



FURTHER INTO THE MARGINS

A regional report on Roma communities displaced by the Ukraine crisis

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This research report examines the experiences of Roma communities who have been displaced by the war in Ukraine. Roma in Ukraine and in Europe have historically faced discrimination and prejudice due to widely held stereotypes among the non-Roma majority. This report highlights how Roma internally displaced persons and refugees are discriminated against, and how, whereas many Ukrainian refugees have been welcomed with open arms in European countries, the same welcome has not been extended to Roma. The report also highlights the role of Roma-led organizations in supporting displaced Roma and reinvigorating the fight for the rights of Roma communities.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This regional assessment presents the key findings and recommendations from Ukraine, Poland and Romania on the situation and particular challenges facing Roma internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees from the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Even before the invasion, Roma communities in Ukraine lived in dire conditions marked by high levels of poverty, segregation, sub-standard and overcrowded housing, and lack of access to essential services such as health and education. The report documents the differential impact of war and displacement on Roma compared to other Ukrainian refugees and offers recommendations for EU and national policymakers, donors, NGO staff and volunteers on both short-term responses and long-term advocacy. Data for this assessment was collected through interviews and focus group discussions in April–June 2023 in Ukraine and Romania and in 2022 in Poland. Interviewees included Roma refugees and IDPs, representatives of Roma-led organizations, representatives of international and national NGOs, and authorities.

KEY FINDINGS

- Roma communities in Ukraine face persistent inequality, discrimination and marginalization. Their most significant challenge is obtaining legal identification such as birth certificates and passports. The lack of such documents is the result of a combination of factors, including lack of awareness, institutional bias and poverty.
- The lack of identity documents affects Roma communities' access to basic services such as housing as well as life-saving humanitarian assistance, both in Ukraine and in refugee-receiving countries.
- Key socioeconomic indicators (income, health and education) among Roma communities in Ukraine, which were already dismal, have been further exacerbated in the wake of the war.
- The biggest concern for Roma women is securing employment. Their involvement in family-run trading and selling businesses in Ukraine is not easily translatable to their new contexts. Consequently, many Roma women are first-time employees. A lack of formal work experience or education, and an inability to speak the official language, are barriers to their professional integration. In addition, the lack of childcare support is a significant barrier to women's formal labour market participation.
- Discrimination significantly affects Roma IDPs and refugees' access to protection, basic services and general wellbeing. Roma refugees in Poland and Romania have faced racial discrimination from not only authorities and officials, but also volunteers and fellow refugees, along the evacuation routes, at border crossing points, and upon arrival in safe states.
- Unlike the open-armed welcome that many Ukrainian refugees received, Roma refugees were openly discriminated against when renting accommodation from private citizens in Romania and Poland. Even when, as in Romania, government schemes made accommodating large Roma families financially lucrative, the withdrawal of such programmes swiftly changed the attitudes of property owners.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Support to Roma communities requires a transnational, flexible and coherent approach that accommodates their particular histories, experiences, needs and perspectives. There remains an urgent need for an institutionalized, transnational network that can offer comprehensive assistance and support to the Roma people – both refugees and hosts, who are ethnic minorities in Europe.
- Roma communities in Ukraine urgently require administrative and legal support which allows them to access basic services. Civil society actors must continue advocating for support to Roma communities through legal aid programmes and increased social benefits. Aid actors must also ensure that Roma communities can access services without identity documents.
- The localization of humanitarian responses requires financial support from donors and international NGOs to Roma organizations, activists and platforms who continue to be the main help for displaced Roma and who raise awareness about the communities' needs. Support is also needed in building coalitions and partnerships, and in negotiating with authorities.
- To effectively address the specific needs and concerns of Roma refugees, it is essential to involve them directly in decision-making processes. This means not just consulting with them, but actively including their voices and perspectives in shaping policies and programmes.
- A proactive approach is needed to address discriminatory attitudes and practices among all those working with refugees. Cultural sensitivity and inclusivity training for volunteers and staff involved in humanitarian assistance to promote empathy and respect towards all individuals, regardless of ethnic and racial background, is essential. Roma-led organizations have more experience in the field and their collaboration could ensure effective outcomes in training and professionalizing volunteers and staff.

BACKGROUND

I would like to see a big house that lights up and where people can go, especially children, who just wander here and there. Now they hardly go to school because there are constant air [raid] alarms. They sit in the basement, and no one likes that. They need a good environment – a home that will be spacious, bright, beautiful, cosy for them, and has everything a home needs. Dishes and household materials. Their own kitchen, where they can come in, make themselves tea, and sit down to talk.

A Roma IDP from Poplavka, Odesa, Ukraine

Of the nearly 11 million people forcefully displaced by the Russian invasion of Ukraine that started in February 2022 (UNHCR Regional Bureau for Europe, 2023), nearly 100,000 belong to the Roma community.¹ A similar number of Roma people are internally displaced in Ukraine (Secretariat of the Commissioner for Human Rights of Ukraine, 2023). Before the invasion, it is estimated that there were between 200,000 and 400,000 Roma living in Ukraine, with significant populations in the Zakarpattia (Transcarpathia), Odesa, and Kharkiv regions (Bocheva, 2019). Ukraine's Roma population comprises a diverse mix of cultures, languages and histories; what they share in common is decades of discrimination, indignities and violations of human rights, stemming from deep-rooted biases and cultural-historical issues (Bocheva, 2019).

Even before the invasion, Roma communities in Ukraine lived in dire conditions marked by high levels of poverty, segregation, sub-standard and overcrowded housing, and lack of access to essential services such as health and education (Bocheva, 2019). Roma concerns were generally a lower priority for Ukrainian authorities, particularly in light of economic, social and geopolitical issues facing the country's wider population. This has come into sharper relief and over a wider landscape following the invasion, where Roma refugees have faced racial discrimination from authorities and officials, but also volunteers and fellow refugees, along the evacuation routes, at border crossing points, and upon arrival in safe states (ERRC, 2023).

This regional assessment documents the experiences of Ukrainian Roma² refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) of the war in Ukraine. Reports show that Roma refugees from Ukraine face specific challenges in accessing protection and humanitarian assistance that are generally available to other refugees from Ukraine (Greener and de Andrade Costa, 2022; Mirga-Wójtowicz et al., 2022). In response to the crisis, Oxfam has partnered with national organizations in refugee-receiving countries to provide support to those forcibly displaced by the war. Minority groups are a key concern as these groups (such as people with disabilities, minority ethnic groups, LGBTQIA+ and others) are not only gravely affected by the immediate events leading to displacement, but also by deep-rooted and long-term discrimination and marginalization.

The assessment presents the findings of three studies carried out by national organizations and Oxfam partners in Romania, Ukraine and Poland.³ It aims to raise awareness of the particular challenges that Roma people face both in Ukraine as well as in refugee-receiving countries, to document the differential impact of war and displacement on Roma compared to other Ukrainian refugees, and to offer recommendations for EU and national policymakers, NGO staff and volunteers both for short-term responses as well as long-term advocacy.

In Romania, the study was conducted by Platform Aresel ('reach'), a civic initiative started in 2018 in response to decades of ignorance, racism, and poor participation and political representation of Romanian Roma citizens.⁴ Aresel aims to encourage and support the participation and public engagement of Roma communities and to advocate to authorities on the situation of Roma people in Romania.

In Ukraine, the study was carried out by the Tenth of April, an independent, humanitarian, non-governmental and non-profit organization based in Odesa, which aims to contribute to the development of civil society and strengthening the rule of law in Ukraine. The organization was founded in 2012 by human rights activists with expertise in refugee rights protection. It provides free legal aid and assistance to vulnerable groups including asylum seekers, refugees, IDPs, stateless people and Roma people (R2P et al., 2017).

In Poland, the study was conducted by Fundacja w Stronę Dialogu (Foundation Towards Dialogue), an organization active since 2012 which 'promotes multiculturalism, non-discrimination and knowledge about the Roma Community'. The research took place in 2022 and published as a standalone report (Mirga-Wójtowicz et al., 2022).

OBJECTIVES

The report aims to examine and consolidate:

1. The situation and particular challenges of Roma IDPs and refugees in accessing protection and services in Ukraine, Poland and Romania, and how this has an impact on their wellbeing and security.
2. Perceptions and key concerns of Roma communities on their situation, the services provided to them, and their self-prioritized needs and future plans (as these may differ from other refugee groups).
3. Perceptions of national and local authorities, host communities, Roma communities already living in the host country, and service providers, including NGOs, on Roma IDPs and how these influence the way they treat and support Roma communities.
4. Possible measures that could be taken to address concerns around potential inequality, stigmatization and risk that may come out of this assessment.

METHODOLOGY

Data for this assessment was collected in Ukraine and Romania between April and June 2023. The study in Poland was carried out in 2022; the findings of which are integrated into this report.

In Romania, 28 interviews with Roma refugees from Ukraine (11 refugees, 10 of whom are women), and representatives of Romanian local and national governments, private property owners, accommodation centre coordinators and NGOs – especially those serving Roma communities – were conducted in Bucharest. The research team also visited several public and private housing facilities, the Gara de Nord transit centre and RomExpo – a repurposed exhibition centre in Bucharest, which now functions as an integrated services centre for refugees. RomExpo currently accommodates state agencies, non-profit organizations, and volunteers participating in the humanitarian response.

The study captures a crucial transitional moment in Romania when the emergency response is moving to integration aimed at longer-term assistance and support, conditional on aspects such as education and employment. This change is embodied in

the new accommodation and integration support programme adopted at the beginning of May 2023. The research also captures a gradual yet consistent switch in the humanitarian assistance and relief: the withdrawal of support for refugees from Ukraine from countries in Europe.

Interviews in Romania were conducted in Romanian, Ukrainian and Russian. One interview was conducted in English. Some interviewees were also able to converse in Romanian. This is more common among those living near the Romanian or Moldovan borders and those who engage in cross-border economic activities. Most Roma refugees interviewed in Romania are more likely to speak Russian than Ukrainian.

In Ukraine, the research team of five researchers conducted four focus group discussions with Roma representatives, 27 individual interviews with Roma representatives, and 25 interviews with key informants from Roma organizations, international organizations, host communities and administrator/authorities. These were conducted in Odesa and Zakarpattia. Over three-quarters of the respondents were women and girls, while about one-fifth were people with disabilities. A local Roma activist supported the research team in arranging and conducting interviews and ensuring the research tools were contextualized.

In Poland, the report – Human rights, needs and discrimination: The situation of Roma refugees from Ukraine in Poland – is the product of activists collaborating to support Roma refugees. The authors drew on their knowledge and experience of working with Roma refugees, extensive ethnographic research, and their work in humanitarian aid campaigns. Data was also gathered through interviews with activists of Roma origin and conversations with non-Roma aid coordinators and volunteers, and data from other projects in which the authors are involved.⁵

A fundamental limitation of this study is the lack of statistics on Roma displaced persons as information on 'ethnicity' is not collected in displacement data. To that end, the report highlights estimated figures. Another limitation is the lack of voices of LGBTQIA+ Roma, men (due to mandatory military conscription), and the inclusion of only a few Roma living with disabilities. Additionally, the sample size of refugees only represents those who signed consent forms – the Romania research team also had conversations with many refugees who feared participating officially in the study due to the threat of eviction from accommodation centres or denial of aid. Their valuable insights, however, also inform this report.

ROMA MIGRATION AND STEREOTYPES

There is a longstanding belief and stereotype held by many non-Roma across the EU about Roma as eternal wanderers and migrants, who choose a nomadic existence over a settled life; this essentializes 'nomadism' as a key Roma cultural characteristic in the minds of non-Roma (Fiałkowska et al., 2018; Kóćzé and Trehan, 2009). Mainstream representations of Roma people in Europe continue to be racialized and perpetuate the discourse of 'otherness' of Roma from Europeans, drawing on physical, social and cultural differences (Kóćzé, 2018). In addition to such negative stereotypes as 'lazy' and 'nomadic',⁶ Roma migrants have been characterized as 'bogus asylum seekers', 'ethnotourists', 'asylum adventurers', 'poverty migrants' and 'welfare parasites' (Kóćzé, 2018). These characterizations and stereotypes have grave consequences on not only everyday social practices, but also policies and institutional programmes. They offer the non-Roma majority a justification for excluding Roma from mainstream society (Fiałkowska et al. 2018, Kóćzé, 2018).

Some of the findings below provide further evidence of the use of these stereotypes to deny Roma refugees the same status and welcome that other Ukrainian refugees received in hosting countries. Roma communities fleeing war in Ukraine have been labelled as 'not genuine refugees' who are taking advantage of the displacement to access services in neighbouring countries (Rorke, 2022). There is also often a conflation of Roma migrants as both 'nomadic' and 'criminals', which has a significant impact on European social and political attitudes towards Roma migration (Kóczé, 2018).

THE SITUATION OF ROMA IN UKRAINE

There is a dearth of reliable data on the Roma population in Ukraine.⁷ The last All-Ukrainian Population Census, conducted in 2001, found that 47,587 people identified as Roma (State Statistics Committee of Ukraine, 2001). However, this data is outdated and may not accurately reflect the situation even in 2001, as a large part of the Roma population presumably was not captured by the census due to a lack of identity documents, absence from their place of residence, or fear of participating because of presumed discrimination and negative consequences. According to the State Service of Ukraine for Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience (DESS), as of 2020, most Roma in Ukraine live in Zakarpattia, Donetsk and Dnipropetrovsk regions (DESS, 2020).

Over the years, different national and international NGOs have estimated the number of Roma in Ukraine to be between 120,000 to 400,000, living mostly in Zakarpattia (the largest population of Roma), Odesa, Zaporizhzhia, Kyiv, Cherkasy, Poltava, Donetsk and Luhansk regions, as well as Crimea (OSCE, 2014). The predominant language is Romani (of different dialects, dominated by the Lowara dialect), as well as Ukrainian, Hungarian and Russian. It is important to note that most Roma refugees interviewed for the research in Romania and Poland speak Russian and Hungarian – a characteristic that distinguishes them from other Ukrainian refugees and possibly drives segregation in the refugee response.

Even before the war, anti-Roma sentiments were rife in Ukraine, and Roma communities faced structural inequalities, discrimination and violence. High levels of poverty, substandard and overcrowded housing, lack of healthcare, social and administrative services, and difficulty securing identity documents are just some of the many indignities faced by Roma communities in Ukraine (Minority Rights, n.d.). Much of this treatment is born of ‘antigypsyism’, understood by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) as a ‘specific form of racism, an ideology founded on racial superiority, a form of dehumanization and institutional racism nurtured by historical discrimination, which is expressed, among others, by violence, hate speech, exploitation, stigmatization and the most blatant kind of discrimination’ (Council of Europe, 2020).

Today, the Roma minority population in Ukraine face persistent inequality, discrimination and marginalization. A lack of identification documents is a significant challenge that denies many Roma access to basic rights and services. Estimates of the percentage of Roma without personal identification documents are unreliable, and range anywhere from 2% to 30% (OSCE, 2018). According to UNHCR Ukraine, based on reports of partner NGOs working on issues of statelessness in Ukraine, 27% of people who require recognition of statelessness status and 45% of undocumented people who are required to confirm their nationality are Roma (UNHCR Ukraine, n.d.).

Many Roma face barriers in obtaining legal identification such as birth certificates and passports. The lack of identification documents is the result of a combination of factors. Officials may be prejudiced and discriminate, creating difficulties for Roma to navigate the bureaucracy required to obtain documents. However, government officials and Roma activists interviewed for this study expressed that although such cases do occur, they are not widespread. Poverty and limited access to education can contribute to a lack of awareness among Roma about the importance of legal identification. Without proper identification, Roma face numerous obstacles in their daily lives, including difficulty accessing social benefits, humanitarian assistance and healthcare services. Lack of identification also limits their ability to secure formal employment, access education, and exercise their right to vote. In some cases, Roma people without identity documents may

be at risk of detention due to their inability to prove their identity, especially in light of the declaration of martial law in Ukraine.

Roma communities in Ukraine score poorly on all key socioeconomic indicators, such as employment, education and health. Roma in Ukraine have traditionally been employed in low-skilled and informal sectors and face significant barriers to formal employment opportunities, while Roma children encounter significant obstacles in accessing quality education. Roma also face barriers in accessing quality healthcare services due to discrimination from healthcare providers, language barriers, and limited awareness of available healthcare options. Those Roma people who do receive social benefits from the state are still at a significant disadvantage because the amount they receive currently does not correspond to the actual minimum living wage.

These key socioeconomic indicators have been further exacerbated by the war in Ukraine. The closure or destruction of schools and forced displacement of several million people has interrupted many children's education; for Roma children, this has been a major setback. Their access to educational opportunities has worsened due to the lack of technology to access online learning while in temporary settlements or host communities (IRF, 2023). These gaps risk perpetuating the poverty that afflicts Roma communities. The Ukrainian Ombudsperson's representatives highlight that only 1% of Roma people in Ukraine have higher education, and every fifth Roma person has no formal education at all. Critically, every fourth Roma person is said to be unable to read or write in Ukrainian (ERRC et al., 2018).

In addition to worsening employment and healthcare indicators, housing is a fundamental socioeconomic issue for Roma communities, who have historically faced housing discrimination and forced evictions and often live in substandard conditions. The war has intensified these challenges, leading to the destruction of homes and displacement of Roma families. Displaced Roma often struggle to find secure housing and are at a higher risk of living in informal settlements that lack basic amenities such as water, sanitation and electricity. Some houses in which Roma people live are not officially registered and lack an official address as they were built without the required legal permissions. Roma residing in such homes cannot officially register their place of residence, which often becomes an obstacle to enjoying basic rights. If such houses are destroyed or damaged in the war, Roma will not receive compensation as they cannot prove their right of ownership.

UKRAINE NATIONAL STRATEGY ON ROMA

In April 2013, the Strategy for the Protection and Integration of the Roma National Minority into Ukrainian Society (valid until 2020) was approved (Legislation of Ukraine, 2013). For seven years, this strategy guided the government's actions in supporting and integrating Roma communities in Ukraine. It provided a framework for addressing issues in education, employment, healthcare, access to social services and housing for Roma communities. Importantly, the strategy also planned to provide 'individual Roma national minority representatives with certificates of state registration of civil status, identity documents confirming the citizenship of Ukraine or a special status' (DESS, 2021a).

An assessment by UN Women in 2019 found that although the adoption of the strategy elevated and established Roma issues on the political agendas of central and local institutions, the strategy suffered due to its top-down nature and lack of data, consultation and analysis. Weak coordination, lack of leadership and oversight, and low prioritization and budget allocation also contributed to the strategy and action plan's underachievement (Karoly et al., 2019).

Based on the evaluation of the strategy and comprehensive feedback from civil society organizations, a new Strategy Promoting the Realization of the Rights and Opportunities of Persons Belonging to the Roma National Minority in Ukrainian Society for the Period up to 2030 (adopted in July 2021) has been devised (DESS, 2021a). This prioritizes access to birth registration and identity documents as a key goal. Several actions to achieve this goal were included in the draft implementation action plan, as recommended by Roma NGOs, UNHCR and its partners, and other actors. The new strategy identifies the following issues that require attention:

- Lack of identity documents and birth certificates.
- Limited access of Roma people to legal aid, particularly free legal aid, due to ignorance of their rights, lack of trust in state authorities, and lack of identity documents.
- Low level of awareness of the Roma community on rights, freedoms and responsibilities provided for by law, in part due to low levels of trust in public authorities and local governments.
- Negative stereotyping of Roma, which has several consequences, such as discriminatory practices and reduced participation in public life.
- Limited access to education for Roma children and adults.
- Insufficient coverage of, and access to, healthcare services.
- Substandard living conditions, including lack of access to utilities such as centralized water supply and sewerage.
- Low employment levels, primarily due to the lack of identity and educational documents, which, in turn, leads to reduced household income and lack of state social security, in particular inadequate pensions.

The draft action plan was finalized at the end of 2021 but has not yet been adopted due to the escalation of the war (DESS, 2021b). As the strategy provides only a framework and areas for further action and lacks a detailed implementation plan, roles and responsibilities, and proper financing, it looks unlikely that its goals will be met soon.

STATE OF ASSISTANCE FOR ROMA IDPS IN UKRAINE

In Ukraine, those who have been forced to leave their homes and have become internally displaced receive Ukrainian hryvnia (UAH) 2,000 (equivalent to US\$54) for an adult and UAH 3,000 (US\$81) for people with disabilities and children per month, in addition to one-time payments to evacuees of the same amount. Local authorities, using their own resources and with support from partners and humanitarian organizations, provide humanitarian aid and other services to the affected population. As of 30 April 2023, 352 humanitarian organizations, both international and national, are providing aid in Ukraine, including multi-purpose cash assistance, protection services, access to water and sanitation, and education. These figures do not include the informal and other kinds of help provided by large numbers of local groups and community-based volunteers.

Limited information is available on how well these services are reaching Roma communities. No separate programmes implemented by international organizations aimed at supporting Roma in Ukraine were identified during the research, although there is support to local organizations working on Roma-focused efforts. This is because belonging to a national minority group is not considered a 'vulnerability' for humanitarian assistance. However, there are several local organizations whose mission is to provide assistance specifically to Roma communities. These include Roma-led organizations and

groups, and religious organizations who have historically provided significant support to Roma communities.

Many Roma people interviewed reported that access to humanitarian assistance is 'equal' for Roma and non-Roma. Lack of documents did, however, have a significant impact on assistance received: if a Roma person did not possess an identity document, in most cases assistance was not provided. Undocumented people are therefore among the most vulnerable. Digital literacy was another issue in accessing humanitarian assistance. If online registration is required, those Roma who did not have access to phones or computers or the skills to use them were at a clear disadvantage.

Cases of discrimination were also noted, especially concerning the resettlement of Roma IDPs. Activists noted that Roma are denied opportunities to rent apartments and from settling in collective sites, with discriminatory attitudes also reported among residents when IDPs sought shelter and housing in their areas (such as in Poplavka, Odesa). Much of the time, the only solution available was resettling with relatives and acquaintances or moving abroad. A representative of a Roma-led organization in Odesa reported that local authorities tended to provide more support to 'Ukrainians' (non-Roma), and Roma were only given whatever was left over from the material support.

Many concerns were raised related to medical assistance. Under Ukrainian law, only people who permanently legally reside in Ukraine are eligible for government health assistance. To access this, documentation such as a Ukrainian passport or permanent residence permit is required. Thus, only those who have valid documents can obtain free medical assistance. For those who lack documents, emergency medical assistance is free, but the cost of medical examinations, surgery and other services must be covered independently.

Word of mouth, or, as interviewees call it, 'the Roma mail', plays a key role in spreading information within communities. Historically, the sharing of information directly between community members was the main way of reaching Roma communities, especially those living in rural areas. Roma mediators and volunteers are also key communicators with the communities, as they are well-known in the communities and usually highly trusted. Interviewees also appreciated information shared by municipalities, local deputies and *starostas* (leaders enjoying support from the village community) (Decentralization Initiative, n.d.). Contacts between the local administration and Roma communities proved effective during the COVID-19 pandemic and remain an important and effective way to share information with people in rural locations.



Rosalyna on the driveway where she slept in a car for two months in Odesa Oblast, Ukraine.
Photo credit: Lottie Stevenson/Oxfam.

Rosalyna, Odesa Oblast, Ukraine

In April last year Rosalyna made the painful decision to leave the house she was born in and take her family to a safer part of Ukraine. Kherson had been occupied by Russian forces, but she and her four teenage children managed to join an evacuation route and travel west.

“We woke up in the morning, packed a couple of things in a hurry, mainly documents, and left in a convoy,” says Rosalyna. “I would have stayed, but I was afraid for the children.”

They had been told to come to a house on the outskirts of Odesa, but when they arrived there was no room. “The children slept in cars for three days, and I slept in the car for two months,” Rosalyna remembers.

Eventually they were all able to move to a room inside, but accommodation stability is a big worry and she is still not certain how long they can stay. Rosalyna’s house in Kherson is now uninhabitable, the windows and roof have been destroyed by bombs, but she hopes one day she will be able to return.

“I want the children to do well, to live a normal life, without any fear, without missiles over their heads.”

EXPERIENCES OF ROMA REFUGEES

In refugee-receiving countries of Europe, Roma refugees face particular challenges accessing assistance due to historical and systemic racial prejudice against Roma communities. Across the EU, discrimination of Roma communities is prevalent despite non-discrimination laws, and manifests in overt harassment and violence as well as in structural racism, marginalization and inequalities that result in generational poverty. As illustrated by a survey in 2021 of 8,000 Roma from Croatia, Czechia, Greece, Hungary, Italy, North Macedonia, Portugal, Romania, Serbia and Spain, despite marginal improvements, 80% of Roma are still at risk of poverty, 70% of young Roma leave school early, and only 40% of Roma are in paid work (EU FRA, 2023).

Thus, while the challenges described below may also apply to non-Roma Ukrainian refugees in some instances, it is crucial to consider the specific racialized experiences of a minority population living with decades of discrimination and how this discrimination and prejudice occurs in the context of displacement. Where possible, the report highlights the challenges that apply to both Roma and non-Roma, and those particular to Roma. It is important to note that the findings are a general overview of Roma refugee experiences in Poland and Romania, and that there are variations in how Roma were treated in each country (and in Moldova; **see Box 1**).

DYNAMICS OF MOVEMENT

Estimates indicate that Roma refugees in Poland and Romania number in the thousands, although exact data is unavailable as information on ethnicity is generally not collected. In Poland, Roma refugees are mainly from the Kharkiv, Donetsk, Odesa, Zakarpattia and Zhytomyr regions in eastern Ukraine (Mirga-Wójtowicz et al., 2022). They are said to number 10,000 as of May 2022 (Mirga-Wójtowicz and Fiałkowska, 2022). In Romania, most Ukrainian Roma refugees who participated in this study are originally from the southern regions of Ukraine, specifically from Odesa Oblast, followed by Mykolaivska and Kherson.⁸ There is no available data on the number of Roma refugees in Romania, not least because Romania is a transit country for refugees.

Roma refugees who travelled from Ukraine to Poland and Romania generally did so in large family groups of a dozen or more people – typically multi-generational families who came together in successive stages of the journey. Although these were mainly women and children, there were also men who had either evaded military conscription or been released from service in the Ukrainian army due to disability, illness, age or parental responsibilities. The strategy of gathering and moving in large groups, or ‘migrant collectivism’, has historical roots – solidarity, cooperation and maintenance of strong family and kinship bonds was imperative for social, cultural and physical survival in a hostile environment (Fiałkowska et al., 2018). Although this collectivism is sometimes perceived by non-Roma as a Roma ‘cultural characteristic’, it is rather a psychological and sociological defence mechanism against antigypsyism and to ensure safety as a minority group.

Large numbers of Roma refugees arriving at reception centres led to other issues. In Poland, volunteers working at reception points wanted Roma families to leave as these locations were not designed to hold large groups of people for more than two to three days, especially groups with elderly people and children who require frequent medical care. In Bucharest, the available accommodation for large groups was in converted school

gymnasiums and other similar venues with poor and improvised living conditions. This problem, however, is an outgrowth of the general difficulties faced by reception facilities for refugees. Lack of information from the authorities, organizational chaos, language and cultural barriers, and above all high levels of stress among all refugees lead to various crises.



Roma community centre in Warsaw, Poland/Foundation Towards Dialogue. Photo credit: Lottie Stevenson/Oxfam.

DISCRIMINATION AND ANTIGYPSYISM IN DISPLACEMENT

Roma face a double burden of discrimination, both at home in Ukraine and in hosting countries. Antigypsyism is a daily reality in many European countries. Everyday violence against Roma takes many forms – from brutal discrimination by non-Roma, violence from mobs and the police, and racist rhetoric from those in power. These attitudes are thrown into sharper relief in a situation of displacement. Reports have also emerged of Ukrainian Roma IDPs not being allowed to board trains or being thrown off trains in Ukraine, and instances of aggression and surveillance by the Ukrainian police or army (Mirga-Wójtowicz et al., 2022). Although less common, instances of Roma refugees not receiving stamps in their passport after crossing the border in Poland have also been reported. Roma-led organizations in Poland also note that consulates and embassies undermine the Ukrainian citizenship of Roma people, leading to double standards in terms of the tasks and services offered to Roma versus non-Roma citizens (Durjasz et al., 2023).

In Romania and Poland, discrimination from non-Roma refugees as well as volunteers and local authorities has led to some poorly planned interventions. Instances of discrimination towards Roma refugees by Ukrainian non-Roma have been documented in Poland, where the latter group separated themselves and refused to share space with Roma. Similar instances have been noted in Romania, leading to conflicts in temporary housing centres.

Both volunteers and public sector employees were ill-prepared to navigate the complexities of the multi-ethnic situations that arose, with the arrival of Roma refugees in Bucharest presenting a challenging encounter with 'otherness'. This situation was not handled effectively, due to a lack of prior knowledge and understanding of how to address the Roma's specific needs, and why their experiences and perspectives might differ from other Ukrainian refugees.

Roma refugees also faced discrimination from those working in the humanitarian response, such as volunteers, NGOs and others. For example, reports have emerged of Roma refugees being denied access to food in the dining halls at the Gara de Nord transit centre in Bucharest, justified on the grounds of concerns around theft, perceived large numbers, loud behaviour and uncleanliness. Many of these tensions were navigated with the help of Roma-led NGOs, who became involved to ensure fair access to basic necessities. Representatives of Roma-led NGOs also report that they secured money for train tickets, documentation, and translation services. Furthermore, many Roma arrived without luggage or with their belongings in plastic bags, prompting volunteers to provide suitable bags.

This turn of events has positive aspects as well. As one interviewee aptly remarked, the involvement of Roma-led NGOs in assisting Roma refugees marked an important moment for the Roma movement, prompting state institutions and representatives as well as the general population to see Roma people as 'generous, caring, volunteers, eager to help'. For the refugees, the presence of a person of Roma origin among volunteers or NGO staff was a source of support and (mental) relief, given the cases of discrimination and hostile behaviour by non-Roma staff at reception centres and by non-Roma Ukrainian refugees. In such a scenario, the need for a trustworthy Roma person whom Roma refugees can turn to for support was even more urgent. Cultural mediators, alongside Roma-led organizations, can play a critical role in this regard.

At the same time, the moment marked a learning curve in the professionalization of volunteers, specifically in navigating and understanding cultural differences. It showed the need for training programmes and resources that address the complexities of working with diverse populations. It also underscores the importance of creating an inclusive environment that values and celebrates cultural and ethnic diversity, while ensuring that volunteers are equipped with the tools to navigate potential misunderstandings and challenges.

Despite the positive elements, support from Roma-led NGOs and Roma communities was considered an 'expectation' by non-Roma. In Poland, it was expected that the small Roma community (numbering between 20,000 and 35,000 people) would 'take care' of Roma from Ukraine (Mirga-Wójtowicz et al., 2022). These opinions, also encountered during the research in Romania, have been expressed by decision-makers and aid providers under the impression that Roma refugees prefer receiving support from other Roma ('their own people').

ACCOMMODATION AND HOUSING

In both Poland and Romania, the issue of accommodation and housing of Roma refugees threw into sharp relief the prejudice, ignorance and confusion among host communities and aid workers alike. In both countries, refugees from Ukraine were hosted by private citizens in their homes. The willingness with which non-Roma Ukrainians were accommodated in private homes and the refusal of the same treatment to Ukrainian Roma lay bare the differential treatment of refugees from the same war. In Poland, for instance, hosts who came to refugee centres are said to have refused accommodating 'gypsies'

(sic). This attitude was also noted in Romania – for example, on Facebook groups offering support and information for Ukrainians, hosts specified in some instances that the offer was not open to ‘gypsies’ (sic). Polish hosts are said to have been selective about their guests. Coupled with the fact that Roma families travel in large groups, this has meant that many Roma were housed in facilities, such as reception centres, gymnasiums, sports halls and hotels, that are administered by public authorities.



Many people have to buy fresh food in accommodation centres.
Photo credit: Lottie Stevenson/Oxfam.

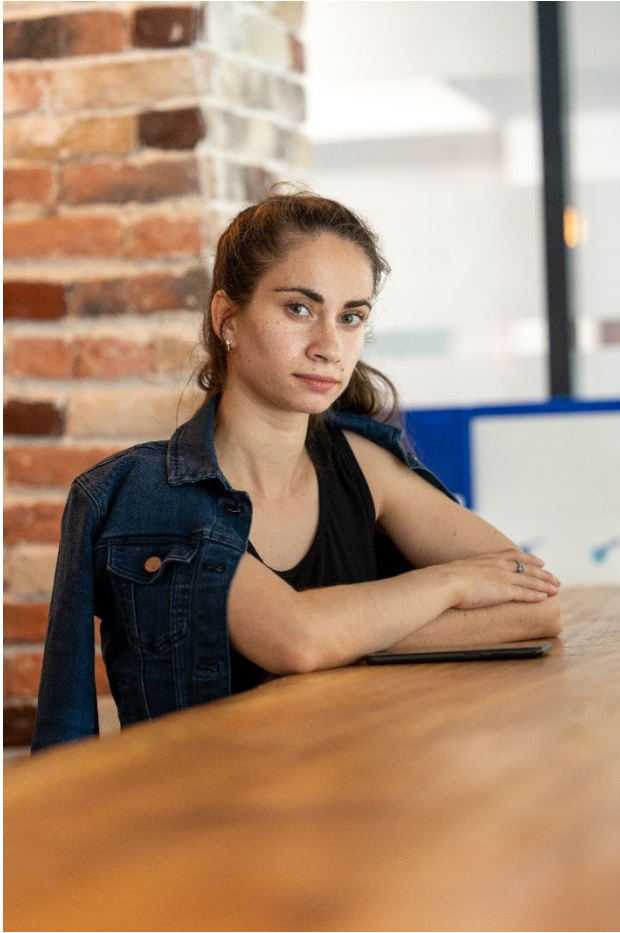
In Romania, on the other hand, the ‘50-20’ programme made housing large Roma families an incentive for private citizens. The programme was a key driver of migration to Romania among all refugees from Ukraine, including Roma. Through this programme, refugees were granted access to private housing, with a subsidy of RON50/day for each housed refugee for property owners and RON20/day for food for each Ukrainian refugee.⁹ Every homeowner who offered shelter to Ukrainian refugees was required to complete a formal request. Following this, they were issued funds, which were split between the refugees and themselves. This process effectively alleviated refugees from the bureaucratic task of completing paperwork, simplifying their access to both accommodation and financial aid. Before coming to Romania, some respondents were living in accommodation centres in Moldova where they had to pay for accommodation and utilities, and lacked educational opportunities for their children. Others were living in Germany or Belgium and struggled with the language. Thus, the 50-20 programme was a significant draw for respondents, in addition to the linguistic and geographic closeness between Romania and Ukraine.

Despite the draw of the 50-20 programme, it had two main issues. First, the system was vulnerable to exploitation and fraud, with instances of individuals who falsely claimed to provide refuge to profit from the financial assistance. In such cases, property owners and

tenants colluded to invent fictitious residency scenarios, thereby taking funds meant for refugee support. In online forums, the blame of such fraudulent practices was put on Roma refugee tenants. Second, the programme inadvertently disempowered refugees by causing them to become heavily reliant on the Romanian state. Simplified access to aid and accommodation had the unintended side effect of reducing their autonomy and fostering dependence on state assistance. When payments for the last months of the programme were delayed, this heightened the sense of uncertainty and panic that many refugees were experiencing. Furthermore, the transition to the 'new' 50-20 programme¹⁰ not only made renting unprofitable for property owners, but also brought to the fore overt discrimination, with owners rejecting Roma renters. Lastly, although changes to the 50-20 programme were announced in good time, refugees felt that communication around the issue was vague, making it difficult to plan.

All Roma refugees who live in private housing talked at length about the fear of being evicted, or facing circumstances where they may have to leave their newly established homes. Although there are instances of private hosts willing to accept refugees after the changes to the programme, Roma refugees claim that their hosts asked them to leave. The constant insecurity of potentially having to vacate their residences disrupts their efforts to build a sense of normalcy and stability in their lives.

Disempowerment is more visible in the case of the Roma refugees living in accommodation centres. Although they receive free housing and meals through the public authorities and various NGOs, they do not have the opportunity to organize their time and lives independently, or to take decisions and be financially autonomous. They cannot cook together and share food, aspects heavily emphasized by Roma refugees who decided to move from public housing into private apartments, which affected them negatively both economically and socially. Roma refugees often complain about the quality of the food they receive and emphasize they would rather receive money instead of food. This highlights that refugees, especially Roma refugees, are not consulted about their needs and wants.



Kasandra, Bucharest, Romania. Photo credit: Lottie Stevenson/Oxfam.

Kasandra, Bucharest, Romania

As a first-time mother, Kasandra's main concern is her baby. The 28-year-old is living in a refugee accommodation centre in Bucharest, but says the accommodation is not fit for a child. They live with cockroaches and mould.

"It's all over the room, under the radiators it's black" she says. "I've spent more than a month trying to get them to move us."

Kasandra says she and her family have faced discrimination from staff when requesting a different room. "One woman said to my mother: 'If you Roma were educated you would not be so stupid to be here'."

Kasandra was a fitness instructor at a gym in Odesa when war broke out. She and her partner had just finished renovating their apartment. "Everything was perfect," she remembers.

She gave birth in Ukraine but became exhausted trying to look after a newborn while dealing with air raids, limited water supplies, and regular power outages. She arrived in Bucharest in December 2022. Kasandra and her baby now share a room with her mother and 13-year-old brother. She says the centre is meant to provide personal hygiene products like shampoo and soap, but that Roma people are often left out.

"It's not distributed fairly," says Kasandra. "If you're Roma you're going to be waiting a long time."

She was told that complaints may not be worth the trouble and the message seems to be 'if you don't like it, you can leave'. But without the money to move out Kasandra and her family must stay where they are.

ACCESS TO DOCUMENTATION

Access to documentation, such as passports and birth certificates, not only has an impact on service delivery for Roma communities in Ukraine, but also has ramifications for their movement across borders. Roma-led organizations have received reports of women and children being barred from crossing the border into Poland, Moldova and Hungary (Popenko, 2022). The respondents in this research were able to access aid and therefore most likely had documentation. In Poland, many of the Roma refugees interviewed during the research or encountered through other activities had identification documents such as passports, with some also holding Russian passports (Mirga-Wójtowicz et al., 2022). Similarly, while anecdotal reports of a lack of documentation have emerged in Romania, this issue did not take centre stage. The 'statistical invisibility' of Roma communities and especially of undocumented Roma who may not be officially registered to receive humanitarian aid (and thus not part of this study) further highlights the vulnerability of minority groups in displacement. Further research is needed on how undocumented Ukrainian Roma refugees are accessing healthcare, education and employment.



Claudia needs passports for her children to get to Germany.
Photo credit: Lottie Stevenson/Oxfam.

HEALTH, EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Roma refugees face several barriers in accessing education, employment and health services in the hosting countries of Romania and Poland. These are a result of linguistic differences, place of residence, fear among Roma, and anti-Roma attitudes. In Poland, for instance, Roma refugees living in small towns (such as Szczawnica, Jordanów, Krościenko and Dunajcem) have been able to attend school soon after arrival. In other places, however, the unprepared school system has been unable to accommodate the linguistic differences of Roma children, meaning that some refugee children have not accessed any educational activities. Some could have participated in remote learning, but were unable to as they did not have access to a computer.

The temporary protection status ensures that all refugees have the right to access healthcare after having registered in the relevant country system.¹¹ Even though medical services are available, a major challenge for refugees is accessing these services. In Romania, since all the people interviewed have young children who are more prone to require medical assistance, they have had experience with the Romanian healthcare system. Their main challenge has been finding doctors who either speak their language or are willing to accommodate Ukrainian patients. The Roma people interviewed tend to have more children than the average Ukrainian family. Consequently, they have encountered added difficulties when trying to register their children with a family physician. In addition to basic healthcare services, many Roma need psychological care, but due to their mistrust of authorities and frequent language and cultural barriers, this is difficult to provide. Here again, the key role is played by Roma volunteers.

In terms of employment opportunities in hosting countries, refugees registering with official systems have the right to work. In Romania, one of the key conditions for Ukrainian refugees is that they must either secure a job or be registered with the local unemployment office via the national General Register of Employee Records (REVISAL). The programme emphasises employment as a critical part of the integration process, promoting autonomy and economic stability among refugees. At the same time, it ensures that refugees are integrated into the national fiscal regime by contributing and paying taxes in the same way as Romanians. Similarly, in Poland, Ukrainian refugees must register with the PESEL (Universal Electronic Population Registration System) and then have the right to work. Usually, the offers are manual labour in sorting plants, gardening, or on construction sites. For women, the offers are mostly kitchen and cleaning jobs.

Although the work system in Romania is better regulated than the accommodation system, workplace vulnerability tends to disproportionately affect Roma. Roma employees interviewed for this research are more likely to end up in informal employment, and work as day workers, undocumented laborers or provide services based on whatever is currently needed (cleaning, driving, etc.). Before the war, most Roma refugees interviewed were self-employed or entrepreneurs, running small businesses, particularly in trade and sales. In their new situation, and due to a lack of education and access to educational opportunities, Roma workers are more likely to earn lower wages.

SPECIFIC CONCERNS OF ROMA REFUGEE WOMEN

Many of the experiences described in this report concern Roma women as they comprise a large percentage of the refugee population. Roma women who have been forcibly displaced due to the war are at a particular disadvantage given their responsibility for taking care of large families. In Romania, in situations where they encountered problems in

housing centres, they preferred to remain silent rather than risk eviction by filing complaints. Similarly, discriminatory actions from employers, or volunteers and staff delivering humanitarian aid, are often met with resignation rather than resistance, as Roma women fear the consequences of speaking up.

When Roma women refugees express their grievances, their complaints are often dismissed. This stood in stark contrast to non-Roma Ukrainian refugees who appear to have more agency and are able to articulate grievances, draft petitions, and seek legal counsel. These strategies often seem inaccessible to Roma refugees who, when seeking assistance on online platforms, are frequently subject to derision and 'othering' from non-Roma Ukrainians.

The biggest concern for Roma women, however, is securing employment. While Roma women were involved in family-run trading and selling businesses in Ukraine, their experience is not easily translatable to the Romanian context. Consequently, many Roma women are first-time employees. A lack of formal work experience or education, and an inability to speak the official language, are barriers to their professional integration. In addition, the lack of childcare support is a significant barrier to women's formal labour market participation in both Poland and Romania.

Conversely, displacement is also said to have presented an opportunity to challenge traditional gender roles.¹² In Ukraine, although women were part of family businesses, their roles centred on domestic duties and their lives were closely tied to the home. For several interviewees, the escalation of the war and their subsequent displacement has presented an opportunity for empowerment. Travelling to Romania and other countries was the first time they travelled alone and had to handle new and complex situations. Such circumstances have compelled women to adapt and take on responsibilities that they may not have otherwise. Roma women said that they discovered that they could manage in another country without their husbands while, at the same time, caring for children and older and ill dependants. One woman recounted:

I realized that I can! I can talk, I can understand, I can know, I want to know, I will not fall apart! I am not like I used to be. I used to be stupid, I never thought for myself. But now I do.

Box 1. Findings from rapid assessment among Roma refugees in Moldova

Oxfam commissioned a similar rapid assessment among Roma refugee communities in Moldova in July 2022. As in other refugee-hosting countries, organizations have observed a segregated response, with the differential treatment of Roma compared to other Ukrainian refugees.

Key findings:

- Roma refugees in Moldova faced segregation and discrimination in housing services. Roma were denied humanitarian assistance at certain refugee accommodation centres and, instead, were directed to other, lower-quality, centres. Roma refugees also reported facing discrimination by workers and having trouble finding private accommodation, with property owners often unwilling to rent to them.
- Lack of information, communication channels and complaint mechanisms significantly affected Roma refugees' access to services and humanitarian assistance. Roma refugees and experts also reported a lack of consultation in the design of relevant reception policies.
- Many Roma from Ukraine lack identity documents, which creates challenges including restrictions on their movements and difficulties accessing humanitarian services. The cost of obtaining documentation is often prohibitive for Roma families and many do not have the knowledge of how to do so.

Some of the study's **main recommendations** are for humanitarian actors to:

- Ensure Roma are consulted and involved in decision-making by establishing consultative groups.
- Support access to basic services and basic needs for Roma refugees, including access to shelter, food and healthcare, through more accessible cash assistance and/or facilitating income-generating opportunities.
- Support Roma representation at refugee accommodation centres and improve communications, access to information and complaint mechanisms.

For more information, see Greener and de Andrade Costa (2022).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has led to the displacement of nearly 14 million people, both inside the country and across Europe (UNHCR, n.d.). Shortly after the invasion, in March 2022, the Council of the European Union unanimously decided to activate the Temporary Protection Directive, an exceptional measure that allowed millions of refugees from Ukraine to access protection, services and rights in EU member states. Although nearly 5 million people have benefited from the directive or similar protection schemes (UNHCR, 2023), Roma refugees have not received the open-armed welcome that has greeted non-Roma Ukrainians in various EU countries.

Representatives of Roma-led organizations worry about the further deterioration of the socioeconomic status of the Roma communities in Ukraine, as the war continues and the country remains in a precarious situation. According to public authorities in Ukraine, not only may the socioeconomic conditions of the Roma minority deteriorate further, the non-participation of Roma men in the war and the linguistic differences between Roma (who speak Russian) and non-Roma Ukrainians may aggravate widely held prejudices. In hosting countries, Roma communities continue to face prejudice and discrimination.

Conversely, the escalation of the war has opened a window of opportunity for discussion on the status of Roma in Europe. Roma-led organizations and activists are, once again, shining light on the inequalities that Roma communities, whether refugees or hosts, face in the EU. They are calling for renewed support from policymakers to address longstanding discrimination, prejudice and stereotypes that keep Roma communities in poverty. The experiences of Roma refugees from Ukraine in the aftermath of displacement have shown that supporting the Roma minority in Ukraine as well as in Europe requires long-term commitment and significant changes at the institutional and policy levels.

TRANSNATIONAL APPROACH TO SUPPORT ROMA COMMUNITIES

Support to Roma communities requires a transnational, flexible and coherent approach that accommodates their histories, experiences, needs and perspectives. There remains an urgent need for an institutionalized, transnational network that can offer comprehensive assistance and support to the Roma people – both refugees and hosts, who are ethnic minorities in Europe. This network, supported, endorsed and funded by the international humanitarian community, would provide a structured approach to ensuring that the needs of the Roma community are consistently met across different nations. Importantly, this approach would draw from and complement the efforts of such structures as the European Network on Statelessness, EURoma Network and European Roma Rights Centre.

Voluntary efforts to support Roma communities fleeing war, while welcome, have limitations in terms of the support they are able to provide. Although essential, a grassroots approach may not be sufficient or sustainable in the long term. A transnational network, supported by international and national NGOs, could: support the establishment of an intergovernmental working group on Roma refugees in European countries; align government programmes in hosting countries with the needs of Roma refugees and migrants; work towards the inclusion of legal provisions to address immediate and long-

term needs; and, crucially, address the issue of institutional and social discrimination against Roma.

National Roma platforms and structures in hosting countries who can advocate for national Roma communities as well as refugees are also essential. These platforms could include the immediate and long-term needs of Roma refugees in their agendas and lead joint advocacy efforts.

DOCUMENTATION AND OTHER SUPPORT TO ROMA IN UKRAINE AND IN HOSTING COUNTRIES

Roma communities in Ukraine urgently require administrative and legal support to allow them to access basic services. Lack of identification and other documentation impedes Roma from accessing education, healthcare and livelihoods; it also prevents them from accessing protection and services reserved for IDPs. Undocumented Roma in hosting countries face similar significant barriers in accessing protection and services.

Civil society actors must continue advocating for support to Roma communities through legal aid programmes and increased social benefits. Aid actors must also ensure that Roma communities can access services without identity documents. Support to Roma-led organizations, platforms and activists in Ukraine is equally necessary as they enjoy access to, and the trust of, Roma communities and often are best placed to support people to access documentation.

SUPPORT TO ROMA-LED ORGANIZATIONS AND PLATFORMS

Roma volunteers, community members and Roma-led organizations have played a critical role in supporting Roma refugees and IDPs, both on short-term needs and in advocating for policy change. In the wake of the Ukraine crisis, individuals and NGO staff in various countries self-organized to provide support to Roma, often relying on personal networks. Our research shows that the presence of people of Roma origin among aid workers and volunteers can be positive for Roma communities. Trust and confidence between Roma communities and volunteers is high given their shared backgrounds and experiences. As such, there is a need to not only give more visibility to Roma-led organizations and platforms, but also to appoint and engage more Roma staff and volunteers in supporting refugees and IDPs.

The localization of humanitarian responses calls for financial support (from both donors and international NGOs) to Roma organizations, activists and platforms who continue to be the main help for displaced Roma and who raise awareness about the communities' needs. In addition, support is needed in building coalitions and partnerships, and in negotiating with authorities. International actors must support Roma-led organizations in initiating and continuing dialogue with Roma organizations, and activists must be supported with training in psychosocial assistance and legal knowledge. Safe spaces for Roma communities, where no discriminatory practices are tolerated and where staff and mediators from Roma communities provide support with communication and information sharing, are also vital.

ADAPT THE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE TO ADDRESS SPECIFIC NEEDS AMONG ROMA COMMUNITIES

Numerous Roma refugees from Ukraine have reported experiencing discriminatory behaviour from volunteers, staff, local and national authorities, representatives of social services and others participating in humanitarian efforts. NGOs admit that while they cannot entirely regulate the attitudes of their staff, it is plausible such attitudes exist. A significant amount of emotional labour and cultural sensitivity are required to work effectively with refugees in general, and Roma refugees in particular.

Thus, a proactive approach is needed to address these types of attitudes and practices among all those working with refugees. Such an approach could include cultural sensitivity training for volunteers and staff involved in humanitarian assistance to promote empathy and respect towards all individuals, regardless of ethnic background. Roma-led NGOs have more experience in the field and their collaboration could ensure effective outcomes in training and professionalizing volunteers and staff on inclusivity.

Given that accommodation centres tend to house more Roma refugees, it is important to implement conflict mediation measures within these environments. This involves maintaining peace and ensuring that each resident feels heard, understood and respected. Staff and volunteers openly admit that they have no idea on how to react in order not to appear biased. This underlines the need for training programmes on conflict resolution and cultural sensitivity. Moreover, programmatic adaptations, such as integrating caregiving support for Roma families who have several children, is crucial as this has been identified as an impediment to women's engagement in the formal labour market.

The UN, EU and all other multi-mandated organizations in the humanitarian response must include members from diverse backgrounds, including Roma representatives, in volunteer and decision-making teams. Such an approach can promote understanding and empathy and provide good practice models for respectful interaction, as well as ensuring better representation of Roma people in consultations.

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION FOR BETTER IDP AND REFUGEE RESPONSES

To effectively address the specific needs and concerns of Roma refugees, it is essential to involve them directly in decision-making processes. This means not just consulting with them, but actively including their voices and perspectives in shaping policies and programmes. In Romania, the Department for Emergency Situations, the coordinating body during humanitarian crises, hosts a weekly meeting with NGOs and members of civil society, including those working with Roma communities, where they discuss emerging issues and solutions. This type of initiative is unprecedented in Romania and is a commendable exercise in crisis management. Similar meetings could be organized to address specific issues related to Roma refugees with Roma refugees' representatives and Roma-led NGOs involved in relief efforts to ensure a coordinated response to their specific needs. For the Ukraine crisis, humanitarian coordination structures should establish taskforces and targeted liaison mechanisms to ensure the unique experiences

and needs of Roma communities are incorporated into the design and delivery of humanitarian aid.

COMMUNICATION, ACCOUNTABILITY AND FUNCTIONAL FEEDBACK MECHANISMS

Refugees and organizations agree that effective communication is salient. To avoid confusion and to ensure that communication is streamlined, state agencies should coordinate information sharing in a manner that is most helpful for refugees. Official information is readily available in Ukrainian, Russian, Romanian, Polish and English, but not in Romani or Hungarian (which is spoken by Roma from Zakarpattia). State agencies should be more mindful of difference when communicating and be involved in formulating more inclusive communication strategies. Not all Roma refugees are (digitally) literate and information should be available in formats that are accessible to all people, such as community outreach, phone lines, or other non-digital methods.

All accommodation centres, state agencies and NGOs that offer services to refugees should have well-defined reporting channels and complaint systems in place. Having a formal procedure to submit complaints not only enables refugees to voice their concerns or report issues, but also holds these organizations accountable for the quality and fairness of their services. Furthermore, the existence of a complaint mechanism can give refugees the opportunity to provide feedback about their experiences and express concerns that they may not feel comfortable voicing in person. At the same time, it might increase the quality of services. Similarly, for refugees being hosted by private citizens, an anonymous reporting system must be established that allows refugees to report negative experiences with hosts in a safe way.



A young boy helps himself to a snack in the kitchen of a house in Berezivka, Ukraine. His family has been displaced by the war. Photo credit: Lottie Stevenson/Oxfam.

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NOTES

- 1 Estimates on the number of Roma displaced from Ukraine are hard to come by, but 100,000 is often cited; see DG NEAR (2023).
- 2 'Ukrainian Roma' is used here as an all-encompassing term for Roma communities living in Ukraine at the time of the Russian invasion.
- 3 The assessment draws from research reports by Oxfam partners who conducted data collection and analysis. The findings, while not directly triangulated, are supported by evidence collected by other organizations.
- 4 For more details on the initiative, see <https://aresel.ro/en>
- 5 For more details on the methodology, see the full report (Mirga-Wójtowicz et al., 2022).
- 6 Although not inherently a negative characterization, the 'nomadic' classification is a powerful stereotype that has been used to justify the confinement, exclusion and marginalization of Roma communities and greatly affects non-Roma perceptions of their displacement status.
- 7 The various Roma communities in Ukraine are: Kishinevtsy (originally from Moldova, but after serfdom was abolished, moved to Ukraine and the Russian Federation); Moldavian Roma (also originally from Moldova but more visibly maintain their Roma heritage and traditions); Vlahy (who live in Ukraine and the Russian Federation and speak a Romani dialect; Palamiy and Georgian Roma belong to this ethnic group); Servy (who are also referred to as Ukrainian Roma and migrated to Ukraine from Romania and Serbia – most do not speak Romani); Ruska Roma (who originate from Poland, reside in the Russian Federation and Belarus, and whose dialect of Romani has incorporated many words from the German, Russian and Polish languages). Other Roma subgroups include Kotlary, Plaschuny and Crimean Roma. See ERRC et al. (2018).
- 8 This is consistent with data from the IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix, which states that nearly half of the Ukrainian refugees residing in Romania are from Odesa Oblast, followed by Chernivetska (9%) and Mykolaivska (8%). See IOM (2023).
- 9 Roughly €10/day for property owners and €4/day for tenants. The 50-20 programme is enshrined in Emergency Ordinance No 15 of 27 February 2022. See Government of Romania (2022).
- 10 See changes to programme here - <https://dopomoha.ro/en/the-5020-program>
- 11 In March 2022, the Council of the European Union activated the Temporary Protection Directive, an exceptional measure that allows refugees from Ukraine to access protection, services and rights in EU member states.
- 12 While evidence suggests that the risk of gender-based violence is heightened in displacement and among conflict-affected communities, this did not emerge from the research carried out for this study. Further research is required on the impact of gender-based violence on the Roma communities displaced by the war in Ukraine.

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