pre-university education, 2.3: Improved inclusion and fairness of higher education.

However, when monitoring activities and indicators, migrants and refugees are rarely mentioned, and in **the annual reports on the implementation of the Action Plan from 2021 to 2023**, for the period from June 2021 to June 2022 and from June 2022 to December 2022¹⁴, there is no clearly recognized progress regarding the inclusion of migrants and refugees in the education system¹⁵. It is stated that Serbian as a foreign language program, manual¹⁶ and teacher training were developed (400 teachers in 2021, and 31 teachers in 2022).

10 prosveta.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/obrazovanje-ucenika-migranata-izbeglica-nov-2022.pdf

11 [SROVRS-2030-1.pdf \(prosveta.gov.rs\)](https://prosveta.gov.rs/SROVRS-2030-1.pdf)

12 [*SROVRS-2030-1.pdf \(prosveta.gov.rs\)](https://prosveta.gov.rs/*SROVRS-2030-1.pdf)

13 [Akcioni-plan-za-period-od-2023--do-2026--godine.pdf \(prosveta.gov.rs\)](https://prosveta.gov.rs/Akcioni-plan-za-period-od-2023--do-2026--godine.pdf)

14 [PRVI GODISNJI IZVEŠTAJ O IMPLEMENTACIJI AKCIJONOG PLANA ZA OSTVARIVANJE SROVPC 2030 \(prosveta.gov.rs\)](https://prosveta.gov.rs/PRVI-GODISNJI-IZVEŠTAJ-O-IMPLEMENTACIJI-AKCIJONOG-PLANA-ZA-OSTVARIVANJE-SROVPC-2030)
[Drugi godisnji izveštaj SROVRS_FINAL \(prosveta.gov.rs\)](https://prosveta.gov.rs/Drugi-godisnji-izveštaj-SROVRS_FINAL)

15 There are no clear indicators of the progress of the inclusion of migrants and refugees in the education system even in the National Report on Inclusive Education in the RS, period 2019-2021. [https://www.unicef.org/serbia/media/22251/file/Nacionalni%20izve%C5%A1taj%20o%20IO%202019-2021%20Sa%C5%B4etak%20\(SRB\).pdf](https://www.unicef.org/serbia/media/22251/file/Nacionalni%20izve%C5%A1taj%20o%20IO%202019-2021%20Sa%C5%B4etak%20(SRB).pdf)

16 [Srpski-kao-strani-jezik-u-nastavnoj-praksi.pdf](https://prosveta.gov.rs/Srpski-kao-strani-jezik-u-nastavnoj-praksi.pdf)

The number, socio-demographic characteristics of migrant and refugee students, their coverage¹⁷ and school success are not known. There are no indicators for their social inclusion, emotional status and degree of discrimination to which they are(not) exposed. When considering the inclusion of students from vulnerable social groups, the focus is on students with disabilities and Roma.

A **Department for Human and Minority Rights in Education** was established within the **Ministry of Education** with that scope of work. In 2015, the Social Inclusion Group was established, later renamed to the **Group for Minority Education, Social Inclusion, and Protection from Violence and Discrimination (GSI)**. The task of this group is the further development and coordination of inclusive education implementation.¹⁸ The **Institute for the Improvement of Education (ZUOV)** plays an important role in improving the quality of education at all levels, particularly in relation to the inclusion of migrant and refugee children, through the development of educational materials, teacher training, provision of guidelines and support to schools, and monitoring and evaluation.

The first migrant and refugee children were included in elementary education in the Republic of Serbia in the 2013/2014 school year. On 1 December 2023, on the territory of five school administrations, **84 students – Ukrainian citizens were included in the regular system of education**, 78 in elementary schools and 6 in high schools. The distribution of students in the competent school administrations is as follows: School Administration Leskovac¹⁹ – 12 (10 in elementary school/2 in high school), School Administration Zrenjanin – 4 in elementary school, School Administration Sombor – 4 (2 in elementary school/2 in high school), School Administration Valjevo – 60 in elementary school, and School Administration Belgrade – 4 (3 in elementary school/1 in high school).²⁰

The Ministry of Education is developing a system of inclusion of children migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in elementary and high school education, **with the support of the EU and the International Organization for Migration (IOM)**.²¹ A series of activities have been undertaken to include refugee children from Ukraine²², primarily based on developed capacities and resources for the inclusion of migrants from the Middle East. On 11 April 2022, the Ministry distributed “**Professional Guidance on Integration of Refugee and Asylum-Seeking Children in the Education System of the Republic of Serbia**”²³ to all school administrations where the arrival of children from Ukraine was registered. These guidelines regulate the enrollment process for students, the provision of support measures (at the school and student support level), as well as the assessment, monitoring, and issuance of documentation. A **Handbook for the Implementation of the Professional Guidance** has also been prepared.²⁴ The Ministry of Education has provided **information on the education system in Ukraine** to adapt educational materials as much as possible and establish connections with the system from which the children come, as well as **information on the organization of the educational process for Ukrainian children**.

The enrollment of migrant/refugee children is conducted according to age and previously acquired level of education, following the recognition of foreign school documents by the ENIC/NARIC center within the Qualifications Agency²⁵. If there is no evidence of previous education, students are enrolled based on a prior knowledge assessment. Enrollment requests are processed within five working days upon request from parents, legal guardians, or relevant authorities²⁶. If a school cannot enroll a child, it provides an explanation and informs educational counselors for inclusive education in the respective school administration within the same timeframe.

17 The Action Plan 2021-2023 says that one of the indicators for general objective 1, the rate of participation of refugee and migrant students in education, was 80% in 2019, and the expected value for 2023 was 81.5%. AP 2023-2026 says that in 2022 it is 82%, and that in 2026 it is expected to be 84%. It is not mentioned in annual reports of the Ministry of Education.

18 Ibid.

19 School Administration Leskovac is responsible for educational institutions in Vranje.

20 Ministry of Education RS, email, 16/01/2024.

21 The European Union has been providing support to the Ministry of Education in the field of migrant education in Serbia since 2018, through the MADAD 2 project, then with support through the Special Measure 6 and Special Measure 7 programs. Currently, the third continuation of the project “EU Support for Migration Management in Serbia – Improving reception capacities, protection services and access to education III”.

22 prosveta.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/obrazovanje-ucenika-migranata-izbeglica-nov-2022.pdf

23 <https://mpn.gov.rs/vesti/strucno-uputstvo-za-ukljucivanje-ucenika-izbeglicatrizilaca-azila-u-sistem-obrazovanja-i-vaspitanja/> he Ministry of Education developed the Professional Guidance in May 2017.

24 [Realizacija Programa dobrodoslice ucenicima migrantima.indd \(cep.edu.rs\)](#), The handbook was created within the project “Support to Refugee/ Migrant Students in the Territory of the Republic of Serbia”, implemented by the Center for Educational Policy in partnership with UNICEF Serbia and the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia.

25 [ENIC/NARIC centar – AGENCIJA ZA KVALIFIKACIJE – AZK](#)

26 MPNTR, Provincial Secretariat for Education, Regulations, Administration and National Minorities – National Communities of Vojvodina, KIRS, CSR, CSOs.

Displaced children from Ukraine residing in Serbia **usually do not need to have their school documents verified** in order to continue their education in primary and secondary schools. The Ministry of Education of Serbia made a decision on the simplified process of including displaced children in the education system. Ukrainian children can be enrolled in schools without previous recognition of diplomas or certificates, and the recognition process can be done later, if necessary, based on the individual needs of the student. The recognition of school documents from Ukraine in Serbia is required in the following cases: **for enrollment in universities** (in order to determine the equivalence of foreign diplomas with the Serbian education system), **for employment in professions that require a specific qualification** (e.g. doctors, lawyers, engineers), **for certain specializations or professional licenses** (e.g. in medicine, pharmacy, or education), in order for the person to acquire the right to work in those fields and **for long-term residence or recognition of education at an international level**.

The first activity upon the inclusion of migrant/refugee children in a specific school is the convening of an **Inclusive Education Expert Team**, required to develop a **School Support Plan for the Inclusion of Migrant/Refugee Students**. This aims to prepare all school students and their parents, as well as teachers, promote interculturality and linguistic diversity, strengthen ties with families and the local community, and mobilize peer support. The Expert Team coordinates sub-teams that handle specific inclusion tasks, such as the **Pre-assessment Team** (which must complete assessments within 7 days of the student's arrival at school) and the **Additional Support Team**. Based on the knowledge assessment, a **Student Support Plan** is developed, determining the grade level for student enrollment. An adaptation period of two weeks to two months for students is possible. The **Student Support Plan** includes an adaptation and stress coping program, an intensive learning program for the local language, individualized teaching activities through schedule adjustments, didactic materials, methods, and teaching styles, as well as extracurricular activities with peer support.

Student progress monitoring is conducted daily and reviewed every two weeks to a month, in line with the student adaptation process and the achievement of planned goals. Schools maintain **legally required records and pedagogical documentation on students**. The student portfolio includes student achievements, reports on the implementation of the Student Support Plan, special interests of students, language proficiency, correspondence with parents or guardians, and other institutions/agencies. If a student leaves school during the school year, parents receive a school report based on international experience in monitoring and evaluating student achievements and acquiring interdisciplinary competencies.

School administrations²⁷ have designated schools for the inclusion of migrant students according to the spatial distribution of collective centers. Centers are located in the territories of 9 school administrations with designated educational counselors overseeing and directing all educational activities. Prominent teachers – external collaborators of the Ministry (10 mentors) were also included, in order to provide mentoring support to schools. School resources, class sizes, language proficiency, and the interests of young migrants are monitored. Branko Pešić Elementary School (Belgrade) has been declared a resource center for the inclusion of migrants/refugees and other vulnerable groups in the education system. The Ministry has also provided **Ukrainian language translators** to translate educational content. Translated materials are delivered to schools and continuously published on the **website [remis.rs](https://www.remis.rs)** under the “resources” section, available to all teachers to support teaching with migrant students. A methodology for accelerated **Serbian as a foreign language** learning has been developed, and teachers of Serbian and foreign languages have been educated for its implementation (including online education). An elective program, Serbian as a foreign language, has been introduced in elementary schools.²⁸ Materials, such as a Teacher's Handbook, are also available.²⁹ **Three bilingual brochures were printed and distributed**³⁰ in 2021, containing good practice examples in migrant education: classroom and extracurricular activity examples, successful examples of school documentation, and products of migrant students.

The report “**Education of Migrant, Asylum-Seeker, and Refugee Students**” by the Department for Human and Minority Rights in Education of the Ministry of Education lists numerous implemented activities aimed at the inclusion of these students: education of preschool teachers, teachers, principals, and professional associates;

27 [U Srbiji postoji 16 školskih uprava, a za područje opština Novi Pazar, Sjenica i Tutin organizovana je Grupa za stručno-pedagoški nadzor u Novom Pazaru.](#)

28 <https://mpn.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/IOM-2-brosura-160x230mm5mm-SRP-PREVIEW.pdf>, <https://mpn.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/IOM-1-brosura-160x230mm5mm-SRP-PREVIEW.pdf>, <https://mpn.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/IOM-3-brosura-160x230mm5mm-SRP-PREVIEW.pdf>.

29 [Српски као страни језик | Завод за унапређивање образовања и васпитања \(zuov.gov.rs\)](#)

30 <https://mpn.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/IOM-2-brosura-160x230mm5mm-SRP-PREVIEW.pdf>, <https://mpn.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/IOM-1-brosura-160x230mm5mm-SRP-PREVIEW.pdf>, <https://mpn.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/IOM-3-brosura-160x230mm5mm-SRP-PREVIEW.pdf>.

granting small grants to schools; development of student support plans at the school level; additional classes; library visits, peer support, computer work; extracurricular activities – excursions, nature schools, theater, technology fairs; sports and cultural activities; involvement in various sections; marking significant dates; providing snacks, clothing, and footwear; workshops on interculturality, anti-discrimination, etc.; providing books, textbooks, school supplies; visits to collective centers, etc. Expert training of teachers and professional associates has been conducted to reduce stress in the migration process.³¹

In addition to institutional stakeholders, **international organizations and civil society organizations** play a significant role in supporting the inclusion of migrant/refugee students in schools.

4.1.2. Education of students displaced from Ukraine in practice – perception of relevant stakeholders

■ Institutional perspective

The perception of all institutional stakeholders included in the research is that **the inclusion of Ukrainian children in the education system in Serbia is carried out without major difficulties**. Their inclusion compared to migrant and refugee children from South and West Asian countries is easier, since there is greater similarity in culture and language. Additionally, displaced children from Ukraine, both boys and girls, were included in the education system in their country, without frequent changes of schools and loss of hours/years of schooling. A significant difference is that they stay longer in Serbia, and in school for that matter. They were enrolled in schools in Serbia based on the level of education they completed in Ukraine. They mostly had the necessary documents or, if they did not have them, the schools allowed them to enroll and waited for the documents to be collected and verified. They were given identification numbers for foreigners and registered in electronic diaries. The organization of learning and teaching is the same for all students, with greater support from teachers, as well as additional activities. In understanding the language, they used mobile phones for translation, were helped by peers of Russian or Ukrainian origin and Russian language teachers. The teachers sent the material for translation to the Ministry of Education. Similarly, the perception of institutional stakeholders is that Ukrainian children are well accepted by their Serbian peers and supported by teachers.

🗨️ Regarding enrollment, they are officially enrolled just like all other students. They received ID numbers for foreigners. They are treated exactly the same as local children. They receive certificates at the end so they can enroll in high school. They are assigned JOB (Unique Educational Number) numbers for the JISP (Unique Information System of Education) system. They receive the exact same treatment as everyone else.

Teachers and PPS, Vranje³²

🗨️ School, in my opinion, should not be a problem, because educational institutions have accepted them without any issues. Teachers are tolerant towards these students. It takes time for them to learn Serbian and fully integrate into educational activities.

NSUNM representative³³

Representatives of the Qualifications Agency stated that in the period 24 February 2022 – 12 February 2024, there were 78 requests for recognition of foreign elementary school documents from Ukraine and 42 requests for recognition of foreign high school documents.³⁴ They had no difficulty in recognizing school documents. There were cases of incomplete documentation for the recognition of higher education documents, but they were resolved with colleagues from the Information Center in Ukraine of the European Network of Information Centers (ENIC).³⁵ However, the **Qualifications Agency does not analyze the applicants for the recognition of school documents** according to age, sex, place, educational profile and school success, so there is no insight into the characteristics and potential of Ukrainian school and university students.

31 [0547-33302102239V.pdf \(ceon.rs\)](#)

32 01/03/2024, focus group with 10 teachers and PPS, from three schools in Vranje.

33 05/02/2024, online interview with representatives of the National Council for the Ukrainian National Minority.

34 Qualifications Agency, email 14 February 2024.

35 European Network of Information Centres, [ENIC-NARIC – gateway to recognition of qualifications](#)

There is also **varying preparedness of schools to include students displaced from Ukraine**, depending on whether they have experience working with migrant and refugee students. Schools with experience are mostly located near asylum and reception centers. Exactly fourteen such schools have been further empowered for the inclusion of migrant and refugee students through cooperation between the Ministry of Education and UNICEF. In these schools, winter and summer school programs have been developed, each lasting seven days during school breaks, aimed at providing children with opportunities for learning (including the Serbian language), interaction, integration, and promoting multiculturalism. The program is specially tailored for refugee and migrant children, as well as for all other children. There are also learning clubs open to provide quality education to children from vulnerable groups (in a total of 30 schools across Serbia)³⁶. UNICEF, in collaboration with these schools, includes young refugees/migrants (including Ukrainians) in projects dedicated to youth. The aim of the 'Upshift' project is to empower youth to initiate solutions to social challenges in their environment by combining social entrepreneurship, innovation, and teamwork.³⁷ The 'Uplift' project equips the most vulnerable youth and adolescents who have arrived from Ukraine with skills and an entrepreneurial mindset that contributes to building advanced communities.³⁸ All of these are examples of good practices, or methodologies for integrating migrant and refugee students, including newcomers from Ukraine, as reported by teachers and PPS representatives in these schools.

In these schools, Ukrainian children were enrolled in collaboration with all relevant stakeholders. Examples of such schools are two elementary schools and one high school in Vranje, which were included in the research. The enrollment of Ukrainian refugee children from the Asylum Center is carried out in collaboration with the School Administration Leskovac and the school, on the one hand, and the Commissioner for Refugees and the Asylum Center, on the other hand. There is also good vertical coordination with the Ministry of Education and the Commissioner for Refugees and Migration. Workshops are organized for them at school, and over time, they are involved in numerous activities. Schools have regular monthly meetings with the school administration and people involved in working with migrant/refugee children at the Ministry level. The representatives of the schools in Vranje emphasized the importance of the support of CSO experts in the Asylum Center regarding learning, helping with homework, socialization and integration.³⁹ They state that **the training on the education of migrant and refugee children meant for them to work with migrant and refugee students**, noting that the training was "in progress", and they had to manage in school with children who did not know the language, or knew only English (and the teachers did not). It would also mean for them to have **trial classes** where an educator would teach in a class where there are migrants/refugees, to see how it is in practice.

The **transition from elementary to high school education in Vranje** is also taking place in cooperation among all stakeholders. Elementary school, i.e. PPS helps with professional orientation, and children with parents go to see their preferred high schools. Enrollment is easier, but so is the integration of children into the first grades of high school, since all students go through a period of adaptation together.

Parent meetings are held in Serbian, teachers believe that parents understand Serbian. **Parents are assessed as responsible and highly demanding.** They work with children in the AC and control their education process. They come to parent meetings more regularly than parents of local children.

The challenge faced by schools with experience in working with refugees and migrants is that the same teachers and class teachers always have migrant and refugee children in their classes, and in this case, displaced children from Ukraine. Working with them requires additional preparations and activities for which they have no financial compensation, nor do their colleagues and the Ministry valorize their additional work in another way. Apart from financial compensation, they also pointed to the importance of sharing experiences with colleagues and publishing their good practices. They also talked about the need for consumable office supplies, a photocopier, toner, laptops, etc.

What we all clearly need, I'm not sure how others handle it in high schools. Unless we get that manual they mentioned we would receive, just to see the concept. That doesn't mean I'll be doing the same thing as them, but I like the idea of exchange. It doesn't have to be in the form of a publication, but let it be collected somewhere where we can go to exchange, not just through that platform, not only online.

Focus group with teachers with PPS from three schools in Vranje⁴⁰

36 <https://www.unicef.org/serbia/price/klub-za-ucenje-skola-u-skoli>

37 UPSHIFT: energija mladih za društveni uticaj | UNICEF Srbija

38 UPLIFT i UPSHIFT – Dostignuća mladih (ja-serbia.org)

39 01/03/2024, focus group with 10 teachers and PPS, from three schools in Vranje.

40 Ibid.

Schools that did not have experience with migrants and refugees from South and West Asian countries were less prepared for the inclusion of refugee and migrant students from Ukraine, and work with these students was mostly based on the enthusiasm and commitment of teachers. When it received a migrant student from Ukraine for the first time, an elementary school in Vranje contacted the School Administration Leskovac for support, and they organized training for teachers in cooperation with the resource Branko Pešić Elementary School from Belgrade. The principal of a high school believed that they were not ready for the arrival of students from Ukraine and Russia, but they were managing somehow, and for some questions, they turned to the Ministry of Education. She suggested that, instead of organizing training courses (of which there are too many), there should be an advisor for specific situations, or a resource center, as well as language support for children at the city level, since the Ministry of Education is overburdened to respond to the requests of individual schools. It can be assumed that some schools are not sufficiently informed that there are mentors in school administrations and the resource center – Branko Pešić Elementary School, who can help them with the inclusion of migrant/refugee children.

If we look at the findings through a **holistic model of integration of refugee and migrant children into the education system**, institutional stakeholders believe that displaced children from Ukraine in Serbian schools **meet educational and social needs relatively well**, and they see challenges in meeting **emotional needs**.

The holistic model of integration of refugee and migrant children into the education system⁴¹ includes responding to the needs of children and acting on the factors that shape their needs, through educational policies and practice. These children need to meet their **educational, social and emotional needs** within the education system. They need to learn the language of the host country and develop their mother tongue, overcome interruptions in schooling or limited education and adapt to the new education system. They need to be able to communicate with others, develop a sense of belonging and bond with the community, and develop a strong personal identity. They also need to feel safe, to be able to cope with loss, grief as well as separation and/or trauma. These needs are shaped by various **individual, interpersonal and institutional (school-level) factors**. **Individual factors** include knowledge of the language of the host country, mother language development, as well as physical and mental health. **Interpersonal factors** include relationships with peers, as well as family and community support for refugee children. **School-level factors** include the learning environment, teacher-student interactions, school engagement, school grading, extracurricular activities, and parent involvement in the school community. These factors are shaped by various **targeted policies and practices**. The holistic approach also **suggests partnering with other relevant stakeholders** to address various needs – the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, asylum centers, health institutions, centers for social work, CSOs, etc.

The **only obstacle they see to the educational and social inclusion of children** from Ukraine is **not knowing the Serbian language**. Although they believe that the children learned the Serbian language quickly (“surprisingly, without a (Ukrainian) accent, they even managed to learn our Vranje accent.”⁴²), all institutional stakeholders pointed to the **importance of introducing a preparatory period for migrant/refugee students**, which would consist of learning the Serbian language, getting to know the differences in the education system and, in general, in culture. Teachers are also not familiar with the Ukrainian education system, which would make it significantly easier for them to adapt the curriculum to the educational needs of children from Ukraine. Employees in educational institutions also warned about the arrival of an increasing number of foreigners and the inclusion of their children in the education system in Serbia, and that it is necessary to prepare the education system (both students and teachers) for their inclusion in the school system.

🗨️ The children who come, of course, need an initial adjustment period, the first week to get to know the people who work here at the school. They don’t need to go straight into the classroom and be thrown into the fire with five classes right away, like, ‘Now we’re learning this, now we’re learning that.’ The preparatory period could be much more relaxed.

Teachers and PPS, Vranje⁴³

41 Lucie Cerna (2019), REFUGEE EDUCATION: INTEGRATION MODELS AND PRACTICES IN OECD COUNTRIES, OECD Education Working Paper No. 203.

42 01/03/2024, focus group with 10 teachers and PPS, from three schools in Vranje.

43 Ibid.

“ A preparatory program for language learning is needed, possibly with support for socialization. It could last up to a month, but there should be a preparatory program they go through before entering our school. Like when our kids go to Germany or somewhere else. First, they go somewhere to learn the language, prepare, and then enter the system. The language barrier is the biggest problem. Also, they should be gradually introduced to the working system and the way things are done in our school.

Interview in Vasa Pelagić Elementary School⁴⁴

In the emotional sphere, teachers and PPS representatives notice the presence of **trauma and stress** in children displaced from Ukraine.

“ A little while ago, we were talking about stress. A little girl from my class hasn't seen her father since she came here. She came with her mother. She's in the 4th grade, and you know how girls are always attached to their fathers—sometimes you can really feel the deep sadness and how she withdraws into herself. When I noticed it, she said, 'I haven't seen Dad in a long time. He's at the front.' And then, that sadness affects her learning and socializing. So, just so you know, these things are happening. Two weeks ago, her brother, who is in 8th grade, lost his best friend, and it was really stressful. It was stressful for all of our 8th graders who heard about it and were comforting him. He was killed in Ukraine. So, yes, the stress is still there.

Focus group with teachers and PPS from three schools in Vranje⁴⁵

The management structure and the PPS service of Vasa Pelagić Elementary School in Kotež, which is near the Krnjača Asylum Center and also one of the 14 schools additionally supported for working with migrant/refugee students, highlighted the importance of the training they received from **Save the Children – Healing and Education Through the Arts (HEART)**, aimed at helping children exposed to traumatic experiences or everyday stress.⁴⁶ They found the practical methodology extremely useful and continue to use it in their work with all migrants and refugees, including Ukrainian children.

Finally, the challenge was also identified in the field of **preschool education**⁴⁷. Ukrainian mothers face the difficulty of enrolling their children in **preschool institutions** due to the low capacity of the institutions and the high prices that the local population also faces. The practice differs from one local government to another, since they determine the costs of state-owned kindergartens and the amount and criteria for subsidizing their costs.

■ Perspective of international organizations and civil society organizations

Representatives of international organizations and civil society organizations are partners with the Ministry of Education and the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration and play a significant role in supporting the inclusion of migrant and refugee children in the education system, as well as empowering all stakeholders in this process—children and parents, educational workers and schools, institutions, and decision-makers. IOM, UNICEF, and UNHCR have placed emphasis on strengthening the capacities of institutions to ensure the sustainability of achieved results—the Ministry of Education, schools, and the Commissariat. Their projects and activities are listed under the previous chapter by institutional representatives as examples of good practice. Local organizations are more focused on direct work with children, parents, teachers, and the local community. All organizations coordinate and cooperate mutually, regularly exchanging information and experiences through the UNICEF-led **Working Sub-Groups on Child Protection for Refugees and Migrants**.

All stakeholders who participated in the research recognized the importance of the role of international and local organizations in the educational process of migrant and refugee children, including displaced children from Ukraine. Representatives of organizations see the process of integrating displaced children from Ukraine into the Serbian education system the same as representatives of institutions—the process went well, children achieve good educational results, and are integrated and accepted by their peers and teachers. They also point out the collaboration of various stakeholders in this process—representatives of the Ministry of Education (including school administrations), the Qualifications Agency, schools, and the Commission for

44 28/03/2024, interview in elementary school.

45 Ibid.

46 [Smjernice za integraciju HEART metodologije.indd \(savethechildren.net\)](#)

47 17/01/2024, meeting with representatives of the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration.

Refugees and Migration. However, **challenges were identified**, especially for Ukrainian children and mothers in private accommodation.

The first challenge highlighted by local and international organizations is the difficulty in detecting the number, socio-demographic structure, and needs of displaced persons from Ukraine, as well as the percentage of their coverage in the Serbian education system and their needs in terms of inclusion in the education system.

“ It seems to me that somehow data was missing, I think the specificity of that particular group of refugees, mostly because they did not report to the state for accommodation in centers, but simply organized themselves and then were practically invisible to both the state and the civil sector.

International organization representative⁴⁸

Therefore, **the challenge was to reach Ukrainian families in private accommodation and map their education needs, but also to support them in integrating into the educational process and in social integration**. Upon arrival, Ukrainian citizens were dispersed across 22 towns in Serbia.⁴⁹ Services and information are available to a lesser extent to families who are not in big cities and in the Vranje Asylum Center.

Secondly, international and local organizations have recognized a greater **need for psychological support for Ukrainian students who are only attending Ukrainian online schools** in relation to students who are enrolled at the same time in a Serbian school (or only in a Serbian school). They also, like the representatives of the institutions, indicated the presence of symptoms of trauma and stress in many Ukrainian students (which will be discussed more in the chapter on health). Certain representatives of international organizations faced complaints from mothers and children about discrimination and peer violence based on Ukrainian origin.

“ We advocated for children to be integrated into local schools to better connect with their peers and participate in extracurricular activities. These children literally do not have a single Serbian friend and do not speak a word of Serbian, even though they have been here for a year and a half. They spend most of their time at home, don't go anywhere, and are always on their phones. Meanwhile, children who enrolled in our schools in the eighth grade have already learned Serbian, made friends, and they go to the cinema together. We can see the difference now when they participate in our activities; they already have a group of friends, which is appropriate and normal for their age.

CSO representative⁵⁰

Thirdly, organizations emphasized the importance of peer education and encouraged teachers to involve volunteers in school and extracurricular activities, such as summer and winter schools, which proved to be a good practice.

“ During winter and summer breaks, we organized winter and summer schools in collaboration with UNICEF's youth program, which has volunteers. The school organizes Serbian as a foreign language and other programs, but we also offer volunteers who are students, high schoolers, or others who go through our training. We created a package of English language workshops, intercultural workshops, and sports workshops for the volunteers to conduct with the children. We had 130 volunteers. Everyone who comes continues, they want more, and the children enjoy it, which enhances the quality. And more and more teachers are using it. Initially, they were reluctant, saying they didn't want volunteers and could do everything themselves, but over time... I think it's great. We just finished winter school with 400 children, half of whom were refugees, migrants, and foreigners. This is where integration happens.

International organization representative⁵¹

48 23/01/2024, online interview, ICSO.

49 08/04/2024, online interview, ICSO.

50 19/01/2024, online interview with CSO representative.

51 01/02/2024, online interview with ICSO representative.

Fourthly, they stressed the need for the education system to better prepare for the increasing number of migrants or foreigners coming to Serbia as workforce, bringing their families, especially as Serbia's legislation changes to facilitate the inclusion of foreigners in the labor market and their integration into society.

Belarusians, Indians, Pakistanis, and people from Bangladesh are also coming. The question now is about this second wave of labor migrants... Who monitors their needs? If someone comes here earning 500 euros a month and brings their family, are they in a better situation than other vulnerable groups here? But it is believed that they have not yet brought their families. We don't have data supporting this thesis. Following the last school year, the number of foreigners in these 14 schools increased by 20%. We have schools in Novi Sad with 20% foreigners. We have become a multicultural society without realizing it.

ICSO representative⁵²

Representatives of organizations also highlighted the varying preparedness of schools to work with refugee and migrant students, striving to provide additional psychosocial support to Ukrainian children (and other refugee and migrant children) and to empower teachers and schools to work with them.

There were various training sessions initiated when the refugee crisis began. Some schools are very well prepared and implement the program effectively. However, we still have schools that do not have this program. There is no additional instruction, and there are no criteria adapted for children who do not know the language. This is still not standardized across the entire country. It also depends on the school principals and teachers. We have wonderful examples where they are fully adapted, and eager to help the children further by including additional classes. And we have examples where this doesn't exist at all. So, it depends on individual cases.

CSO representative⁵³

All stakeholders highlighted the importance of developing **Serbian as a Foreign Language** program, which was first created in response to the wave of refugees during the 2015-2017 period. Before that, there was a program for Serbian as a Non-Native Language intended for minorities in Serbia.

However, we developed the methodology for "Serbian as a Foreign Language" for the first time with the Faculty of Philology, essentially acknowledging that we are not only a country of emigration but also of immigration. Now, there is a whole set of training programs being developed, including advanced training on how to teach Serbian as a foreign language to newly arrived children. The concept includes individualization, differentiation, and "Serbian as a Foreign Language", where progress is assessed for each child individually.

ICSO representative⁵⁴

Difficulties were noted in accessing preschool education, as capacities are full, and costs are high. For example, in Belgrade, the enrollment fee for kindergarten is 28,000 RSD (240 EUR), and Ukrainian mothers are expected to pay the full price. This is a significant challenge as most refugees from Ukraine are single mothers with children, making it hard for them to join the labor market if they have to take care of their children.

We are now working on an advocacy document regarding preschools. There are many problems because they require full payment. We all know how problematic it is for our children, with waiting lists. The inclusion of children in preschool education is very difficult. Especially since the Law on Asylum, which lists the rights of those under temporary protection, does not mention the right to free preschool education. There is a general right to elementary and high school education but not preschool. As we worked with people under temporary protection ... the institutions are not to blame but the specific Article 76, which lists the rights, and the lack of harmonization of laws as well.

ICSO representatives⁵⁵

52 01/02/2024, interview with ICSO representative.

53 19/01/2024, online interview with CSO representative.

54 01/02/2024, interview with ICSO representative.

55 07/02/2024, online interview with ICSO representative.

Representatives of organizations also mentioned **higher education**, from preparing high school students for university enrollment to the offer of support from the Rector of the University of Belgrade for admitting young people from Ukraine to universities. However, there was no interest from the youth, which may indicate that there are no difficulties for Ukrainian displaced persons enrolling in universities, or that there is insufficient information about the enrollment process for displaced persons and their needs. From the perspective of a mother from Ukraine in the asylum center, there is a lack of financial support for youth from Ukraine to study in Serbia, since they cannot be financed from the budget of the Republic of Serbia. According to the Qualifications Agency, out of 42 requests for recognition of foreign high school diplomas, 90% refer to the recognition needed for the purpose of continuing education, i.e. enrolling in studies in the Republic of Serbia.⁵⁶ This means that their needs in relation to university education should be examined.

Finally, **international and local organizations warned that donor funds for supporting displaced persons from Ukraine are significantly decreasing**, while the war is still ongoing, families are still arriving, and there are various needs related to the integration of children into the education system and entire families into Serbian society. Most organizations have ceased operations at the Vranje Asylum Center.

In order to reduce funds and achieve sustainability, **UNICEF plans to empower ZOUV and their Department for Minorities and the Diaspora** to further develop a support network for schools. The Department should continue to support 14 schools that have gone through their program for working with migrant/refugee children, and to involve other schools, as well as to implement Serbian as a Foreign Language education. Strengthening the resource center – Branko Pešić Elementary School, which provides on-the-ground support, is also planned.⁵⁷

Perspective of children and mothers displaced from Ukraine

Regarding the way of participation in the educational process, there are **three groups of students displaced from Ukraine**. One group consists of children who attend a Serbian school and an online Ukrainian school at the same time, so that they have the option of choosing – return to Ukraine, stay in Serbia or go to a third country. Another group are children who only attend an online Ukrainian school because they expect to return to Ukraine. Within that group, there are also children who tried to go to a Serbian school, but gave up because of the inconveniences they experienced, that is, peer violence based on their Ukrainian origin and/or unsupportive teachers. The third group consists of children who go only to Serbian schools. These are often children from mixed marriages, i.e. one of the parents, usually the father, is of Serbian origin.

🗨️ My son also attends a Serbian school, but he is also online in a school in Ukraine, and he took exams, and we are in constant contact with his teacher. We are doing this because we want to go back. It would be nicer if they could start attending a Ukrainian school right away. But they are really doing great here, they've made friends, and everything is fine.

Mother, employed

🗨️ I came on 8 March 2022. I came from Kharkiv, with my daughter. My daughter is fifteen years old... She only attended Serbian school for one year, but there was a lot of bullying, so she left school and now only attends Ukrainian school online.

Mother, informally employed

🗨️ I came before the war. We lived in the central part of Ukraine. I have four children, three attend Serbian school, and the youngest is in preschool. I am registered here. I live in Kraljevo. My husband is from Serbia. We lived in Ukraine before the war. The children only attend Serbian school... We have nothing to do with the Ukrainian school, and we don't want to. We have decided to stay here. In half a year, we will submit the papers for citizenship. Mother, employed

Online focus group participants, private accommodation⁵⁸

56 14/02/2024, email, Qualifications Agency.

57 The Action Plan for the implementation of SROVRS 2023-2026 plans to establish five functional resource centers regarding the inclusion of students from vulnerable social groups, which should provide support to students, parents and employees in educational institutions.

58 19/04/2024, online focus group with mothers from Ukraine, from private accommodation.

Children who attend both schools, as well as their mothers, consider it not to be a significant burden. Teachers and PPS representatives also think so, but they are not familiar with the dynamics and content of the online classes. The online school in Ukraine started during the COVID-19 pandemic and continued during the war throughout Europe. There is varied information from parents about the organization of online classes, depending on whether the children attend both schools or only the online Ukrainian school. Children who attend both schools and their mothers say they have classes on Saturdays, Sundays, and sometimes in the evenings, one or two hours a week. While children who only attend the Ukrainian online school have regular classes every day for a longer period.

Every day from 12 PM to 5 PM, he is in (the online Ukrainian) school. Actually, he is enrolled in two schools. One is a simple school that he attends externally just to take exams, and it's a free public school. The other is a paid school where he attends online classes, plus additional lessons with three teachers. That way, he has lessons and homework. But when the exam period comes, he takes the exams at the public school.

Mother, employed online in Ukraine⁵⁹

Children who only attend the Ukrainian online school say they spend time in the apartment, have no social life, feel lonely, and do not speak Serbian. Two children who are afraid to leave the apartment have experienced peer violence, and one girl is working with a psychologist because of it. This is consistent with the insights of CSO representatives who point out that children who only attend the Ukrainian online school are the most vulnerable.

The days are very similar and quite sad. I don't have any friends. I'm afraid to go for walks by myself. I spend a lot of time at home.

Girl, 14, private accommodation, Ukrainian elementary school

I wake up around 10 or 11 in the morning, look at something on my phone, then I eat, then I do my homework, then I have online classes, then I play some games or go outside. But after they bullied me, I don't go outside anymore. And so, I still have some free time after that... Boy, 13, private accommodation, Ukrainian elementary school

Online focus group participants, private accommodation⁶⁰

These children, as well as others in both private and collective accommodation, **spend a lot of time on mobile phones and playing video games**. Many video games are played in groups, so they socialize in the virtual world.

(Facilitator: Do you also play Roblox? Can you play games on certain days, or you can play every day?) We can play every day, but after doing homework. (And how many hours a day do you play games?) About six hours because we have nothing else to do. My mom works, my dad works.

Girl, 8, private accommodation, Serbian elementary school

I would like to play even more than I do now. But unfortunately, out of the two laptops I have, only one can support the games I play. On the computer, I play for a minimum of four hours a day, and then about an hour on the phone. I'm not as absorbed in the game I play on the phone. It also depends on my mood. Girl, 17, private accommodation, completed 10th grade at a Ukrainian school

Online focus group participants, private accommodation⁶¹

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid.

In general, most children who participated in the research, regardless of age and whether they are in collective or private accommodation, **rarely participate in extracurricular activities**. They say they do not have time because they have Ukrainian school on weekends, or they find it difficult to adjust to the school shift changes, or they do not have the means to pay for them. While in Ukraine, older children were active, participating in sports and artistic activities (football, climbing, table tennis, swimming, crocheting, painting, etc.). The greatest encouragement to spend their free time meaningfully in Serbia came from civil society organizations. Young people in the Asylum Center cited the main obstacles to participating in extracurricular activities as the distance of the AC from the city and poorly organized public transport, lack of information about events for youth, and not enough events/activities/places for young people to gather. Those young people who participated in activities outside the AC (extracurricular or project activities, sports) feel better. Unfortunately, there are fewer such activities now as many projects by international and nongovernmental organizations have ended.

Many organizations left because of the lack of interest from children in these activities. I was the only one going; they constantly pushed me to go here and there. My advice would be for others to do something and not sit in the room on the phone or play games all the time. The opportunities we had with the arrival of Indigo and UNICEF were immense. We went to the Youth Achievements competition three or four times. You explore Serbia, learn something new, make new friends and acquaintances. You see how the system works, what problems the country has. We had the chance to see what was happening in the country, for example, you get a topic about air pollution...

Girl, 17, Vranje Asylum Center, Serbian high school⁶²

Mothers accommodated in the Asylum Center recognized the significant support and cooperation between the Commissariat, schools, international organizations, and civil society organizations in integrating their children into the education system, from school enrollment to the entire process of education, socialization, and integration into the school and local community. They believe that **education in Serbia is good and of high quality**.

Regarding the school enrollment process, the mothers said they were not dealing with it themselves; the Commissariat did everything for them, including collecting and translating documents and enrolling the children in school. They received a lot of help, including transportation for the children to school.

Focus group with mothers from Ukraine, accommodated in the Vranje Asylum Center⁶³

On the other hand, **mothers in private accommodation** relied on their resources, family, friends, and the motivation of school principals and teachers. With their help, they overcame challenges such as language barriers, lack of information about the education system, and the recognition of documents (duration and costs). Some received support from civil society organizations for learning Serbian, recognition of diplomas, and psychosocial activities for the children.

I came to the school on 15 August 2022, and the school was closed. I didn't know what to do. I didn't speak Serbian at the time. I saw a man leaving the school and thought he was security. I told him I wanted to enroll my child in school, I am Ukrainian, using something from Google Translate. He said he was the school principal. He reassured me, saying my son would definitely attend their school. And that's how it was. He said everyone was on vacation and to come back on the 25th. I did, with a lot of documents, and he told me none of that was necessary, to bring it later. My son started school (first grade of elementary school) within five days. (Beograd)

Online focus group participant, private accommodation, Belgrade⁶⁴

Mothers and children pointed to **the differences in the organization of the education system**. In Ukraine, preschool education for children aged 3-6 is mandatory. Elementary education lasts nine years, typically from ages 6 to 15, and is compulsory and free. After that, students can continue high school education, which lasts

62 02/03/2024, focus group with five young refugees from Ukraine, Vranje Asylum Center.

63 02/03/2024, focus group with mothers from Ukraine at the Vranje Asylum Center.

64 19/04/2024, online focus group with mothers from Ukraine from private accommodation.

three years, preparing them for the final exam to obtain a high school diploma. This level of education is not mandatory, but most students continue their education after elementary school. High school education can be general or vocational. Higher education in Ukraine can be divided into several categories, including university education, vocational-technical education, and adult education. Higher education institutions include universities, higher education institutions, and technical schools. Additionally, the Ukrainian education system has specific features in terms of language policy and curricula adapted to cultural and regional characteristics. **Most mothers and children, comparing Serbian and Ukrainian schools, concluded that the programs in Ukraine are more demanding and teachers stricter**, while one student who finished the 7th grade in a Serbian school and the 8th grade in a Ukrainian school said the content was very similar. The perception of mothers related to the educational program and teachers depends on the level of education and educational profile (and the size of the city) that the student attended in Ukraine or is now attending in Serbia.

🗨️ (In Ukraine) The school has five floors and many classrooms, many students, and that's it, a lot of strict teachers, and the school is much harder there than here.

Boy, 15 years old, both Serbian and Ukrainian elementary schools, Vranje Asylum Center⁶⁵

🗨️ I think the education system in Serbia is a bit better because there are also conduct grades, which is quite good; I don't remember having that in Ukraine. I would add that learning is easier here, and the teachers are a little better in Serbia. It's not a big difference, but they are slightly better in Serbia. I think that's it.

Boy, Serbian high school, 16 years old, private accommodation, Belgrade⁶⁶

A mother pointed out the **difficulties of enrolling her child in kindergarten** in Belgrade because it is expensive, even the state kindergartens, and there are no available places in either state or private kindergartens. Another mother in Vranje expressed the need for **support in higher education**, as Ukrainians cannot receive state funding and must finance it themselves, which is quite expensive (*"Education up to the age of 18 is covered, but once you turn 18, no one wants to deal with the children, and many children plan to enroll in universities. They are unable to enroll in university"*).⁶⁷

In both groups, mothers saw **learning the Serbian language as the biggest challenge for their children's inclusion in the education system**. Children and teachers tackled this with Google Translate, with support from peers in the class (with the help of the English language or peers of Russian/Ukrainian origin), additional engagement from Serbian and Russian language teachers, and AC additional support from older children and professionals in CSOs. In any case, they believe that the children quickly mastered the language and are more or less successful in learning the school material.

The **children themselves**⁶⁸ also highlighted the importance of the Serbian language and gave **recommendations** for learning it:

🗨️ Google Translate works very poorly as a translator for some technical things, speaking from my experience. I would recommend using Google Lens, which you can use to take a picture and translate, as every phone has it. I would recommend that. And I would recommend children to practice more and talk as much as possible with Serbs.

Boy, 16, Serbian high school, private accommodation

🗨️ I would tell them not to learn certain phrases, like 'how to cross the street,' but to learn words like 'why', 'than', 'how', 'like', 'there'. Because when they can ask questions using those words, they can learn new words. But if they memorize whole sentences, they cannot learn the language and new words... Learning a language from a textbook is not good because you cannot ask a textbook anything, so learning with someone, and communication with others.

Boy, 13, Serbian elementary school, private accommodation

65 02/03/2024, focus group with five young refugees from Ukraine, Vranje Asylum Center.

66 30/04/2024, focus group with two young refugees from Ukraine, private accommodation.

67 Focus group with women from Ukraine in the Vranje Asylum Center.

68 30/04/2024, focus group with two young refugees from Ukraine, private accommodation.

”” Talk a lot with friends, because when you talk to someone, it’s easier to remember how to respond. They should not be ashamed to ask for help from teachers and other students.

Girl, 17, Serbian high school, private accommodation

”” I was the same as they are now, when I came to Serbia, I only knew Ukrainian and Russian. My friends would speak to me in Serbian, and I would speak to them in Ukrainian, and then we started, they learned Ukrainian, and I learned Serbian. And then I would tell them, like, a car, and then show what a car is. It’s avtomobil, in Ukrainian. Then I would show the car and they understood what it was. Then they said the car, and then I understood that it was avtomobil.

Boy, 8, Serbian and Ukrainian elementary school, private accommodation.

”” I would recommend that they help and show the object and tell them. And for them to understand what the object is, they should help by drawing. (moderator: What should they draw?) Like, you draw a hand and then tell them this is a hand. Then they would remember it that way. And they should use their hands to show what is what.

Boy, 8, Serbian elementary school, private accommodation.

”” We now have online Serbian classes. But it’s online, and she says that if it were possible to come in person like she attended English school. And that the school should be through Ukrainian, to learn Serbian through Ukrainian, not through English or Russian. She says that live communication is important.

Girl, 17, finished 10th grade in Ukrainian school, private accommodation.

However, what worries mothers and their children (of all ages) most in both groups is **peer violence because of their Ukrainian origin** (even when the father is Serbian) and **insufficient support from teachers in these cases**, sometimes even their pro-Russian orientation. Some mothers resolved this by talking to the class teacher, school psychologist, and/or school principal, and invoking rights and institutions and organizations that protect their rights; some enrolled their children in other schools, and some withdrew their children from Serbian schools and enrolled them only in online Ukrainian schools. It is important that some children (older elementary and high school students) have shown they know whom to turn to for help in cases of violence – the class teacher and PPS, but it’s important that all migrant and refugee children are familiar with the procedures for responding when it comes to violence.

”” Then problems began with the students who were in the same class, but the issues were not with learning but with relationships. My child started to withdraw, didn’t talk much about it, but I noticed that when the whole class went on an excursion, the children didn’t even want to greet my daughter. They would come and turn their heads away, just to avoid seeing her. When I went to the principal and the class teacher, they told me, well, the child must somehow build relationships with her peers. My daughter had a friend who was Russian, and the Serbian children teased them, saying why are you friends when Russia and Ukraine are at war, meaning you have to kill each other, why don’t you kill each other... That’s when I decided enough was enough and enrolled her in a private online school in Ukraine. Now, my daughter has become calmer, not as nervous, but she doesn’t go outside because she’s anxious and worried that she will see children from that class, and because of that worry, she doesn’t go outside.

Online focus group participant, private accommodation, informally employed⁶⁹

Sources of stress for children, besides peer violence, include separation from parents, relatives, and friends who remained in Ukraine (or went to other countries), with some fathers and brothers going to the front line. There is uncertainty, mothers and children worry about those who stayed behind, and they receive grim news from Ukraine. It is also important to note that many Ukrainian families did not come directly from Ukraine to Serbia but traveled through a number of places and even stayed in other countries.

69 19/04/2024, online focus group with mothers from Ukraine, from private accommodation.

“ We first went to Poland, stayed in a hotel for one night. From Poland, we went to Georgia, where we lived for six months. After that, we flew to Turkey, from Turkey to Belgrade, and from Belgrade to Petrovaradin... We had to leave Georgia because it was not peaceful there, there were always some rallies and protests. Just before we left, there was some conflict, and a guy got his head smashed. Because of the unrest in the country, we had to go.

Boy, 13, Ukrainian online elementary school, private accommodation⁷⁰

In the end, there were also **children and youth who mentioned that coming to Serbia expanded their horizons**, regardless of whether they were in private or collective accommodation.

“ What I like about Serbia is that in Ukraine we lived in a small town, we didn't even go on excursions within Ukraine, and here in Serbia, I've already been on excursions three times to Macedonia, Bosnia, and we will go to Italy, so I really like that. The possibility of development, seeing the world, I really like that.

Girl, 17, Serbian high school, private accommodation⁷¹

“ Both Serbia and Ukraine are nice. In Ukraine, I lived in a very small town, and I miss that town, but in Serbia, I got the chance to live closer to a big city, which has its own perks. For example, the food. I hadn't seen some food in Ukraine until I came here. So, in Novi Sad, I was able to see and try something new.

Girl, 17, finished 10th grade of Ukrainian school, private accommodation⁷²

“ Of course, my life changed a lot when I came to Serbia. I like the school here much more than in Ukraine. In Ukraine, I was at an economic lyceum, but I wanted something more related to electrical engineering. And here, I found an electrical engineering school. I found a lot more friends here, and since I came to Serbia, everything has been going better for me.

Boy, 16, Serbian high school, private accommodation⁷³

Regarding plans for the future, the answers from mothers and children are diverse, ranging from staying in Serbia, returning to Ukraine, or going to third countries, to those who still do not have a clear plan. The decision will depend on the course of the war in Ukraine and the level of integration they achieve in Serbia.

High school students who participated in the research gave **recommendations for the inclusion of migrant children in schools and for social integration in general**:

“ My recommendation is not to be ashamed to express your needs to your class teacher and other teachers. For example, I was excused from English class because it was difficult for me, so I took Russian instead. The class teacher coordinated with other teachers to give me an easier program.

Girl, 17, Serbian high school, private accommodation⁷⁴

“ First, regarding school, it's important to behave well, as this will make a good impression on the teachers. If you have good relationships with the teachers, you will learn better. If you don't listen to the teacher, if you don't follow, you won't have the opportunity to learn well. Also, I would say to talk as much as possible with language teachers so they can correct you more often. Accept their criticism if you say something wrong. And don't be ashamed to ask for help, as S. mentioned.

Boy, 16, Serbian high school, private accommodation⁷⁵

70 23/04/2024, online focus group with two Ukrainian children, older elementary school students (7th and 8th grade).

71 Ibid.

72 30/04/2024, online focus group with four young, displaced persons from Ukraine, private accommodation.

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid.

75 Ibid.

More clubs for young people, more activities for youth, and more organizations. More activities in general and more city-cleaning activities. Everything is very polluted and dirty, especially in Vojvodina and Vranje, I read about this recently. That's an ecological change. And more opportunities for teenagers. There is one organization in Vranje for young people, but I don't know if they will make any changes. More places to get information would be helpful too. For example, going to the municipality to ask if there are any activities for young people. For example, Ukrainians living in private accommodation have nowhere to get information. We in the center, we had some projects and traveled. But what about the others? They don't have these opportunities.

Girl, 17, Serbian high school, Vranje Asylum Center⁷⁶

I would like to see changes regarding bullying. I'm not some miracle that fell from the sky; I want to be seen as a human being.

Girl, 17, Serbian high school, Vranje Asylum Center⁷⁷

Looking back, I was very shy and didn't initiate contact, but now I see that I should have. Make as many contacts as possible, and maybe some of them will develop into friendships.

Girl, 14, Ukrainian online school, private accommodation⁷⁸

4.1.3. Education of students displaced from Ukraine – summary of challenges and solutions

The Professional Guidance on Integration of Refugee and Asylum-Seeking Children in the Education System of the Republic of Serbia contains elements of a **holistic model of integration of refugee and migrant children into the education system**⁷⁹. Activities for the inclusion of migrant and refugee children at the level of the entire school are foreseen, which include the preparation of teachers and all school students and their parents for the reception of new students, promotion of interculturality and linguistic diversity; strengthening ties with family and local community; mobilizing peer support. The support plan for the migrant/refugee student contains a program of adaptation and overcoming stress; program of intensive learning of the language of the environment; individualization of teaching activities through the adjustment of timetables, didactic materials, methods and ways of working; involvement in extracurricular activities with peer support. This means that meeting the educational, social and emotional needs of refugee and migrant students is foreseen; the individual, interpersonal and institutional level is targeted; and the partnership of all relevant stakeholders is insisted upon.

Through the prism of this model, we will interpret the findings we received from three different perspectives – displaced mothers and children, institutional stakeholders, and civil society representatives.

- ▶ **Concerning the educational needs**,⁸⁰ which include the need for refugee and migrant students to learn the language of the host country and develop their native language, overcome interruptions in schooling or limited education and adapt to the new education system, the perception of all stakeholders is that the education of Ukrainian children is carried out well, starting from enrollment, through the organization of classes and student success, to grading.
 - **The first challenge in this sphere**, recognized by all stakeholders, is **the lack of a preparatory period for the inclusion of Ukrainian students in the education system in Serbia**, which would include learning the Serbian language, getting to know the culture and education system in Serbia. Learning the Serbian language was based mainly on navigating and using Google Translate and engaging children of Russian or Ukrainian origin who had mastered the Serbian language, but also the enthusiasm of

76 02/03/2024, focus group with five young, displaced persons from Ukraine, Vranje Asylum Center.

77 02/03/2024, focus group with five young, displaced persons from Ukraine, Vranje Asylum Center.

78 23/04/2024, online focus group with two Ukrainian children, older elementary school students (7th and 8th grade).

79 More in: Lucie Cerna (2019), REFUGEE EDUCATION: INTEGRATION MODELS AND PRACTICES IN OECD COUNTRIES, OECD Education Working Paper No. 203.

80 Ibid.

Serbian and Russian language teachers who additionally worked with Ukrainian students. Such an approach is tiring for both students (both displaced and local ones) and teachers. Although the Serbian as a foreign language program was developed, a manual for its implementation⁸¹ was published, and was introduced as an elective subject in elementary schools⁸², in this research we did not encounter a systemic implementation.

RECOMMENDATION: The Ministry of Education should support the proposal of the Society for the Serbian Language and Literature of Serbia, which is included in the *Initiative for the Introduction of the Elective Curriculum of Serbian as a Foreign Language*, to make Serbian as a Foreign Language a compulsory subject for students whose mother tongue is not Serbian.⁸³ Learning clubs (that exist already in 30 schools) can be used as places for a preparatory period for refugee and migrant students by applying the Serbian as a Foreign Language program and presenting information about culture and education in Serbia (through workshop work). The Ministry and ZUOV should conduct an evaluation of the implementation of the Serbian as a Foreign Language program.

- **The second challenge** recognized by the researchers is that, although all stakeholders talk about the good school success of Ukrainian school students, there is no **systemic monitoring of the school success of Ukrainian displaced children** (or other refugees and migrants) and comparison with the success of local children, as well as **research** on the education of Ukrainian children (nor other refugees and migrants). Without these data and research findings, it is difficult to determine the educational needs of migrant and refugee children and whether they are met.
- Closely related to this challenge is **the lack of monitoring of the characteristics and potential of Ukrainian school students and students through the analysis of applicants for the recognition of school documents** to the Qualifications Agency, according to age, sex, place, educational profile, and school success.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- » The Ministry of Education, in addition to monitoring the indicators of achievement in the *Strategy for the Development of Education in the RS until 2030* – “The rate of participation of refugee and migrant students in education”, should include and monitor the indicator “Success of refugee and migrant students in education compared to domestic students” (in the PISA test, too) while differentiating the indicators in relation to the country of origin, age and sex of students. Annual reports on the implementation of action plans should also contain this information.
 - » Moreover, the Ministry of Education should develop cooperation with the academic community in conducting research (especially longitudinal, on a representative sample) and organize expert meetings for the exchange of practice and research findings, as a basis for updating and creating educational policies.
 - » The Qualifications Agency should, in public reports, prepare and publish a regular analysis of applicants for the recognition of school documents according to age, sex, place, educational profile, and school success.
- In response to educational needs, challenges were also observed in **enrolling children displaced from Ukraine in preschool and higher education institutions**. In both cases, it is about the lack of financial resources for enrolling children/youth in educational institutions. There is a possibility of subsidizing enrollment in pre-school institutions for children of persons under temporary protection, only if the local self-government enables it, that is, if it includes this target group in its local acts. Additionally, displaced students from Ukraine cannot study using the budget of the Republic of Serbia.

81 The manual, along with the organization of the teaching of Serbian as a foreign language, also includes the Rulebook on the institution's actions in case of suspected or established discriminatory behavior and insult to the reputation, honor or dignity of a person; stress recognition and management in students, parents and teachers; communication and listening skills; recognition of stereotypes and prejudices; the importance and role of intercultural understanding.

82 [Нови изборни предмет у основним школама: Српски као страни језик – Друштво за српски језик и књижевност Србије \(bg.ac.rs\)](#)

83 [ДРУШТВО ЗА СРПСКИ ЈЕЗИК \(bg.ac.rs\)](#)

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- » The Ministry of Education in cooperation with the Qualifications Agency should map potential students from Ukraine and identify their needs in order to design organized support in cooperation with university rectors in Serbia.
 - » The Commissariat for Refugees and Migration and commissioners for refugees, in cooperation with the Ministry of State Administration and Local Self-Government and local self-government units where Ukrainian children and children of other refugees/migrants reside, should include activities and funds for the inclusion of refugee and migrant children in preschool and higher education institutions in local action plans for migration management.
- **Social needs**⁸⁴ include the needs of migrant and refugee students to communicate with others, develop a sense of belonging and bond with the community, and develop a strong personal identity.
- **Weak involvement of Ukrainian children in extracurricular activities** due to busyness with school and/or lack of financial resources was noted. In collective centers, children's involvement in extracurricular activities depends on projects, i.e., donor funds. Activities are discontinued when the inflow of funds ceases. Additionally, Ukrainian children, regardless of their accommodation, spend a lot of time playing games on computers and mobile phones.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- » Schools should connect more closely with cultural and sports institutions, as well as with youth offices and jointly design programs.
 - » Schools should encourage peer support more (e.g. UNICEF volunteer team).
 - » The video game format can be used to connect the Ukrainian (and other refugee and migrant children) and local children, as well as to reduce discrimination and violence against them.
- **Discrimination of Ukrainian students by peers and/or teachers** due to Ukrainian origin was highlighted. This challenge is mostly solved by changing schools or attending only online Ukrainian schools. The extent of the presence of discrimination is not known.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- » Schools should consistently implement "inclusion activities at the level of the entire school", which, among other things, implies the following: "teacher preparation for the reception of new migrant and refugee students; preparation of all school students and their parents for the reception of new migrant and refugee students; promotion of interculturality and linguistic diversity; strengthening ties with family and local community; mobilizing peer support". (school handbook for the implementation of Professional Guidance, pp. 40-48).
- » The Ministry of Education should work on strengthening the mechanisms for reporting and responding to violence when it comes to refugee and migrant children because the existing mechanisms were not developed with this population in mind (e.g. the national platform for the prevention of violence involving children "I Protect You" could also offer information in the languages of the refugees). An example of good practice is the manual *Serbian as a foreign language in teaching practice*, which included a chapter on *the understanding and application of rules and protocols dealing with issues of recognition and treatment in cases of violence* and presented the *Rulebook on the institution's actions in case of suspected or established discriminatory behavior and defamation honor or dignity of the person*.
- » The team for protection against discrimination, violence, abuse and neglect in schools should be strengthened to identify and respond to cases of peer violence against refugees and migrants.
- » The Ministry of Education, in cooperation with the academic community, should conduct research on discrimination against refugee and migrant children in schools, in order to determine its level and characteristics, as well as the frequency and efficiency of the application of the Rulebook on actions with such cases.

84 Lucie Cerna (2019), REFUGEE EDUCATION: INTEGRATION MODELS AND PRACTICES IN OECD COUNTRIES, OECD Education Working Paper No. 203.

- **The third challenge in the social sphere**, which is closely related to emotional needs as well as the previous challenges, is the **way of participation in the educational process characteristic of children displaced from Ukraine**: parallel attendance at school in Serbia and online school in Ukraine, or only online school in Ukraine, which can lead to a lack of free activities, i.e. social isolation and its consequences – loss of self-confidence, anxiety, depression, etc.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- » Schools should encourage the inclusion of Ukrainian children in Serbian schools and/or non-formal education and free activities, through the organization of “open doors”/events in the local community to familiarize Ukrainian children and parents with their peers, the school and the education system in Serbia.
- » The Ministry of Education and school counselors should familiarize themselves with the work plan and program of Ukrainian schools and give instructions to schools on how teachers can coordinate their work and prevent the overloading of children who go to Serbian and online Ukrainian schools at the same time.

- ▶ **Emotional needs**⁸⁵ include the need of migrant and refugee students to feel safe and to be able to cope with loss, grief, as well as separation and/or trauma.

- **All stakeholders noticed the stress of Ukrainian children, as well as the fact that the children were exposed to difficult and potentially traumatic experiences** for which, often, there is no professional intervention in schools, since the children do not ask for help and that, despite the difficulties, they manage to maintain a good success in school.

RECOMMENDATION: The Ministry of Education, ZUOV and resource centers for the inclusion of children from vulnerable social groups should empower teachers to recognize stress and trauma as well as to respond and refer students who face difficulties to the relevant authorities. Additionally, they can support preventive activities and recommend/educate for the implementation of the existing examples of good practice, such as e.g. teacher education for stress management of migrant children in schools (MPNTR, ZUOV), *Healing and Education Through the Arts* – HEART (Save the Children), peer education on providing psychological first aid (PIN).

- ▶ **Challenges were also identified that reflect all the stated needs:**

- **Lack of insight into the number and socio-demographic characteristics of Ukrainian children and the inability to provide adequate support for their inclusion in the education system and assessment of their scope**, since most of them are in private accommodation and a certain number of children only attend online Ukrainian schools. Therefore, in general, mothers and children in the asylum center have more support for inclusion in the education system and integration than mothers and children in private accommodation.

RECOMMENDATION: The Ministry of Education, in cooperation with the MoI and KIRS, should determine the number and socio-demographic characteristics of Ukrainian children in private accommodation, in order to be able to support and monitor the scope and quality of inclusion of these children in the education system in Serbia.

- **Unequal preparedness of schools for the inclusion of displaced children from Ukraine** due to different levels of experience in working with migrant and refugee children, and the lack of information and education of school staff.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- » The Ministry of Education should implement its plan to, in cooperation with UNICEF, empower ZUOV to take over support in the inclusion of refugees and migrants for a network of 14 schools and to expand the network by including new schools, as well as to further strengthen the resource center for inclusion Branko Pešić Elementary School. It should also include this target group in the 5 planned resource centers for inclusion by 2026. (Action Plan 2023-2026).

85 Ibid.

- » The Ministry of Education should use the most successful schools that have experience in working with refugees and migrants as resource centers. Each school can get its own “mentor school”. It is also necessary to develop ways to valorize the efforts of the most active teachers dedicated to working with refugee and migrant children, which can be done in cooperation with the teachers themselves. One of the ways of valorizing their work, which would be a significant step in improving the quality of teaching for children, is for these professionals to become educators for colleagues, to organize exchanges of good practices between schools and professionals through gatherings and publications.
- Finally, it was identified that **there are more and more foreign children in schools⁸⁶ and that a systemic (and holistic) approach to their inclusion in the education system should be improved.**

RECOMMENDATION: The Ministry of Education should encourage research by the academic community and the experience exchange with practitioners, children and families about the inclusion of foreign children in the education system. The findings of the research will lead to the improvement of the inclusion process and the updating of policies and strategic documents in relation to changes in the social context and needs on the ground. It is especially important to carry out evaluation/research of the implementation of the *Professional Guidance on Integration of Refugee and Asylum-Seeking Children in the Education System of the Republic of Serbia*, in order to update it according to the perceived needs and challenges in practice.

4.2. Cultural rights

4.2.1. Legal, strategic and institutional framework for access the cultural rights

The **Ministry of Culture and Information**, in its *Strategy for the Development of Culture of the Republic of Serbia from 2020 to 2029*,⁸⁷ expressed the strategic commitment of the Republic of Serbia to “culture as one of the key factors of societal development, i.e., culture as one of the national priorities that contribute to the harmonious development of society in the Republic of Serbia, the quality of life of its citizens, and the improvement of international relations”. It is also committed to preserving cultural diversity as a special asset of our country, which includes the creativity of national minorities and all social groups, as well as the possibility of various identity choices. Two important principles on which the strategy is based, among others, are “improving mutual understanding and equal inclusion of vulnerable groups in cultural life” and “wide availability of culture and equal and active participation in cultural life”.

Under measure 3.3. Encouraging and developing cultural needs and habits and equal participation in cultural life,⁸⁸ the Strategy emphasizes the responsibility of the state in the cultural policy aimed at children and youth, since they represent the most important segment in the development of cultural needs, because they are not only visitors to events, but also future audiences, and also creators in culture. As many as 81% of youth believe that they are insufficiently involved in cultural activities, and 70% that there is not enough content for young people. Therefore, one of the nine areas in the *National Youth Strategy for the period from 2015 to 2025*⁸⁹ is dedicated to the culture and creativity of youth. It is very important to establish a systemic connection of cultural and educational institutions in all models of cooperation between educational and cultural institutions – visits to cultural institutions, but also the involvement of youth in the production and presentation of cultural content, both in the field of cultural heritage and in the field of contemporary creativity. The strategy deals with the policy of social cohesion and the inclusion of all social groups in cultural life, since this is important for the development of culture and quality interpersonal relations. It also points out the importance of gender equality, to which culture can make a significant contribution, not only in the domain of creativity, but also in the domain of deconstruction of gender stereotypes and roles in society through cultural programs. However, migrants, foreigners and refugees are not mentioned as sensitive social groups that should be the target groups of the strategy.

86 At the end of 2023, 46,073 foreigners were granted temporary residence based on work. This number is 29% higher compared to 2022, and even 121% higher compared to 2021. Most of them were from the Russian Federation (41%), Republic of China (24%), Turkey (12%), India (7%) and Cuba (1.5%). In the period from 1 January to 31 December 2023, the National Employment Service issued 52,178 (9,875 women) work permits to foreign nationals. Migration profile of RS for 20231, [Migracioni profil.pdf \(kirs.gov.rs\)](#)

87 [strategija-razvoja-kulture-od-2020--do-2029-qodine.pdf \(kultura.gov.rs\)](#)

88 Ibid.

89 [nacionalna_strategija_za_mlade0101_cyr.pdf \(mos.gov.rs\)](#)

The National Council for Culture, as a professional advisory body, under the **Law on Culture**, analyzes and provides opinions on the state of culture, and offers suggestions for creating cultural policies and for the development of cultural activities. Support is also provided by the **Institute for Cultural Development Research**, through research and preparation of studies and analyses. At the provincial level, according to the **Law on Establishing the Competences of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina**, the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, through the work of the **Provincial Secretariat for Culture, Public Information, and Relations with Religious Communities**, is responsible for implementing cultural policies in the province and ensuring the working conditions for provincial cultural institutions.

In Serbia, **Ukrainians** are recognized as a distinct and full-fledged national minority, represented through the **National Council of the Ukrainian National Minority**. The Ukrainian National Council, as the highest body of minority self-government, established under the Law on National Minorities of 2002, was established on 17 May 2003, and since then this date has been celebrated as the Day of the Ukrainian National Community in Serbia. The Council represents national interests in the fields of education, cultural creation, information, and the official use of language and script. Ukrainians have the opportunity to “consume” their own culture in the Ukrainian language through cultural and artistic societies⁹⁰ and musical events, magazines,⁹¹ radio and TV programs.⁹²

Ukrainian culture is nurtured through education in the Ukrainian language and through the cooperation of higher education institutions. **The first elementary school classes in the Ukrainian language were established** in Kula, Vrbas, Budisava, and Novi Sad. **Ukrainian language instruction with elements of national culture** is offered as an elective in elementary schools in five communities with the largest number of members of this community. The Ukrainian language is taught at the **Department of Ukrainian Studies at the Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade**. This year marks **the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Ukraine and Serbia**, and next year will mark 30 years of cooperation between the two leading higher education institutions – the University of Belgrade and Kyiv National University “Taras Ševčenko”.

Regarding **cultural events representing Ukrainian culture**, they are sporadic and mostly occur around the anniversary of the beginning of the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Thus, this year, along with the **March of Solidarity with Ukraine**, the “**Solidarity with Ukraine**” exhibition was organized, and **documentary films “Ukraine’s Stolen Children”** were shown at the EU Info Center and “**20 Days in Mariupol**” at the Cultural Center Hall and on Insajder TV (including a discussion after the film). **The Krokodil Engaging Words panel discussion**, which included two Ukrainian writers, Yulia Brovarna and Andriy Lyubka, was also organized.

In May 2024, **cultural diplomacy projects** were realized in Serbia with the arrival of the First Lady of Ukraine (for the first time since the beginning of the Russian invasion) at the invitation of the First Lady of Serbia. **A Ukrainian section was opened at the Belgrade City Library and an audio guide in the Ukrainian language was launched at the Belgrade Fortress**, with support from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine, the Ukrainian Institute, and the Embassy of Ukraine in Serbia.

Civil society organizations, including associations of Ukrainians, were active in organizing cultural events or taking Ukrainian children and mothers to cultural and sports events.

4.2.2. Realization of cultural rights of children and mothers displaced from Ukraine – perception of relevant stakeholders

■ Institutional perspective

Representatives of the National Council for the Ukrainian National Minority note that there are five **cultural and artistic associations operating** in Vojvodina – in Kula, Vrbas, Novi Sad, Sremska Mitrovica, and Indija. **However, these associations primarily involve the older Ukrainian diaspora, and displaced persons are not actively participating in their activities.** Additionally, there are no such associations in Central Serbia, not even in Belgrade. The Council organizes the Festival of Ukrainian Culture, children’s festivals, Ukrainian balls, and various cultural events, but according to them, the turnout of refugees is almost negligible.

90 Among the cultural and artistic societies, the following are known: “Ivan Senjuk” in Kula, “Karpati” in Vrbas, “Kolomejka” in Sremska Mitrovica, “Kobzar” in Novi Sad, and “Kalina” in Indija.

91 Ukrainians in Serbia have a Society for the Ukrainian language, literature and culture – “Prosveta”, founded in 1989, which publishes the magazine “Ukrainsko slovo”. With the financial support of the Government of AP Vojvodina, the monthly newspaper “Ridne Slovo” and the children’s magazine “Solovejko” are published in Ukrainian.

92 Since 2013, “**Ukrainian Panorama**”, a magazine-type show, has been broadcast on RTV2.

Among all the refugees who have come to Serbia, only a handful have joined these associations. In Central Serbia, even in Belgrade, there are no such associations. There are NGOs that have promoted various aspects of Ukrainian culture, such as Ukrainian cuisine, but this activity has significantly diminished in recent months. Refugees do not show much interest in participating in our associations, even though the doors are wide open to them.

Representative of institutions⁹³

The Commissariat for Refugees and Migration supports the **celebration of Ukrainian holidays and religious practices** in the Vranje Asylum Center, along with civil sector representatives.

Perspective of international organizations and civil society organizations

There is a consensus among international and domestic civil society organizations that **mothers and children from Ukraine, accommodated in the Vranje Asylum Center, have been organized to attend numerous cultural events**, including theater visits, exhibitions, museums, literary evenings, and tours of cultural heritage in Vranje, even participation in an animated film festival, etc.

Yes, there were some workshops on music where children from the center and children from the local population prepared presentations together, and then spoke on the topic of films. We also had various excursions, visited exhibitions, animated film festivals, international ones. One of my favorite activities was with Uroš Petrović, a fairy tale writer and a member of Mensa, where our girl won a ball for solving a riddle in Serbian, imagine that. We really put in a lot of effort. We visited all the places in Vranje, the house of Bora Stanković, the White Bridge, all the monuments, the museum in Leskovac, the museum in the Leskovac area, the first textile factories... There is great interest in this.

CSO representative⁹⁴

On the other hand, organizations have **encouraged the presentation of Ukrainian culture at existing traditional events and gathering places in local communities.**⁹⁵

We have a monthly event called the Chit-chat Club, where refugees from various countries gather, anyone who wants to come and improve their Serbian, but it's thematic. Each time there's a different theme. For example, if the theme is the traditional Serbian dance 'kolo,' which is protected by UNESCO, then all participants, including Ukrainians, talk about something from their own culture. Sometimes the theme is national holidays, related to religion, or various other things. They light up when talking about their own traditions, whether it's dance, food, or customs related to a national or state holiday. Then, people also talk to each other, and it's fascinating to see Serbian being used as a lingua franca among them. It's quite incredible to see an Iranian and a Ukrainian conversing in Serbian. We aim to support events that celebrate multiculturalism, allowing everyone to express themselves, including them.

International organization representative⁹⁶

According to representatives of international and domestic civil society organizations, including Ukrainian associations, **it is challenging to motivate Ukrainian women and children living in private accommodations to participate in cultural activities**, as they often find themselves in difficult and uncertain situations, separated from their husbands, fathers, extended families, and friends who remain in Ukraine. Many face economic problems and view cultural activities as a luxury they cannot afford in terms of time or finances. Since their arrival in Serbia is forced and not an act of free will, they are more oriented towards Ukraine and are motivated by the hope of returning home.

93 05/02/2024, online interview with representatives of institutions.

94 14/02/2024, online interview with two CSO representatives.

95 The UNHCR representative gave examples of their initiatives: "Vrane Days", where women from Ukraine presented their handicrafts and cakes to citizens; "Banica Days", held every year in Bela Palanka, and in 2022, foreign cuisines, including Ukrainian, were presented; "Delicatessen Monday", now called "Culinary Bridges", an event held in KC Grad, presents the cuisine of different countries, where women from Ukraine also presented theirs. In Cafe Bar 16, a "Chit-chat club" is held once a month, which brings together refugees from various countries (including Ukrainians) to improve communication in the Serbian language and get to know different cultures.

96 07/02/2024, online interview with international organization representatives.

Representatives of cultural associations of the Ukrainian national minority state that **displaced Ukrainians remain in closed communities and are treated, by the long-time residents in Serbia, as Serbs**, perceiving that they have a different mentality. They also note that they are more interested in finding jobs or options to leave Serbia rather than participating in any activities. Ukrainian associations understand that displaced individuals currently have economic priorities and have focused more on providing humanitarian aid to those who stayed in Ukraine, and displaced people participate in these activities.

Somewhat more successful in motivating refugees to engage in cultural activities are the **associations of Ukrainians (and joint associations with Russians, Belarusians, and Serbs) that emerged in response to the war in Ukraine**. For example, they organized a series of activities with children, aimed at maintaining a connection with their culture, celebrating certain holidays in a traditional manner, and creating a small library of Ukrainian literature and authors, making it accessible to refugees.

■ Perspective of children and mothers displaced from Ukraine

Mothers displaced from Ukraine, residing in the Vranje Asylum Center, watch Ukrainian cultural content on the Internet using their mobile phones. It is difficult for them to independently participate in cultural events in the city because the asylum center is isolated and they have to walk 20 minutes, often along a highway. Visits to cultural events such as the cinema and theater were organized by the CSOs. However, since these organizations no longer have financial resources to support this target group, such activities have ceased.

The mothers also mentioned events where they **promoted Ukrainian culture**, with a significant humanitarian component – raising funds for certain humanitarian actions. As a good practice example, they also mentioned a competition in the Ukrainian language and culture, attended by Ukrainian families and families from Serbia.

For mothers in Vranje, it is important that their children participate in school events and performances, as this is the best way for them to learn the Serbian language and culture and present their own language and culture.

“ They were invited to join the choir. Their children were invited to sing Serbian songs, and they are preparing a serious performance with costumes. This is an initiative of the school, helping them get acquainted with Serbian culture... Her younger granddaughter, on the teacher’s initiative, and all the Serbian children at an event organized by the teacher, sang two Ukrainian songs. The event, a children’s concert prepared by the school and the teacher, was very nice.

Focus group participants, Vranje Asylum Center⁹⁷

Young people from the Asylum Center believe that there are not enough cultural events for youth in Vranje, nor enough information about activities for young people.

“ In Belgrade, there are a lot of Russian places and more activities for them, but it’s still not enough. Here in Vranje, there is nothing. Novi Sad seems better. There is a bot, like an app, for making new acquaintances. Mostly there are Russians and some Ukrainians, but it’s not enough.

Girl, 17, Serbian high school, Vranje Asylum Center⁹⁸

Mothers displaced from Ukraine and living in private accommodation mostly do not have time for cultural activities, nor do they feel the need, as the war in Ukraine is still ongoing, and their husbands, relatives, and friends are still there or scattered around the world. Many of them also work and take care of their children.

“ I work from six in the morning until two, or from three until two at night. I have four children at home, and by the time I prepare everything and clean the house, the day is already over. I have no time for activities, so this is how we live every day, just getting by.

Online focus group participant, employed, private accommodation⁹⁹

97 02/03/2024, focus group with mothers from Ukraine at the Vranje Asylum Center.

98 Ibid.

99 19/04/2024, online focus group with 5 Ukrainian mothers from Belgrade, Kragujevac, Kraljevo, Petrovaradin and Subotica.

Youth and children displaced from Ukraine in private accommodation spend most of their time playing virtual games. They engage in cultural activities primarily through school, which organizes cinema visits and recreational classes for younger children, and excursions and museum visits for older students. Young people also go to the cinema but do not have a great need to go out. Two older elementary school students do not leave the house due to fear of peer violence, spending their free time playing games. In Ukraine, they played in playgrounds and visited friends' houses in their free time and were more involved in sports than cultural activities.

🗨️ I have been to the cinema three times. Twice for anime and I don't remember what the third time was. But each time, I read the subtitles in Serbian. I have also been to the National Museum once. At the square. And that's it for my experience.

Boy, 16, Serbian high school, private accommodation¹⁰⁰

🗨️ I take walks with my family. I have been to the Photography Museum with the school. And with the class, we have been on various excursions to other countries.

Girl, 17, Serbian high school, private accommodation¹⁰¹

🗨️ Now I'm going on a seven-day school excursion. In Serbia, I've been to the cinema three times, in Ukraine zero times... I'll watch TV now. There's a Ukrainian YouTuber who records himself playing games, so I'll watch that. And then I'll do the same things in the game that he does.

Boy, 8, Serbian elementary school, private accommodation¹⁰²

4.2.3. Achieving cultural rights of children and mothers displaced from Ukraine – summary of challenges and solutions

Achieving cultural rights for displaced Ukrainian mothers and children is mostly facilitated by schools, the Commissariat for Refugees, and civil society organizations (both international and domestic, as well as associations). They primarily participate in cultural events when organized by these stakeholders and rarely attend cultural events independently. There is a greater focus on familiarizing them with Serbian culture, but there are also events promoting Ukrainian culture. Support is also provided to Ukrainian artists, promoting their films at film festivals and Ukrainian literature and authors. However, there are challenges in this area as well:

- ▶ **The first identified challenge is the delicacy of realizing the cultural rights** of Ukrainian mothers and children in Serbia, since children and mothers are worried about their loved ones in Ukraine, focused on overcoming difficult times and often do not have the opportunity to participate in cultural life, design and afford themselves quality free time and recreation for the family. They are also more focused on returning to Ukraine than on integrating into a new environment and participating in cultural events.

RECOMMENDATION: Realization of cultural rights is important for personal development, but also for the development of intercultural dialogue and social cohesion necessary for the development of society. For that reason, it is necessary for the Ministry of Culture, in cooperation with the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration and civil society organizations, to enable Ukrainian refugees to enjoy cultural rights, participate in cultural events and actively represent their culture. Cultural events of a humanitarian nature, public debates and discussions about the situation in Ukraine, cultural events to mark significant holidays for Ukrainians, cultural quizzes and support for Ukrainian artists have proven to be good practices. Participation in cultural events at school, excursions and visits to cultural institutions organized by the school are important for children.

100 30/04/2024, online focus group with four young refugees from Ukraine, private accommodation.

101 Ibid.

102 25/04/2024, online focus group with 3 younger elementary school students, private accommodation.

- ▶ Mothers in private accommodation **have economic priorities, they work and take care of children. They have no time for cultural events.** Furthermore, children who only go to Ukrainian schools and their mothers **are not visible and it is difficult to reach them.** Mothers and children in the asylum center have the support of the Commissariat and CSOs both for solving economic issues and for cultural content, but there is **dependence on donor funds**, so it is difficult to ensure continuity.

RECOMMENDATIONS: In both cases, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Culture should ensure the sustainability of cultural activities through the cooperation of educational institutions and cultural institutions, which is addressed by the latest Strategy for the Development of Culture of the RS. A significant role in encouraging this cooperation should be played by the Commissariat, international and domestic civil society organizations, including Ukrainian associations. It is also important to involve both children and mothers in cultural activities at the same time. For youth, it would be important to connect with youth offices. Sustainability is also ensured by the participation in local traditional events that are financed from the budget of the local self-government.

- ▶ **The National Council for the Ukrainian National Minority and traditional cultural associations of Ukrainians failed to attract Ukrainian refugees**, even when they were involved in humanitarian actions organized by the associations

RECOMMENDATION: The National Council and traditional cultural associations of Ukrainians have the potential to bring together refugees from Ukraine and enable them to practice their cultural rights. To realize that potential, they need to connect with schools, cultural institutions and civil society organizations.

- ▶ There is no strategic approach to creating a stimulating environment for mothers and children displaced from Ukraine, as well as other migrants and foreigners in Serbia, to develop/nurture cultural needs and to enable them to participate culturally (cultural production and consumption).¹⁰³

RECOMMENDATION: The Ministry of Culture should develop a strategic approach to this audience based on the analysis of the programs of cultural institutions – the representation of the content of Ukrainian culture (and other migrants) and the analysis of the audience, i.e. the availability of culture to mothers and children from Ukraine and their needs.

4.3. Healthcare

4.3.1. Legal, strategic and institutional framework for the healthcare of persons displaced from Ukraine

The right to health is regulated by numerous universal, regional, and national legal standards contained in relevant international and regional documents, as well as national constitutional, legal, and strategic frameworks. Regarding refugees, the key universal standard is contained in the 1951 **United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, with the additional 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. Article 23 of the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees stipulates that refugees are entitled to the same treatment as nationals in terms of public assistance, which includes healthcare. Additional international instruments related to the health protection** of migrants and refugees include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

The issue of healthcare for refugees in the Republic of Serbia is regulated by general and specific regulations governing the field of healthcare, as well as specific regulations guaranteeing the right to healthcare for particular groups of people who enjoy special protection on the territory of Serbia. The **Law on Healthcare**,¹⁰⁴ in Article 3, stipulates that citizens, as well as foreign nationals and stateless persons who are **permanently or temporarily residing in the Republic of Serbia**, have the right to **healthcare in accordance with the law**, and a duty to protect and improve their own health and the health of other citizens, as well as the conditions of their

103 Dragin, Dušica (2019): *Pravo na kulturu ili pravo na razvoj kulturnih potreba*, *Zbornik radova Akademije umetnosti*, br. 7, str. 32-46, [2334-86661907032D.pdf \(ceon.rs\)](https://ceon.rs/86661907032D.pdf)

104 Law on Healthcare, Official Gazette of RS, No. 25/2019

living and working environment. It also stipulates that a person **passing** through the territory of the Republic of Serbia has the **right to emergency medical assistance in accordance with the law**.

Article 236 of the law specifies that a foreign national, a stateless person, a person recognized as a refugee, an asylum seeker, a registered foreigner who has expressed an intention to submit an asylum application, a person included in a voluntary return program, and a person granted asylum in accordance with international and domestic legislation in the Republic of Serbia (in further text: a foreigner), who is permanently or temporarily residing in the Republic of Serbia, or passing through the territory of the Republic of Serbia, has the right to healthcare in accordance with this law unless otherwise specified by an international agreement. **Funds for the realization of the right to healthcare from paragraph 2 of this article are provided from the budget of the Republic of Serbia.** A foreigner who meets the conditions to acquire the status of an insured person in accordance with the law governing health insurance, realizes healthcare in accordance with those regulations. **Article 237 of the law indicates that foreigners receive healthcare to the same extent as Serbian citizens.**

The Law on Health Insurance¹⁰⁵, in Article 60, provides that **emergency medical assistance**, within the meaning of this law, is immediate medical assistance provided to avoid bringing the insured person into life-threatening danger or irreparable health damage or death. It includes medical assistance provided **within 12 hours from the moment** the insured person is admitted to a healthcare institution or private practice to avoid bringing the insured person into life-threatening danger or irreparable health damage or death.

The Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection¹⁰⁶, in Article 76, guarantees healthcare for persons granted temporary protection, in accordance with the provisions of the regulations governing the right to healthcare for foreigners. **The Decision on Providing Temporary Protection in the Republic of Serbia for Displaced Persons Coming from Ukraine also refers to this provision of the law.¹⁰⁷**

The Ministry of Health of the Republic of Serbia, since the time of the migration crisis, has been a key national stakeholder in supporting migrant groups in realizing their right to healthcare when they cannot achieve this right in accordance with the applicable regulations of the Republic of Serbia. **Healthcare institutions** at all three levels of healthcare (local health centers, secondary and tertiary healthcare institutions) provide treatment to migrants for all types of acute and chronic diseases.

4.3.2. Healthcare of children and mothers displaced from Ukraine in practice – perception of relevant stakeholders

There is a consensus among key stakeholders that the issue of healthcare for displaced persons from Ukraine is a significant challenge that requires urgent state intervention. All key stakeholders, from the relevant ministry to civil society organizations, recognize the **existence of a legal gap and the lack of a legal basis for providing healthcare to displaced persons from Ukraine at the expense of the budget of the Republic of Serbia.** They agree that Serbia's positive legal regulations should be adapted to the new reality in which we live.

■ Institutional perspective

The Rulebook on the Manner and Procedure of Inclusion in Mandatory Health Insurance for Persons Not Mandatorily Insured¹⁰⁸ stipulates that a person who is included in mandatory health insurance acquires the status of an insured person on the day of submitting the application for inclusion in mandatory health insurance to the branch of the Republic Health Insurance Fund (RFZO) in the area where the person has a residence or temporary residence if they are a foreigner. This status is determined by a decision. However, the key question of whether persons under temporary protection can be included in the mandatory health insurance system in this way was addressed by the Fund itself. Persons coming from countries with which no international health insurance agreement has been concluded can register for health insurance if they have registered temporary residence in the Republic of Serbia and if they have been assigned a foreigner's registration number by the Ministry of the Interior. A person coming to the Republic of Serbia from a country with which the Republic of Serbia has an international agreement can be mandatorily health insured if they are not registered for

105 Law on Health Insurance, Official Gazette of RS, No. 25/2019

106 Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection, Official Gazette of RS, No. 24/2018

107 Decision on the Provision of Temporary Protection in the Republic of Serbia to Displaced Persons Coming from Ukraine, Official Gazette of RS, No. 36/2022, 21/2023, 21/2024

108 Official Gazette of RS, No. 44/2018

health insurance in their country of origin, which is proven by a certificate issued by the health fund of that country.¹⁰⁹ **Since the Republic of Serbia has not concluded a bilateral agreement regulating the issue of health insurance for displaced persons from Ukraine, this possibility should be provided to them without distinction.** Therefore, if displaced persons from Ukraine wish to exercise this possibility, it should be enabled for them.

The legal construction requiring solely the regulation of temporary residence in accordance with the Law on Foreigners is legally unsustainable. The decision by which the Government regulated the issue of temporary protection refers to Article 76 of the Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection, which, in paragraph 1, point 1, recognizes the right to residence for the duration of temporary protection, and in point 3, **the right to healthcare.** If the RFZO believes that only persons with regulated temporary residence in Serbia have the right to inclusion in mandatory health insurance, **then, by the principle of argumentum a contrario, this right could not be recognized for persons with permanent residence,** which is a higher form of status regulation of the position of foreigners. Especially since **persons under temporary protection also receive an appropriate foreigner's registration number, which cannot be obtained without legal presence** in the territory of Serbia. It is also necessary to emphasize that the **monthly insurance premium amounts to 4,134.73 RSD, or about 35 euros.**

The Ministry of Health, with the support of the European Union, is implementing the project "EU Support in Migration Management in the Republic of Serbia – Access to Healthcare Services III"¹¹⁰, providing funds to cover healthcare costs and the full range of treatments that public health institutions in Serbia provide to the migrant population. Interventions for individual cases fall under the so-called **individual measure** (previously special measure 6, then 7), financed by the European Delegation since April 2022.

Displaced persons from Ukraine can also be included in this project. However, **there are several limitations** that should be noted. **First, the project has run out of funds,** and many services billed by healthcare institutions or RFZO have not yet been paid.¹¹¹ **Second, the project applies to all migration groups in need on the territory of Serbia,** without an established and financially recognized priority for persons enjoying temporary protection. **Third, the project has actively supported healthcare services in asylum centers and migrant reception centers, while persons residing in private accommodation often remain invisible to the healthcare system.** This is especially true since there is adequate support from KIRS in the centers, while those in private addresses do not have such support. **Fourth, the procedure and technical approach to healthcare institutions, introducing them to appropriate records when they do not have health cards, remain unclear and subject to different interpretations. Healthcare institutions near asylum centers are well-versed in the procedure, but this is often not the case with health institutions that do not have daily experience in communicating with migrants.**

A positive practice and atmosphere can be observed in **numerous examples of understanding the problems of these individuals, with healthcare institutions meeting their needs.** The **Ministry of Health is also interested in dialogue** on amending and supplementing positive legal regulations to enable persons enjoying temporary protection access to healthcare services at the expense of the budget, as well as for those recognized with the right to asylum.

■ Perspective of international organizations and civil society organizations

Civil society organizations and international organizations have identified a significant need for healthcare among displaced persons from Ukraine, as well as challenges in accessing it. Primarily, there is a **systemic shortcoming** reflected in the non-recognition of displaced persons enjoying temporary protection as foreigners who are entitled to healthcare at the expense of the budget of the Republic of Serbia. Consequently, there are varying practices and procedures among RFZO branches regarding the possibility of inclusion in mandatory health insurance and differing practices among primary healthcare institutions, making it difficult for displaced persons to access healthcare. In Vranje, KIRS has established cooperation with healthcare institutions, and Ukrainians in the asylum center find it easier to access healthcare than those in private accommodation. Civil society organizations also point to a significant need for medicines, especially for chronic diseases and the need for regular treatment.

109 <https://rfzo.rs/index.php/osiquranalica/najcescap>

110 More: „Подршка ЕУ у управљању миграцијама у Србији – приступ здравственим услугама“ (zdravlje.gov.rs)

111 18/04/2024, Acting Assistant Minister Jelena Janković, consultative meeting.

” I said, open the Law on Asylum, Article 76. It states the right to healthcare. She told me she could not insure them. This reveals a systemic issue. She can’t integrate them into the system. You are insured through employment or other means, but she doesn’t have the option for temporary protection. She can insure an asylum seeker or someone granted asylum, but not someone under temporary protection.

ICSO representative¹¹²

” Regarding healthcare in Vranje, they didn’t have any problems. They received treatment with the temporary protection card. In some cities, it worked, but in others, only emergency services are covered for foreigners, while other services require payment, preventing people from accessing primary healthcare without being asked to pay... It’s completely inconsistent. This applies to both health insurance and healthcare access.

ICSO representative¹¹³

For that reason, international and domestic organizations, in collaboration with the Ministry of Health, have provided support to Ukrainians in asylum centers and private accommodation. For example, the organization ADRA had a project “Safe and Secure – Support During the Winter Period for Temporarily Displaced Persons from Ukraine”, providing medications, medical examinations, and health insurance. They also paid for private gynecological examinations, ultrasounds, Pap tests, colposcopies, etc.

” Regarding the needs, I think they are quite significant when it comes to health insurance, medications, and examinations. A lot of funds have been spent on specialist examinations. There is always a need, especially for medications, since these are elderly people. For those we couldn’t cover with state health insurance, we arranged with our donors to cover them with private health insurance. Out of 100 people, about 30 managed to obtain state insurance, while around 70 were covered by private insurance.

ICSO representative¹¹⁴

The UNHCR stated that through cooperation with the Commissariat and the Ministry of Health, they manage to address urgent cases, but regular healthcare services remain problematic.

Furthermore, civil sector representatives express concern about the complexity of changing the legal framework and the discontinuation of funding for individual measures implemented by the Ministry of Health with EU support, (September 2024).

” On one hand, it is good that the Ministry of Health is flexible and responds to emergency cases without neglecting them. That is valuable. But on the other hand, changing the legal framework will not be easy. Another important issue is the availability of these funds. These funds won’t exist forever; as announced, this individual measure will end, and who knows what will happen afterwards. The fact is that temporary protection is, by nature, temporary. From our perspective, we definitely see the need for legal changes.

*Representative of ICSO*¹¹⁵

There were no identified issues with vaccinating children from Ukraine. Solutions were found even when mothers lacked vaccination certificates. UNICEF’s health team was particularly engaged in child immunization. Institutes and health centers have sufficient vaccines, and it’s necessary to promote the importance of vaccination and that vaccines are available and free.

” There was a specific problem where a woman came to us for help when she needed to enroll her child in kindergarten. They asked her for proof of vaccination. However, due to her entire situation, she was unable to bring the documentation with her. Among other things, that paper was left behind, and she could

112 07/02/2024, online interview with two ICSO representatives.

113 Ibid.

114 Ibid.

115 07/02/2024, online interview with two ICSO representatives.

neither provide it nor prove that the child was vaccinated. We looked into where she could obtain such proof of vaccination for the child. We directed her to Torlak. Their website details everything that can be done, including antibody tests, to verify that the child has been vaccinated.

*Representatives of ICSO*¹¹⁶

Organizations also highlighted the need to preserve and improve the mental health of mothers and children displaced from Ukraine. Younger children showed **trauma symptoms** like bedwetting, anxiety, confusion, nightmares, and school difficulties (first and second grade of elementary school), hyperactivity... **Older children need a social network** to feel stable and secure, similar to their previous environment. They faced issues typical for their age—peer challenges, school adaptation, romantic problems, etc. **Symptoms were more pronounced in children attending only online Ukrainian schools without social circles.** They exhibited anxiety, reluctance to speak with others, poor language skills, insecurity, low self-confidence, delayed identity formation, etc.

🗨️ Younger children exhibited mental health symptoms due to trauma, such as bedwetting, anxiety, confusion, and nightmares which is a somewhat appropriate and normal reaction in younger children. Especially since, for most of these children, mom and dad occasionally go back to Ukraine, they return because of work, or dad is not there at all, and mom is alone. The lack of a father figure is evident. These are all normal reactions to an abnormal situation, expected reactions.

*CSO representative*¹¹⁷

Among mothers, there is an “imperative of strong women.”¹¹⁸ Initially, they did not want any support and communicated that they were fine and needed nothing. However, by the end of 2023, when they realized that the war in Ukraine would not end so quickly, they became more open to communication and included their children in psychological support. They started somatizing problems more and sought medical help.

🗨️ We have been conducting psychotherapy, or rather counseling, with them with interpreters for Ukrainian. They mostly approached us with more pronounced symptoms, some of whom had reached a stage where they had difficulty functioning daily. That’s when they turn to us for help. Initially, there’s a strong imperative, a cultural approach—they are strong and capable, with no reason for concern. Then they tend to somatize more and seek help from general practitioners for symptoms that are more physical than psychological. So, they suppress a lot of things.

*CSO representative*¹¹⁹

Civil society organizations draw attention to psychoeducational activities in which peer mediators are engaged, as well as activities in which professionals who have significant experience in working with displaced persons in Ukraine in the period preceding the war are engaged.

PIN organization has been involved in providing psychological support to displaced persons from Ukraine since their arrival, both at the Vranje Asylum Center and in private accommodations. Activities have included specialized support such as individual and group psychological counseling, family counseling, visits and support with psychiatrists, and assistance in accessing mental health services within state institutions. Additionally, they had psychoeducational activities through peer education on providing initial psychological aid. **The PIN’s peer program for providing psychological first aid** consisted of training in which youth (from the local population and displaced from Ukraine) were trained to be peer mediators in recognizing difficulties in the field of mental health in young people and connecting them with available resources, but mostly with the education system and the school psychologist. After the training, the youth organized different activities within their communities where they promoted mental health and worked on educating youth, parents, and

116 Ibid.

117 19/01/2024, online interview with CSO representative.

118 The experience of Group 484 in working with displaced women from the area of the former Yugoslavia also recognizes this phenomenon characteristic of the beginning of refuge, which implies that displaced women take upon themselves the enormous burden of the new situation they are in, firmly believing that it will not last long. During that period, they refuse any psychological and even material support. Only when they become aware of the permanence of the refugee situation are they ready to talk about their psychological challenge.

119 Ibid.

adults in their environment about what mental health is, what are the most common symptoms among young people, what problems they face.

A JRS representative shared a good practice example of psychological support for Ukrainian women through the support group “I See, I Hear, I Can”, led by a Ukrainian psychotherapist experienced in working with war-displaced individuals since 2014.

“ I organized a project, but it was led by a psychotherapist from Ukraine who had experience since 2014, when the war started there, though they didn’t call it a war, but something else, who knows what. But even then, people were losing their relatives, it was the same situation, just localized in two regions. Over those eight years, she gained experience with internally displaced people. There were those who had lost their loved ones and all sorts of things. When I was choosing who could lead that group, I chose her because of her extensive experience. We led a support group, with women who came from Ukraine to Serbia and one woman from Poland. I would say these women started to progress faster and accepted the reality more quickly... and started easier, you know, the group was called “I see, I hear, I can”, meaning they opened my eyes and ears, and I can see the possibilities around me. I’m not sitting closed off. I think some more special psychological support is needed, but there’s still that barrier, I’m okay, I don’t need a psychologist.

ICSO representative¹²⁰

One organization has highlighted **the vulnerability of women and children displaced from Ukraine to gender-based violence and human trafficking**. This is because women often connect with acquaintances in Serbia whom they have previously known or met through social networks to secure accommodation and support, especially when they arrive alone with children. Therefore, workshops conducted by the organization Atina in asylum and reception centers on these topics are crucial, as well as collaboration with other organizations engaged in this field such as ASTRA, AWC, PIN, and others.

“ Then we had cases where these mothers network with acquaintances from Serbia whom they knew before or met through social media. They are given a room or something. These relationships can be very delicate because they are undefined and expectations can diverge. They may think it’s someone’s good intention to help them with housing until they find a long-term solution, while the other person may think differently. We’ve had such cases. That’s why we’ve networked with organizations like ASTRA, PIN...

ICSO representatives¹²¹

The experience of the organizations indicates the **need for empowerment and additional work with displaced women in terms of openness and conversation about topics such as violence, manipulation, or isolation, including the importance of recognizing such situations**.

■ Perspective of children and mothers displaced from Ukraine

Mothers accommodated in the Vranje Asylum Center primarily highlighted the employment of a doctor at the center as a good practice. They could approach her for any health issue, and she was able to write prescriptions for them, even though they purchased the medications with their own money.

“ It would be good if there were a doctor in the center who could come at least once a week or once every two weeks, whom they could turn to when something happens, in terms of being able to review their diagnoses, chronic diagnoses they already have from Ukraine, to confirm them here and receive the necessary therapy. The problem is that most organizations help children or pensioners, and a certain age group, people aged 18 to 65, are left hanging. Another thing is that they don’t have to buy medicines with their own money, but that it is funded from some funds.

Focus group participant, Vranje Asylum Center ¹²²

120 08/04/2024, online interview with ICSO representatives.

121 07/02/2024, online interview with two ICSO representatives.

122 02/03/2024, FGD with mothers from Ukraine, Vranje.

They also emphasized **the significant role of the Commissariat in situations requiring healthcare**, but they also pointed out its helplessness due to poor healthcare organization in Vranje, which affects the local population as well.

” The lady said she used the service twice for her eyes, meaning she had eye surgery. She had trouble getting to the eye doctor, but the Commissariat called and took her there.

They had situations where they had to go to the gynecologist. They tried four times to reach the gynecologist. There was always an excuse. First, she was on sick leave, then on annual leave, then she couldn't see them now, then she no longer works. Anyway, they didn't manage to reach the gynecologist. There is a private gynecologist here, but the examination is 7,000 dinars, which they cannot afford.

Focus group discussion, Vranje Asylum Center ¹²³

They also mentioned difficulties **in accessing healthcare due to their status as persons under temporary protection** in Serbia, particularly regarding regular check-ups, chronic illnesses, and purchasing medications.

” She had a situation where her daughter had the flu and she had to buy medicine with her own money, but she turned to an organization (CSO) and they paid for it. For now, Some time ago, everyone in the center had the flu. This is a problem because they bought all the medicines with their own money.

Focus group participant, Vranje Asylum Center¹²⁴

Mothers in the asylum center spoke about ongoing traumatic experiences and the psychological difficulties faced by both them and their children. Some of them believe it is easier to keep everything to themselves and that they cannot be helped because the war is still ongoing. Others would like psychological support¹²⁵, not sporadically, but consistently, and in their native language.

” None of them thought it would last this long when they started; they thought it would be two, three weeks, just to sort things out, to overcome the moment, and now it's already the third year they are here... For the first few months, she couldn't sleep; recently, she stopped taking medication to be able to fall asleep... She says she still has nightmares that she dreams about... The thing is, despite the fact that they are not there now, many of them, specifically her, her mother is in Ukraine, her brother is in Ukraine, all her relatives are in Ukraine. This is not a situation she left behind when she came here; she is still in that situation. She calls, hears how the windows shake and similar things that happened.

It's individual. There are people here who would like to talk, but as she says, psychologists have come here, but that's not it; when they approach and ask how she is, and she doesn't know Serbian well and doesn't want to open up to everyone. There is no trust. It would be good if someone worked continuously with someone. There are things they don't want to say in front of everyone, but in person.

Focus group participants, Vranje Asylum Center ¹²⁶

Ukrainian mothers living in private accommodation face similar problems, but unlike those in the center, they do not have the support of KIRS. **They have primarily pointed out the issue of health insurance** and expressed gratitude for the support of civil society organizations in obtaining it. They also highlight **varying practices in healthcare institutions**, for example, in some health centers, a fee is charged for consultations, while in others, it is not.

123 Ibid.

124 Ibid.

125 Psychological support is provided sporadically by civil society organizations, if possible, in a language that displaced women and children understand, or translation is done with the help of cultural mediators. Displaced women are not inclined to this kind of support, pointing to the importance of continuous conversation, without intermediaries, in a language they can understand well.

126 Ibid.

”” Actually, that’s how it is. We have to pay for every doctor’s visit if we don’t have health insurance. We don’t have to pay for children, only for adults. It’s 800 dinars just for the doctor to see you and write a referral. Woman from Ukraine in private accommodation, Kraljevo (another woman from Kragujevac: We never paid for that, not even for tests.)

”” If you don’t have health insurance, you go to social health insurance, make a contract with them, and pay 3,800 dinars every month to have continuous insurance. ADRA paid for us for six months, I got health insurance cards for myself and the children earlier and paid them, then ADRA paid, so now I don’t have to pay anymore, I’m registered (employed). Because I know, I was in the hospital with my child and I got a bill for just one night on an infusion, it cost me 14,000 dinars to pay. So, we don’t have that. Although it is written in our papers, that we have the right to medicine, for this, for that, it’s not like that.

Focus group participant, private accommodation, Kragujevac ¹²⁷

Among the children who participated in the research, **there were also children who required special care** in health and/or psychological terms (e.g. diabetes, epilepsy, difficulties with reading and writing). Special attention should be paid to these children and help them realize their educational and other potential.

4.3.3. Realization of healthcare of children and mothers displaced from Ukraine – summary of challenges and solutions

Due to the existence of legal gaps and the unrecognized status of displaced persons enjoying temporary protection, who are entitled to healthcare at the expense of the Republic of Serbia budget, **access to this right can be assessed as inadequate, incomplete, and often left to the discretionary judgment of various stakeholders within the healthcare system.** Generally, displaced persons from Ukraine have the right to emergency medical care at the expense of the Republic of Serbia’s budget. However, even this possibility primarily results from a positive interpretation of regulations because legally, unfortunately, reimbursement of these costs from displaced persons could be requested, as pointed out by some beneficiaries of temporary protection living in private accommodation. What can be considered positive practice and atmosphere is the presence of numerous examples of understanding the issues faced by these individuals, with healthcare institutions accommodating their needs. However, above all, there is agreement among key stakeholders that this area must be adequately regulated by law, without room for different interpretations and inconsistent practices.¹²⁸

► **Article 236 of the Law on Healthcare, which does not explicitly recognize displaced persons with temporary protection** as a category of foreigners, for whom the costs of health services fall on the budget, has put any displaced person suffering from chronic diseases in a disadvantageous position, i.e. requiring usual and regular medical services, which includes regular therapies and the availability of drugs, in general.

RECOMMENDATION: It is necessary for the National Assembly to adopt the amended Article 236 of the Law on Healthcare and to recognize persons who have been granted temporary protection as a category of foreigners. Alternatively, bearing in mind that Article 236 shows the clear intention of the legislator to comprehensively include a large number of vulnerable groups of foreigners in the healthcare system, **an authentic interpretation of the National Assembly is required** – whether the category of persons enjoying temporary protection can also be considered a vulnerable category in the context of this article of the law. Namely, persons enjoying temporary protection are persons enjoying international protection and international and European practice recognizes them as refugees. Persons who have been granted asylum are persons who have already been recognized by the legislator. **About all the positive changes in this area, it is necessary to present, in a language that people understand, the possibilities for accessing health services in Serbia.** In this sense, **KIRS, the National Council of the Ukrainian National Minority, international organizations and CSOs** can play an important role.

127 19/04/2024, online FGD with mothers from Ukraine in private accommodation.

128 18/04/2024, consultative meeting on the healthcare of persons with temporary protection.

- ▶ **The different practices and actions of RFZO branches** in the context of the possibility of inclusion in mandatory health insurance, the lack of accurate and precise information about the possibility of realizing the right, the different practices of the actions of primary healthcare institutions, created an unfavorable environment for exercising the right to health for this extremely vulnerable group of displaced persons.

RECOMMENDATION: It is necessary for the Ministry of Health to inform all health centers how to provide services to persons with temporary protection and how to charge for them (how to invoice services). It is necessary to enable inclusion in the mandatory health insurance system for persons who have been granted temporary protection and that the RFZO informs all its branches about this in a timely manner.

- ▶ **After the end** of the project “EU Support in Migration Management in the Republic of Serbia - Access to Health Services III”, the Ministry of Health will be left without funds to cover the costs of healthcare and the full scope of treatment that public health institutions in Serbia provide to the migrant population.

RECOMMENDATION: In cooperation with the EU, until the establishment of a systemic solution, it is necessary to consider the possibility of additional financial support to the Ministry of Health intended exclusively for the needs of persons enjoying temporary protection in Serbia.

- ▶ **Needs for support in preserving and improving the mental health of both mothers and children were also identified.** Children and mothers were faced with traumatic experiences experienced in Ukraine, during the journey and constantly present due to the situation in Ukraine where their loved ones remain. Women and children are also vulnerable to **gender-based violence and human trafficking.**

RECOMMENDATION: It is necessary to provide psychological support to mothers and children from Ukraine, especially those in private accommodation. Psychoeducational activity with children, especially peer education, and work with mothers in a support group led by a Ukrainian psychotherapist proved to be examples of good practice. Activities to **raise awareness of the phenomenon of gender-based violence and human trafficking are also important.**

4.4. Regulation of status and access to the labor market

4.4.1. Legal, strategic and institutional framework for the regulation of status and access to the labor market of persons displaced from Ukraine

As a consequence of the war events in Ukraine, **Serbia has become a refuge for a number of displaced persons from Ukraine.** In the context of regulating their status, the Government of the Republic of Serbia followed the policy of the European Union member states, opting to **activate Articles 74-76 of the Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection** due to the expected massive influx of displaced persons. **Temporary protection** is a type of protection granted in an emergency procedure in case of a mass influx of displaced persons who cannot return to their country of origin or usual residence if there is a risk that due to the mass influx, it is not possible to effectively conduct each individual asylum procedure to protect the interests of displaced persons and others seeking protection, as determined by the Government of Serbia.

The Government of the Republic of Serbia implemented this by adopting the **Decision on Providing Temporary Protection in the Republic of Serbia to Displaced Persons Coming from Ukraine**¹²⁹ on 17 March 2022. The duration of temporary protection has already been extended twice for one year each time. The decision **recognizes the following categories of displaced persons:** Ukrainian citizens and their family members who resided in Ukraine; asylum seekers, stateless persons, and foreign citizens who were granted asylum or equivalent national protection in Ukraine and their family members who had approved residence in Ukraine; foreign citizens who had approved valid permanent residence or temporary residence in Ukraine and who cannot return to their country of origin under permanent and long-term circumstances.

129 Official Gazette of RS, No. 36/2022, 21/2023 and 21/2024

The **Ministry of Internal Affairs**, in accordance with the provisions of the Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection and this decision, **registers persons granted temporary protection and issues a decision on the approval of temporary protection for each person** for a period of one year. It should also be borne in mind that there are persons from Ukraine who did not seek temporary protection, and who regulated their status with some form of temporary residence, depending on their situation – based on work, education, family reunification, etc. They are treated as foreigners and exercise their rights through laws relevant to foreigners.

Displaced persons from Ukraine exercise their rights in accordance with Article 76 of the Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection, which includes the right to: stay for the duration of the temporary protection; a document confirming their status and right to stay; healthcare in accordance with regulations governing healthcare for foreigners; access to the labor market during the period of temporary protection, in accordance with regulations governing the employment of foreigners; free elementary and high school education in state schools, in accordance with special regulations; legal assistance under conditions prescribed for asylum seekers; freedom of religion under the same conditions as citizens of the Republic of Serbia; and collective accommodation in facilities designated for such purposes.

At the time of their arrival in Serbia, according to the then-current Law on Employment of Foreigners, persons granted temporary protection had the right to a personal work permit. With the **amended Law on Employment of Foreigners**¹³⁰, Article 3, paragraph 3, item 2, it is stipulated that persons granted asylum or temporary protection have the right to work without a unified permit, which is a novelty in our legal system and includes a permit for temporary residence and work.

In accordance with the positive legal regulations, persons granted temporary protection, without distinction, can access the labor market in the Republic of Serbia. **The Strategy on Economic Migration of the Republic of Serbia for the period 2021-2027**¹³¹ is a public policy document that establishes the general goal of creating an economic and social environment to slow the departure of the working-age population, strengthen ties with the diaspora, encourage return and circular migration, and attract foreigners with different educational profiles.

Key institutions in the context of labor market access for displaced persons from Ukraine include: the **Ministry of Labor, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs**, which has a mandate for employment in the country and abroad; monitoring the state and trends in the labor market in the country and abroad; maintaining employment records; improving and encouraging employment; strategy, programs, and measures of active and passive employment policies; employment of persons with disabilities and other hard-to-employ persons; development and provision of social employment and social entrepreneurship; exercising rights based on unemployment insurance and other rights of unemployed persons and surplus employees; preparing national qualification standards and proposing measures to improve the adult education system; proposing and monitoring the implementation of strategies in the field of labor market migration; participating in concluding employment agreements with foreign employers and other employment-related agreements. The **National Employment Service** performs employment tasks, unemployment insurance, employment records, and employment abroad. In addition to the aforementioned, it also performs professional-organizational, administrative, economic-financial, and other general tasks in the field of employment and unemployment insurance.

4.4.2. Regulation of status and access to the labor market of mothers displaced from Ukraine – perception of relevant stakeholders

■ Institutional perspective

The National Employment Service provides assistance and support in employment to job seekers in accordance with the Law on Employment and Unemployment Insurance¹³². The provision of assistance involves the implementation of specific activities or measures that will lead to employment or increase the employability of individuals in the labor market. The measures an individual will participate in depend on their needs for job-seeking assistance from the National Employment Service, as well as the needs of the labor market, and are determined by an individual employment plan agreed upon by the individual and the National Employment Service.

130 Official Gazette of RS, No. 128/2014, 113/2017, 50/2018, 31/2019 and 62/2023

131 Official Gazette of RS, No. 21/20

132 Official Gazette of RS, No. 36/2009, 88/2010, 38/2015, 113/117, 113/2017 – oth. law and 49/2021

The Employment Action Plan, which is the primary instrument for implementing active employment policies, defines specific measures to be carried out in the upcoming period, as well as categories of hard-to-employ and marginalized unemployed individuals who are prioritized for employment and are at an increased risk of social exclusion. **The Employment Action Plan does not include specifically defined active employment policy measures for foreign nationals, including refugees or asylum seekers.** In accordance with the Law on Employment and Unemployment Insurance, foreign nationals can register in the National Employment Service's records and receive support in accordance with their needs and status.

NES implements active employment measures through a wide range of opportunities: job search training, self-efficacy training, job search club, job fairs, workshops for overcoming job loss stress, entrepreneurship development training, professional internships, apprenticeships, practical knowledge acquisition, labor market training, employer-demand training for the unemployed, functional basic adult education, start your own business initiatives, employment subsidies for hard-to-employ individuals, wage subsidies for inexperienced persons with disabilities, self-employment subsidies, support measures for persons with disabilities employed under special conditions, public works engaging persons with disabilities, and employer-demand training for employees.

The National Employment Service has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with UNHCR and the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration (KIRS), which outlines the specifics of their cooperation, including organizing informational sessions, identifying needs for easier labor market access, and regular cooperation with the NES in developing individual integration plans, among others. In accordance with the Memorandum, the NES has participated **in conducting informational sessions for asylum seekers and NES employment counselors,** aiming to familiarize them with the services provided to this beneficiary category and inform them about their employment rights and procedures, as well as NES's role in this process. To further the integration of asylum seekers and foreign refugees, plans include **organizing info days and conducting training sessions for active job searching.**

Based on practical experience, we can say that one of the obstacles to providing adequate support, aside from the lack of valid documentation (recognized diplomas) or proof of acquired qualifications, is the language barrier. In this regard, our partners are committed, through the Memorandum of Cooperation, to providing translators as needed.

NES representatives¹³³

There are 519 foreigners registered as unemployed with the NES (398 women). Of this number, 30 foreigners are from Ukraine (27 women). Of these Ukrainian nationals, **8 individuals have qualifications while 22 are registered as unqualified.**

Representatives of the relevant institutions **point to legal and substantial challenges** that may arise in the context of exercising the right to access the labor market. **Firstly, the Law on Employment and Unemployment Insurance**¹³⁴, in Article 83, stipulates that the National Employment Service must maintain special records of foreigners and stateless persons. Article 85 states that a foreign citizen or stateless person can register as unemployed if they have a permanent or temporary residence permit, and Article 88 stipulates that the record of an unemployed person ceases if their permanent or temporary residence permit is revoked (paragraph 1, point 8). **Secondly, the Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection,** as previously mentioned, in Article 76, paragraph 1, point 3, allows persons with temporary protection to access the labor market. Simultaneously, the decision granting temporary protection to displaced persons from Ukraine limits its duration to one year. **Thirdly, many active employment policy measures, particularly financial ones, require beneficiaries to provide security measures** (promissory notes, guarantors) **and to agree to monitor the implementation of the measures,** which often lasts longer than one year.

Representatives of national institutions highlight a systemic issue in accessing active employment measures for all foreigners, not just those with recognized temporary protection. Although there is a clear legal basis for allowing access to the labor market, **many active employment policy measures, considering the conditions and criteria for their implementation, effectively prevent displaced persons from benefiting from them.** For example, the self-employment subsidy requires documents such as security measures, a photocopy of

133 18/12/2023, email NES.

134 Official Gazette of RS, No. 36/2009, 88/2010, 38/2015, 113/2017, 113/2017 – oth.law and 49/2021

the guarantor's ID card, and other evidence regarding the guarantor's status, which are almost impossible for displaced persons to obtain. As a contractual obligation, it is also required that the individual conduct the activity for which the subsidy was granted as their primary occupation and pay taxes and contributions for mandatory social insurance for **at least 12 months** from the start of the activity. Given that the Government of Serbia extended the temporary protection for an additional year in March 2024, no displaced person from Ukraine could currently qualify for this measure, as they cannot guarantee their status for the next 12 months from the start of their business.

■ Perspective of international organizations and civil society organizations

Representatives from international and domestic civil society organizations agree that the economic empowerment of mothers from Ukraine is the most pressing need within that population. It appears that they, **in collaboration with the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, NES, and the Qualifications Agency,** have the best approach to, **on one hand, map the potentials and needs of refugees and migrants** in accessing labor rights, and **on the other hand, identify the needs and challenges faced by employers** in need of workforce, **and to connect them mutually.**

Identified challenges for integrating women from Ukraine into the labor market primarily include inadequate knowledge of Serbian (and English), employment in jobs far below their qualifications (so-called brain waste) and **working while caring for young children** (since they cannot afford daycare). **Especially in small communities,** they struggle to find employment, often resorting to **precarious work.** Employment or starting their own businesses is also difficult for highly qualified Ukrainian women (e.g., dentists) **due to a lack of social contacts and a developed client network.** There is also a recognized **need for retraining and upskilling women** to meet the specificities of the Serbian market. Furthermore, support is needed for preparing **adequate CVs and sharing them with employers, as well as interview preparation** (particularly addressing cultural differences and how to handle inappropriate questions).

“ However, because of the language, for example, people who are proficient in our language and English find it easier to get a job, regardless of qualifications. Of course, someone cannot work in IT if they are qualified for something else, but it seems to me that those who struggle with the language tend to work in physical jobs or jobs that do not require communication with people. These include warehouse work, hotel jobs, cleaning positions, and so on. Quite a few people have managed to find their way. In the IT field, Ikea has employed many of them. So, they somehow manage and find solutions. We know about people who work in bakeries, butcher shops, pastry shops, but there are also those who do not want to accept such types of jobs because their qualifications are far above that level; they are overqualified for such jobs, but that puts them at risk of losing their livelihoods altogether.

Now, when we talk about women, women with young children are not actively seeking employment. This is because they do not have the money to pay for daycare, whether we're talking about state-run ones, because payment is erratic, or private daycares. If they do not have their mother or someone else to care for their children, they do not have the opportunity to work because there is no one to care for the child. This is a significant problem because it then calls into question their existence here.

People living in smaller communities find it harder to get a job. They mostly work on a freelance basis, in physical jobs, or on daily wages in agricultural work.

icso representatives¹³⁵

The representatives of an organization also expressed **concern about what the amendments to the Law on the Employment of Foreigners and the introduction of a single permit will bring into practice.**

“ As of 1 February, the amendments to the Law on Employment of Foreigners have come into effect, introducing a single permit where work permits will no longer be issued, but we are still waiting to see how this will work in practice... Actually, this should be automatic, where all employers have information that the person with the registration number has a regulated status, and it should go hand in hand. However, there is concern among all stakeholders working with these people that it will not be so easy. People may

135 07/02/2024, online interview with two ICSO representatives.

still need to request some kind of confirmation from the NES because the systems are not uniform. Now, when the registration number is entered, all data should come out and the person should see that someone has a work permit. The system is not uniform, and there will be a document proving this.

ICSO representative¹³⁶

Organizations are trying to respond to identified challenges and have developed examples of good practices. UNHCR Serbia has the most experience and developed support programs for employing refugees. They have been implementing a paid internship program with IKEA **for three years**, aiming to promote their skills, familiarize them with the labor market, and establish contacts in the local community. The program often leads to employment opportunities. They have also **developed a network of employers and collaborated with several human resource agencies**, offering them candidates among asylum seekers and refugees. Within the program, they have employed Ukrainian women as well.

🗨️ We have established a network of contacts in the private sector, including in Vranje. Last year, we had an event where we improved communication and gained insight into certain new jobs. Some individuals found employment on their own. Two Ukrainian women in Vranje started their own small business, a dressmaking shop.

UNHCR representative¹³⁷

Representatives of the UNHCR also emphasized the importance of the **tripartite memorandum with the NES and KIRS**, within which they conducted capacity-building activities for NES employees to better understand the needs and obstacles of beneficiaries. This was aimed at sensitizing employment counselors (case workers) to be motivated to help people participate in activities organized by NES, such as job fairs, etc. Unfortunately, NES training sessions are conducted in Serbian, making it difficult to include foreigners. Nevertheless, in collaboration with NES, **displaced persons from Ukraine are included in job fairs**. They suggest informing beneficiaries promptly about job fairs.

The UNHCR has also begun collaborating with ADRA to assist their Ukrainian beneficiaries in finding employment. **ADRA has approached the comprehensive integration** of Ukrainian refugees into the labor market, providing them with vocational training (programmer, accountant, physiotherapist, accountant, graphic design, digital marketing, etc.) and Serbian language learning. They assist with diploma recognition for employment purposes and obtaining work permits, as well as job placement in collaboration with UNHCR. They also have excellent cooperation with the NES and the Qualifications Agency. **In Vranje, the CSO Indigo** implemented a three-month paid internship program with Ukrainians in specific companies. **Representatives of JRS** have had positive experiences in compiling a list of Russian companies motivated to employ Ukrainians due to their knowledge of the Russian language.

🗨️ Another thing that could be useful here is perhaps placing an advertisement and creating a list of (Russian) companies...I've already started moving in that direction, and we've had several companies open their doors. All Ukrainians interested in applying for those jobs were warmly welcomed.

ICSO representative¹³⁸

■ Perspective of women displaced from Ukraine

Displaced women from Ukraine are **highly motivated to enter the labor market**, having realized that their status is not as temporary as initially thought, now entering their third year in Serbia with dwindling savings. They have undertaken numerous job searches, with some finding employment, often with the assistance of international and domestic civil society organizations.

136 Ibid.

137 07/02/2024, online interview with four UNHCR representatives.

138 08/04/2024, online interview with two JRS representatives.

However, there are numerous **challenges** in accessing the labor market for displaced Ukrainian women. The primary challenge is **their status regulated through temporary protection**, leading to uncertainties and interruptions in their employment and documentation renewal.

“ I want to return, but now I’m thinking we might need to stay longer. We have issues with refugee protection in Serbia, receiving last-minute information about extensions. If it’s not extended next time, I need to apply for residence, which takes time and prevents me from working. Waiting for the residence permit and then for the work permit is very stressful. I waited for a long time.

Online FGD participant, private accommodation, Belgrade¹³⁹

A significant challenge is the lack or insufficient knowledge of the Serbian language, especially for professional jobs such as lawyers, teachers, or medical workers, etc.

“ She has been here briefly and knows very little Serbian (nursery teacher). The idea is for her to learn Serbian better and then work in a factory. She doesn’t know how to sew, but there are other jobs at the factory, like painting or whatever is needed.

FGD participant, Vranje Asylum Center¹⁴⁰

Women displaced from Ukraine feel discriminated against in the employment process due to their Ukrainian origin.

“ Here I have temporary protection. Because of employment, I went to the Employment Service and got a work permit there. ...I went to a store to work as a cashier, but they didn’t want to take me because I am Ukrainian. It was lucky for me that nearby, a neighbor needed a waiter. So, I came, talked to the neighbor, and he said yes, I need you, and I will register you with everything, so you have insurance.

FGD participant, private accommodation, Kraljevo¹⁴¹

According to the experience of women in the labor market, whether they are in private accommodation or in an asylum center, women **often take jobs below their qualifications**, leading to *brain waste*. **They are also willing to start their own businesses, but high taxes deter them, often forcing them to work “under the table”.**

“ She would accept any job. Her situation is quite difficult. She has been worn out during this time. Her husband, who returned from the war, was on sick leave afterwards, and they had no income. He only recently started working again, but wages are very low in Ukraine. Sending a hundred euros a month is a lot there; here, with a hundred euros, you can go to the town and buy something like bread, etc. She graduated from law school. Here she tried to find any job she could, even tried sewing and applying to various companies.

FGD participant, Vranje Asylum Center¹⁴²

“ I heard the story of all the girls here. And I see that there’s a problem. First, everyone here has some education, and everyone here has some good profession. And when we came here to Serbia, I don’t know, I have such an impression, when we came here, we became somewhat less. You can’t just complain; you have to work twice as hard to blend in. We all have some good professions that could be valuable. Serbia could give these girls a lower tax rate. We would have for three different companies (pastry shop, graphic design, transport agency). I don’t know, maybe for the first three years or a year. For a specific time, tax exemption or some other form of subsidies and compensation. So that our children could live here, so that we could work. I think we could be very useful for Serbia.

FGD participant, private accommodation, Belgrade¹⁴³

139 Ibid

140 02/03/2024, focus group with mothers from Ukraine, Vranje Asylum Center.

141 19/04/2024, online focus group with mothers from Ukraine in private accommodation.

142 02/03/2024, focus group with mothers from Ukraine, Vranje Asylum Center.

143 Ibid

Women also noted the need for additional training to meet job requirements different from those in Ukraine. However, they also **need to enter the labor market after the training**, but they **lack social networks and are not familiar with the labor market** and have not received adequate support from the **National Employment Service**.

She graduated from the Faculty of Economics and has an additional education, essentially in auditing. She can review and prepare audit reports for companies. (How familiar is she with Serbian accounting?) She says that there is a different approach to economic calculations in Serbia compared to what she knows, but in practice, it can be learned very quickly. There is some form of training or requalification where she can learn Serbian accounting and start working.

ADRA offered a three-month hairdressing course, but it was not enough time, and they couldn't fund it longer. She enjoys hairdressing and she practices with family members but lacks materials and equipment.

(Did you go to National Service, and did they offer you some kind of training, or retraining?) Some of them were there, but it was a complete waste of time.

FGD participants, Vranje Asylum Center¹⁴⁴

Moreover, **mothers with young children** struggle to find a place in a kindergarten and have to stay with the children, making it difficult to find a job and to work.

She has a small daughter and cannot work herself, but her son works and supports both his sister and mother... When they arrived here, she tried to enroll him in at least a high school to gain some skills, but since he was already 18, they said they no longer dealt with that. And so, the situation ended like that, but he understands that his mom doesn't work anywhere, he has a younger sister, and he found a job.

FGD participant, Vranje Asylum Center¹⁴⁵

Some women work **online for Ukraine, facing challenges in accessing healthcare**.

I haven't tried to find a job in Serbia. I'm an entrepreneur in Ukraine, working online as a graphic designer. I have a lot of work and I'm trying to work as much as possible to secure my financial side of life. But that doesn't mean I won't need a job in the future. Because if I had a job, I would have health insurance. So, I'm thinking about how that could work out.

Online FGD participant, private accommodation, Novi Sad¹⁴⁶

Women in Vranje (and likely in all small towns), unlike women in Belgrade and Novi Sad, face an additional challenge – **low living standards, limited job opportunities, and the lack of jobs even for the local population**. **On the other hand, moving to a bigger city requires higher expenses**.

But they have long understood that they cannot find a job according to their education because there isn't enough work even for Serbs.

They explored it, but in Belgrade, apartments were too expensive; they couldn't support the whole family. Their daughter and son-in-law tried in Belgrade, but it wasn't possible. They managed to find a studio apartment for the two of them and the children. When there are many people in one place, it's difficult. Here they have accommodation, and it's much easier.

FGD participants Vranje Asylum Center¹⁴⁷

144 02/03/2024, focus group with mothers from Ukraine, Vranje Asylum Center.

145 Ibid

146 19/04/2024, online focus group with mothers from Ukraine in private accommodation.

147 02/03/2024, focus group with mothers from Ukraine, Vranje Asylum Center.

These findings indicate that while there is **motivation among women to work**, they need support in learning Serbian, retraining, and job searching due to their lack of social networks and unfamiliarity with the Serbian job market. Additionally, **motivated women capable of starting businesses** require incentives such as tax reductions.

4.4.3. Regulating the status and access to the labor market of mothers displaced from Ukraine – summary of challenges and solutions

It is extremely important that the Government of the Republic of Serbia, by activating appropriate legal provisions, has enabled displaced persons from Ukraine to access the labor market. Generally, one of the greatest challenges for foreigners in any country is achieving a status equivalent to that of citizens. In terms of access to the labor market and employers, the offerings constituted by the education, work experience, and willingness to work of the displaced persons from Ukraine are fully available.

However, research participants agree that there are challenges in regulating the status and realizing the right to work for displaced women from Ukraine. The most significant challenges are the following:

- ▶ As for the **regulation of status**, it turned out that displaced persons from Ukraine **do not stay in Serbia temporarily.**

RECOMMENDATION: The Government of the Republic of Serbia, in cooperation with relevant representatives of institutions and civil society organizations, should consider promptly the possibility of providing alternative forms of international protection to these persons and inform them about it, as well as the relevant institutions that provide them with services.

- ▶ As for employment, **problems** are primarily observed in **the segments of institutional support for active job search, inclusion in the system that implies the use of the right to active employment measures, and consequently also in familiarizing employers with the human potential of displaced persons from Ukraine.**

RECOMMENDATION: It is **necessary** for the Ministry responsible for labor affairs and the NES, in cooperation with international organizations and civil society, to **conduct an analysis of active employment policy measures and determine which measures displaced persons can access according to their specific status and approved length of stay.** At the same time, the analysis should **determine all essential obstacles to access to the existing measures** (e.g. means of security, duration of temporary protection, etc.). The gender dimension should be taken into account in the analysis.

- ▶ **Between Serbia and Ukraine there is a difference in business in certain areas - for example,** bookkeeping and law require additional training, as well as the motivation of women to respond to the needs of the labor market and engage in another profession. Similarly, **cultural differences in writing a CV and participating in a business interview** can make it difficult to enter the labor market.

RECOMMENDATION: It is **necessary** for the NES to include education of this type within the measures of active employment policies.

- ▶ **Insufficient knowledge of the Serbian language** reduces the probability of employment, especially for highly qualified women in their profession.

RECOMMENDATION: The NES should develop active employment policy measures that include a measure specific to foreigners – **learning the Serbian language for the purpose of employment.** Donors should also support international and local CSOs to continue organizing Serbian language classes for Ukrainian women. Online education provides a large geographical coverage.

- ▶ **Employing women in jobs far below their qualifications**, the so-called “brain waste”. This type of employment leads to the loss of their working potential, which can have negative economic and psychological consequences on a personal level (loss of self-confidence, depression, etc.), and for the community, a loss of labor that could significantly contribute to development.

- ▶ **The lack of knowledge** of the labor market, as well as the underdevelopment of social networks (including clients) makes it difficult to find a job

RECOMMENDATION: It is necessary to continue with the good practice of mediation in the employment of ICSO and CSO in cooperation with KIRS, NES and the Qualifications Agency. Paid internships are important for introducing employers to the potential of displaced persons from Ukraine, as well as informative talks and fairs. Support is needed, as stated above, **in learning the Serbian language. Psychological empowerment and support in that process** are also necessary.

- ▶ **Women have the feeling that they are discriminated against when trying to find employment because of their Ukrainian origin**

RECOMMENDATION: It is necessary for the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, in cooperation with civil society organizations, to familiarize displaced women from Ukraine with their rights and obligations according to the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination, and especially how to recognize such cases and how to initiate appropriate protection procedures.

- ▶ **The lack of support for childcare makes it difficult for women to enter the labor market.**

RECOMMENDATION: KIRS and commissioners for refugees, in cooperation with the Ministry of State Administration and Local Self-Governments and LGUs where Ukrainian families (and families of other migrants) reside, should include activities and means for the inclusion of refugee and migrant children in preschool institutions in the LAPs for migration management. Employers should also support this service through socially responsible businesses.

- ▶ **Displaced women from Ukraine are motivated to start their own businesses, but it is difficult for them to legalize them without support and incentive measures.**

RECOMMENDATION: It is necessary for the NES to include women displaced from Ukraine in active employment measures related to starting their own business: start your own business, subsidy for self-employment, etc.

5. Concluding remarks

The Republic of Serbia, like the EU countries, has provided temporary protection to displaced persons from Ukraine, granting them the right to: stay during the period of temporary protection; a document confirming their status and right to stay; healthcare, in accordance with regulations governing healthcare for foreigners; access to the labor market during the period of temporary protection, in accordance with regulations governing the employment of foreigners; free elementary and high school education in state schools, in accordance with specific regulations; legal assistance under the conditions prescribed for asylum seekers; freedom of religion under the same conditions as citizens of the Republic of Serbia; collective accommodation in facilities designated for this purpose. In the process of realizing their **rights to education, cultural rights, healthcare, and access to the labor market**, there are numerous examples of good practices and observed experiences, but there are also challenges that need to be addressed in the future.

When it comes to exercising the **right to education**, there is a consensus that it is implemented well, i.e., that the **process meets educational needs**, from enrollment, through the organization of classes, and the success of students, to grading. The only obstacle perceived is the lack of knowledge of the Serbian language, that is, the lack of a preparatory period for the inclusion of children in school. However, it should be emphasized that there is neither systemic monitoring, nor research into the educational achievements of Ukrainian children, as well as other refugees and migrants, and no comparison with the educational achievements of local children. Most challenges are related to meeting **emotional and social needs**. There are displaced children who attend only online Ukrainian schools and have no social contact with local children. Certain children who attend classes in Serbian schools, experience discrimination because of their Ukrainian origin, and there are examples of some of them giving up schooling in Serbian schools due to peer violence. The mental health of these children is particularly at risk. It is also a question of how burdened children are who attend Ukrainian and Serbian schools at the same time. Many children have experienced trauma and are still going through traumatic experiences, since their fathers and relatives remained in the war environment, and they need continuous monitoring and psychological support. For that reason, the **Ministry of Education should strengthen the already established support system for refugee and migrant children in the education** process at several levels: **introducing a preparatory period** for learning the Serbian language, getting to know the cultural specificities of Serbian society and the education system, as well as more intensive monitoring of their emotional state and psychosocial needs; **raising the capacity of all schools** while using the capacity of schools and teachers who have experience and good practices in working with migrants and refugees, especially in meeting the emotional and social needs of migrant students. A strategic approach requires **regular monitoring of the number, socio-demographic characteristics and success of displaced children from Ukraine** (as well as other refugees and migrants) and **cooperation with the academic community** in conducting research in the field of migrant and refugee education. It is **important to provide special support to children and mothers at key transition points in education** – enrollment in preschool institutions and the first year of elementary and high school, as well as enrollment in higher education institutions.

The realization of cultural rights for displaced children and mothers from Ukraine is enabled by schools, the Commissariat for Refugees, and civil society organizations. They mostly participate in cultural events when organized by the mentioned actors, rarely attending cultural events independently. There is a greater focus on familiarizing them with Serbian culture, but there are also events promoting Ukrainian culture. Support is also provided to Ukrainian artists, promoting their films at film festivals and promoting Ukrainian literature and writers. **Good practices include** humanitarian cultural events, cultural content with a war theme often as an introduction to protest walks and public debates and discussions about the war in Ukraine. Mothers in private accommodation often cannot afford to participate in cultural events, neither timewise nor financially, while mothers and children in asylum centers have the support of the Commissariat and CSOs, but there is a dependency on donor funds making it difficult to ensure continuity. **It is necessary to ensure the sustainability of cultural activities through the cooperation of educational institutions and cultural institutions (and their cooperation with CSOs) and the more active role of the National Council of the Ukrainian National Minority.**

Regarding **healthcare**, due to the legal gap and the non-recognition of displaced persons enjoying temporary protection as foreigners who, at the expense of the budget of the Republic of Serbia, realize the right to healthcare, access to this right can be assessed as **inadequate, incomplete, and very often left to the discretion of various stakeholders in the healthcare system**. Different practices and actions of the RFZO branches in the context of the possibility of inclusion in mandatory health insurance, lack of accurate and

precise information on the possibility of realizing the right, different practices of primary healthcare institutions, have created an **unfavorable environment for realizing** the right to health for this extremely vulnerable group of displaced persons. **It is necessary to amend Article 236 of the Law Healthcare** and recognize as a category of foreigners those persons who have been granted temporary protection. Alternatively, considering that Article 236 shows a clear intention of the legislator to comprehensively include a large number of vulnerable groups of foreigners in the healthcare system, it is possible to request an **authentic interpretation from the National Assembly**, whether the category of persons enjoying temporary protection can be considered a vulnerable category in the context of this article of the law. It is necessary, without exception, to enable persons who have been granted temporary protection to be **included in the mandatory health insurance system** and inform displaced persons from Ukraine about any positive changes. It is also important to pay special attention to the **mental health of mothers and children** due to the continuity of traumatic experiences as the war in Ukraine is still ongoing, as well as to their **vulnerability to gender-based violence and human trafficking**.

Regarding the **right to work and access to the labor market**, it is important that the Government of the Republic of Serbia, by activating appropriate legal provisions, has **enabled displaced persons from Ukraine to access the labor market**. However, problems are observed in the segments of institutional support for active job searching, inclusion in the system that implies the use of rights to active employment measures, and consequently the awareness of employers about the human potential of displaced persons from Ukraine. Displaced persons should be **provided access to appropriate records of the National Employment Service**. Considering the prescribed measures, especially the conditions that must be met for displaced persons to be able to use them, it is necessary to first conduct an **analysis of active employment policy measures** and determine which measures displaced persons can access vis-a-vis their specific status and approved length of stay, **identify all essential barriers to accessing existing measures** (e.g., security funds, duration of temporary protection, etc.) and predict measures that are specific exclusively to foreigners (learning Serbian for employment purposes). It is necessary to approach displaced persons more actively, organize meetings between NES representatives and displaced persons, and systematize their competencies that would be presented to potential employers. In all these activities, the **gender dimension and the specific needs of women** should be taken into account.

Finally, it is evident that the displaced persons from Ukraine **are not staying in Serbia temporarily. Therefore, it would be appropriate to consider the possibility of providing alternative forms of international protection** to these individuals and to inform them, as well as the relevant institutions that provide them with services.



Save the Children