

# VOICES OF REFUGEE CHILDREN IN BULGARIA



Bulgaria, 2023  
Age, Gender, and Diversity (AGD)  
Participatory Assessment 2023



**UNHCR**  
The UN Refugee Agency

## Acronyms

BGN: Bulgarian Lev (currency of Bulgaria)

CFM: Complaints and Feedback Mechanism

FGDs: Focus Group Discussions

IOM: International Organization for Migration

RRC: Registration and Reception Center

RSD: Refugee Status Determination

UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

IP: International Protection

TP: Temporary Protection

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# A WORD FROM THE UN REFUGEE AGENCY REPRESENTATIVE IN BULGARIA



**Seda Kuzucu**  
UNHCR Representative in Bulgaria

Each individual is unique. The actual or perceived differences among us shape our opportunities, capacities, needs, and vulnerability. These perceptions of difference can significantly influence how we are treated by others.

In a world where forced displacement has become a stark reality for millions, the vulnerabilities and challenges faced by refugee and asylum-seeking girls and boys stand out as among the most pressing humanitarian concerns. This participatory assessment report, focusing on children in Bulgaria, provides invaluable insights into their lives, struggles, and the resilience they embody. However, this report is more than just a compilation of data and findings; it is a testament to the voices of children who are often unheard and a lens for UNHCR and partners advocacy and operations.

Our unwavering commitment to understanding and addressing the unique needs the children is the basis of our assessment. Through direct engagement, we have sought to listen and learn from the children themselves, capturing their stories, aspirations, and the barriers they face in their quest for a safer and more hopeful future. These children not only shared their experiences and the risks they face but also proposed solutions.

Being accountable to forcibly displaced and stateless people is integral to our mission. We are committed to ensuring that our responses include continuous and meaningful engagement, understanding their needs and protection risks, building on their capacities, and reflecting their perspectives and priorities. They must be at the centre of decision-making concerning their protection and well-being. Consulting them directly and listening to their voices is essential for gaining a deeper understanding of the protection problems they face.

The findings of this report illuminate the multifaceted challenges children are confronting – from accessing education and healthcare to securing their safety and well-being in a new and often unfamiliar environment. These challenges are not insurmountable, but they require concerted effort, empathy, and an unwavering commitment to child rights and protection.

As we present the conclusions and recommendations of this report, we call upon all stakeholders – government authorities, non-governmental organizations, community leaders, and the international community – to join forces in addressing the identified needs and gaps. It is our collective responsibility to ensure that every child, regardless of their origin, status, or circumstances, is afforded the protection, support, and opportunities they deserve.

This report serves as a call to action. It urges us to look beyond statistics and see the faces, hear the voices, and recognize the potential of these children. It is a reminder that in our efforts to support them, we not only uphold their rights but also invest in a future where dignity, safety, and opportunity are not privileges but guarantees for all.

I extend my deepest gratitude to the children who shared their experiences with us, to our dedicated staff and partners who made this assessment possible, and to you, the reader, for your interest and commitment to making a difference. Together, let us move forward with resolve and compassion, inspired by the courage and resilience of the children we serve.

# Background:

In recent years, Bulgaria has witnessed refugees arriving primarily from conflict-affected regions such as Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and more recently, Ukraine. These refugees are fleeing ongoing armed conflicts, persecution, and instability in their home countries. Bulgaria received more than 10,000 unaccompanied children seeking protection since 2022.

The Syrian conflict, which began in 2011, has resulted in one of the largest refugee crises of modern times, with millions of Syrians forced to seek refuge in neighboring countries and beyond. Many Syrian refugees have made the perilous journey to Europe, including Bulgaria, in search of safety and stability for themselves and their families.

Additionally, refugees from Afghanistan and Iraq have been displaced by decades of conflict, political instability, and violence in their respective countries. Many of them were born as refugees and have been deprived of education and child development opportunities, as their parents had been before them. They too have sought refuge in Bulgaria and other European countries in search of safety and better opportunities. Many children participating in these discussions have been separated from their families or caregivers, residing in the RRCs for long periods of time without sufficient access to educational or child development opportunities.

More recently, the conflict in Ukraine has led to a new wave of displacement, with civilians fleeing the violence and seeking refuge in neighbouring countries, including Bulgaria. The ongoing conflict in Eastern Ukraine has resulted in significant humanitarian consequences, including the displacement of thousands of individuals, many of whom are children.

Children are disproportionately affected by the refugee crisis in Bulgaria and face numerous challenges, including lack of access to education, healthcare, and basic necessities. Many refugee children have experienced trauma as a result of their displacement and exposure to violence, which can have long-lasting impacts on their physical and mental well-being. Additionally, language barriers and discrimination can further exacerbate the difficulties faced by refugee children as they navigate life in a new country.

In addressing the needs of refugees, particularly children, it is imperative to engage directly with them to gain insight into their experiences and assess their needs effectively. By conducting interviews, focus group discussions, and other participatory methods, UNHCR can better understand the challenges faced by refugee children and devise appropriate interventions to support them. This approach allows for the identification of specific vulnerabilities, such as trauma, exploitation, or family separation, which may require specialized support and protection measures. Moreover, engaging with refugee children directly empowers them to voice their concerns, preferences, and aspirations, fostering a sense of agency and dignity amidst their displacement. By prioritizing the voices and needs of refugee children, UNHCR can develop more informed and targeted responses that promote their well-being, protection, and integration into host communities.

# Summary

The report presents findings from structured focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted with asylum-seeking and refugee children in Bulgaria. These discussions were held in various cities including Sofia, Harmanli, Plovdiv, Varna, and Stara Zagora, involving children primarily from Ukraine, Syria, Egypt, and Iraq, with at least half of the children from Ukraine. Key themes explored include child protection, education, healthcare, the asylum process, and challenges faced during the journey to Bulgaria.

In Bulgaria the Refugees and Asylum-seeking children from Syria and other countries are accommodated in Refugee Reception Centres (RRCs) administered by State Agency for Refugees (SAR). There are six RRCs at country level which accommodates all asylum-seeking children as well a number of refugees in the reception centres during their international protection procedures, including unaccompanied children (UAC). There is a separate zone specially allocated for UAC in three Reception Centres referred to as “safe zones”. There are social workers available working with children on a regular basis. Children separated from their natural caregivers and seeking protection together with related or unrelated adult asylum-seekers are often not identified and accommodated with the adult population among the families.

The original concept of “safe zones” refers to Temporary Emergency accommodation option for the identified UAC. However, but due to the delay in their international protection procedures and difficulties in finding longer term alternative accommodation options for the children, they end up staying for longer period. As of the end of 2023, a total number of 413 UASC were accommodated in five reception centres.<sup>1</sup>

Refugee children face significant protection risks due to the lack of awareness and support during the asylum process. Many children and their families are uninformed about their rights, entitlements, and international protection procedures. This lack of awareness leaves them vulnerable to exploitation, discrimination, and arbitrary detention. Additionally, inadequate legal representation and support services further exacerbate their vulnerability, leaving them without proper guidance or advocacy during critical stages of the asylum process. The absence of child-friendly procedures and support mechanisms increases the likelihood of negative outcomes, including wrongful rejections of asylum claims, prolonged detention, and deportation to unsafe conditions.

Child labour arises as a significant protection risk for refugee children in Bulgaria due to financial pressures faced by their families and their sense of responsibility to abate and contribute to the improvement of their financial situation for their family members back in their home country. This not only deprives children of their right to education and healthy development but also exposes them to exploitation, hazardous working conditions, and physical or emotional abuse. Child labour perpetuates cycles of poverty and deprives children of their childhood, compromising their long-term well-being and future prospects.

Language barriers pose significant challenges for refugee children in accessing education and essential services in Bulgaria. Many refugee and asylum-seeking children arrive in Bulgaria with limited or no knowledge of the Bulgarian language, which hinders their integration into the education system and impedes their ability to communicate with healthcare providers, social workers, and other service providers. The lack of adequate language support exacerbates their isolation and marginalization, leading to academic underachievement, social exclusion, and limited access to critical services such as healthcare, legal assistance, and psychosocial support. Language barriers compound existing protection risks and undermine the overall well-being and integration of refugee children in Bulgaria.

Refugee children face significant protection risks during their journey to Bulgaria, characterized by perilous border crossings, exploitation, violence, and trauma. Many children undertake hazardous journeys, often traveling long distances on foot or by overcrowded boats, buses, or trucks, in search of safety and refuge.

Throughout their journey, children are exposed to various forms of exploitation and abuse, including human trafficking, sexual exploitation, and forced labour. Moreover, children are at heightened risk of separation from their families, becoming unaccompanied or separated children, further exacerbating their vulnerability to exploitation and abuse. The lack of adequate protection mechanisms and safe migration pathways increases the risks faced by refugee children during their journey to Bulgaria, compromising their safety, well-being, and fundamental rights.

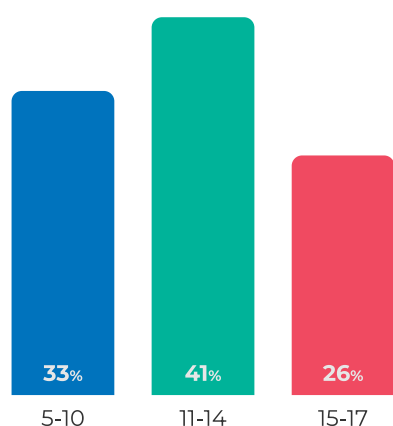
The report emphasizes the urgent need for a responsive social protection system tailored to child refugee needs in Bulgaria. It highlights the importance of listening to children's voices, addressing language barriers, and providing comprehensive support in education, healthcare, and asylum procedures. Recommendations include language support, improved access to healthcare, addressing child labour, enhancing awareness of the asylum process, and streamlining complaint mechanisms. By prioritizing child protection and integration, Bulgaria can create a more inclusive and supportive environment for refugee children.



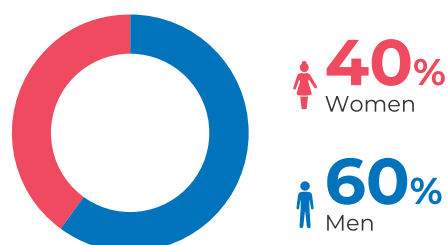
# Methodology

The participatory assessment was conducted through Structured Focus Group Discussions in Sofia, Harmanli, Plovdiv, Varna, and Stara Zagora. A total of 11 FGDs have been conducted during the assessment period with asylum-seeking and refugee children, whose countries of origin are Ukraine, Syria, Egypt, and Iraq. Each group consisted of 7 – 15 members participating in the group discussions with an age range of 10 – 18 years old.

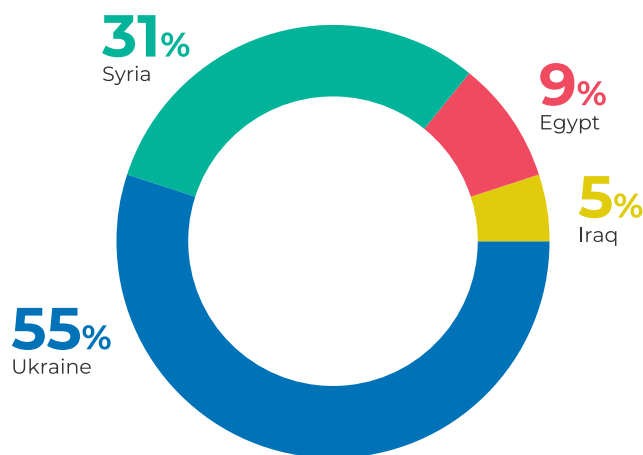
Age of participants



Sex of participants



Countries of origin of the participants





# Main Findings



## 1. Child Labour

A portion of the children within the age range of 14 to 16 have managed to secure employment in various sectors such as restaurants, construction, and car mechanics. However, this employment tends to be temporary due to their lack of residency permits. Respondents highlighted that they utilize their earnings to cover essential expenses such as personal hygiene and food, as these amenities are lacking within the Refugee Reception Centre (RRC). Their primary motivation for working is to support themselves and potentially assist their families back home. Notably, they mentioned that the received income is spent on food since the quality of food provided in the centre is often subpar.

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“Some of the minors are able to find employment in restaurants, construction, car mechanics, etc. However, this is mostly temporary as they don’t have residency permit. They are working because they would like to have extra income to support themselves, especially that the food quality is bad in the centre.”

Ali<sup>2</sup> (unaccompanied boy from Syria)

“The ones that are working are already 18. Some children who are working are washing dishes in the restaurants and were paid daily 50 BGN.”

Aisha (unaccompanied girl from Syria)

“I spend my money on food, new clothes, but most of the money is spent on food as I don’t like the food of the RRC.”

Mohammed (unaccompanied boy from Syria)

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Some refugee children from Ukraine are also working. Four Ukrainian teenagers among the participants stated that they work part-time, fitting shifts in around their school schedules during the week and/or on the weekends and during vacation. Payment methods vary; while some receive daily wages, others are compensated hourly.

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“We need pocket money, and our parents does not have enough money to cover our additional needs, that’s why decided to work.”

Oleksandr (Refugee from Ukraine)

“I have to take care of my sick parents and grandparent as we don’t have any other subsistence.”

Dymitro (Refugee from Ukraine)

“There is no enough money for food, therefore we also have to work to support ourselves and our family.”

Artem<sup>3</sup> (Refugee from Ukraine)

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When asked if they would refrain from working if given the option, the majority of asylum-seeking children struggled to grasp the question and were unable to provide a definitive response. When the same question was asked from refugees from Ukraine, they said they would quit working if they had alternative of financial support for their families and could use this time in doing extracurricular activities.

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“If I have the option of not working, I would like to have some rest and follow my hobbies and enrol in training courses.”

Mykhailo (Refugee from Ukraine)

“It is difficult to answer the question, as I can’t decide now.”

Mostafa (unaccompanied boy from Syria)

“I will study and have time to play with my friends.”

Ali (unaccompanied boy from Syria)

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## 2. Education



During the focus group discussions (FGDs) and among those children who felt comfortable sharing, it was revealed that prior to their arrival in Bulgaria, all of the children were enrolled in various levels of education, including preschool, primary, and secondary school, corresponding to their respective ages. A Syrian participant who had not attended school in their home country mentioned that they are now enrolled in school in Bulgaria.

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“There are a lot of problems in the municipal school, and we didn’t like the school.”

Youssef (Asylum seeking, Unaccompanied boy from Syria)

“I did not go to school in Syria but have been attending school in Bulgaria for 2 years, but I have not learned

anything, as all classes are in Bulgarian. The teacher has been using offensive words.”

Amina (Asylum seeking, Unaccompanied girl from Syria)

“I would like to go to an Arabic school to learn how to read and write in my native language as well.”

Rania (Refugee, Unaccompanied girl from Syria)

“I don’t speak the language, I am not able to communicate with my classmates, which makes me sad.”

Oleksandr (Refugee from Ukraine)

“I am no more going to Bulgarian school due to language barrier.”

Tetyana (Refugee from Ukraine)

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With a range of native languages such as Arabic and Kurdish, and many children growing up with Turkish as the main language of communication and education, it became evident that children attending school in Bulgaria encounter challenges with the local language and occasionally experience neglect from teachers. Consequently, some of the children have discontinued attending school altogether. Additionally, some children from Ukraine continue attending school remotely (online), either in Bulgaria or Ukraine, depending on their circumstances and their location. Regrettably, 40% of the children participating in the focus group discussions are currently not enrolled in any form of educational institution in Bulgaria. It is noteworthy that some of the children attend Bulgarian language classes at the Integrico integration centre located in Varna.

The children from Ukraine expressed appreciation for creative arts, sports lessons, and the opportunity to use phones during classes for translating assignments into their native language, with support from their teachers. Some children specifically noted feeling safer due to the security measures in place at school.

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“Yes, we have cheerleading, singing, boxing, English, drawing, swimming and Bulgarian Language courses.”

Bohdan (Refugee from Ukraine)

“I continued to study at the Ukrainian school online and combined with Bulgarian school, last year. But this year I am only attending Bulgarian School.”

Olena (Refugee from Ukraine)

“We don’t have any activity therefore most of the time we are only watching videos on TikTok or playing video game on our phone.”

Omar (Asylum Seeking, unaccompanied boy from Syria)

“I play with my friends in the centre or attend the Bulgarian language classes.”

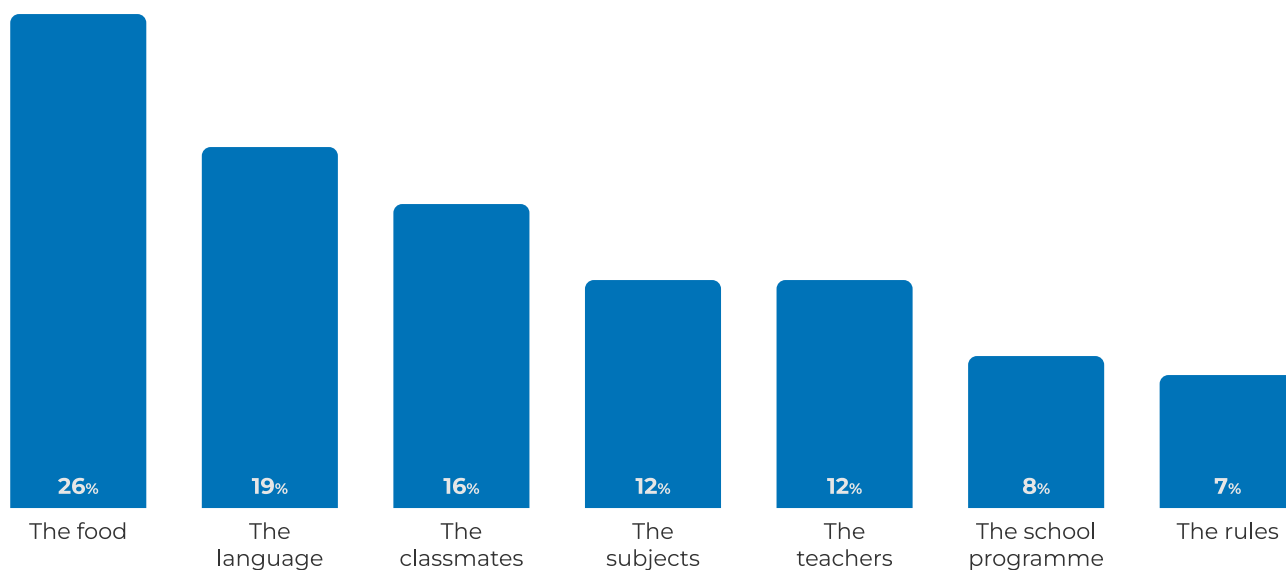
Ali (Asylum seeking, unaccompanied boy from Syria)

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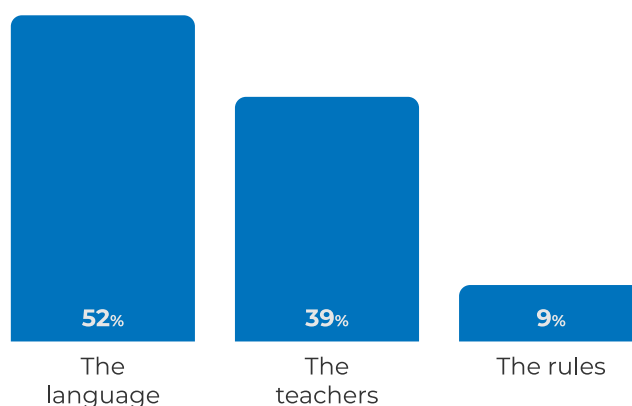
When the children were asked if there is anything they had particular difficulties with about their schools, they most frequently mentioned the language, as they felt unable to communicate in Bulgarian. Other responses included the teachers, as some of them faced discrimination from teachers and classmates, the food provided, and having to submit homework when unfamiliar with the school programme and curriculum. In relation to the latter, they noted challenges in submitting their homework without support, resulting in some dropping out of school.

## Challenges faced in school

### Refugees from Ukraine



### AS and Refugees from Syria and other countries



During their free time, some children voluntarily attend Bulgarian and English language lessons to enhance their communication skills, while others enjoy sports, music, dance, and other leisure activities.

When asked how they would prefer to spend their time, the children expressed a desire for more educational activities, including studies in sciences, and mathematics. They also expressed the interest to have opportunities to engage in sports such as football and swimming. They also emphasized the need for additional support in linguistic development including their native language. Furthermore, 10% of children from other countries were in need of financial assistance as they are currently unable to work for various reasons.

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“I love playing football in school and in sport classes.”  
Ahmad (Asylum seeking, unaccompanied child from Syria)

“We would like to have Mathematics, English, and French classes in the reception centre.”  
Samer (Asylum seeking, unaccompanied child from Syria)

“We would like to learn to read and write in our native language.”  
Ziad and Nur (Asylum seeking, unaccompanied boy and girl from Syria)

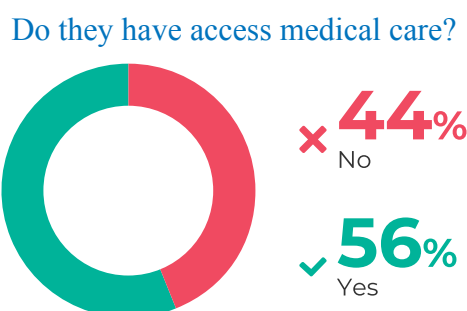
“I like walking tours, listening to music and have extra sports activities.”  
Andriy (Refugee from Ukraine)

“I hope there will be preparation courses for admission to higher education institutes.”  
Iryna (Refugee from Ukraine)

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### 3. Health

When asked about their ability to access health services in Bulgaria, 44.4% of the children indicated that they have been able to do so, with more than 55.5% mentioning that they find it challenging in accessing medical care.



During the focus group discussions, the majority of participating children expressed satisfaction with their health status, describing it as ‘good’ and reporting no significant health concerns. Some even mentioned having access to necessary medication if required. However, concerns were raised regarding the accessibility of medical care within the reception centre. Some children noted the high cost of purchasing medication not provided on-site, and others highlighted challenges in communicating with doctors.

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“I have dental problem, but I can’t buy the medicine because it is too expensive, and the medication is also not available in the RRC.”

Ghada (Asylum seeking, unaccompanied girl from Syria)

“One time I was not feeling well and when I visited the doctor in the centre, he gave me expired medicine.”  
Sana (Asylum seeking, unaccompanied child from Syria)

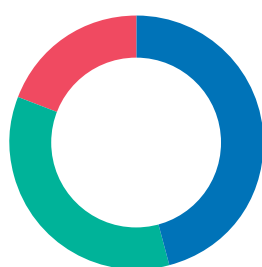
“Our health condition is good and in case if we need to see a doctor, we can visit them, and they solve our problem.”

Dmytro (Refugee from Ukraine)

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The main challenge in accessing medical care were identified as the language barrier, followed by the need for an adult to accompany them (particularly for unaccompanied and separated children) and having enough money to buy the prescribed medicine. Of notable concern were instances where expired medication was provided to the children by medical practitioners.

## What are the main challenges when accessing medical care?



**46%**

Need to be accompanied by adult

**35%**

Language barrier

**19%**

Lack of money

In relation to dietary concerns, an overwhelming response indicated dissatisfaction with the quality of food provided within the reception centre. Children reported being served undercooked meat and feeling unfamiliar and uncomfortable with Bulgarian cuisine. Consequently, many of them opted to eat outside the centre. Among those who knew how to cook (over 50%), some prepared their own meals, although they mentioned lacking the necessary appliances to do so. Cooking is enjoyed by many, with some expressing a desire to prepare dishes from their home countries.

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“I don’t like the food in the centre; therefore, I go outside and eat. I work to be able to buy food for myself.”

Tarek (Asylum seeking, unaccompanied child from Syria)

“I enjoy cooking and like to cook my home foods time to time. It gives me happiness cooking my home food.”

Ayah (Asylum seeking, unaccompanied child from Syria)

“I have a lot of fun when I am cooking food from our hometown with my mother.”

Tamara (Refugee from Ukraine)

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## 4. Travel to Bulgaria

The children participating in the focus group discussions have resided in Bulgaria for varying periods, ranging from just over a week to 2 years, with a majority having been in the country for 1-1.5 years.

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“We were in a stressful state, leaving home under shelling. It was difficult as we had to travel for more than 1-2 days. I was afraid and there was lack of quality food and water. I felt confused in a foreign country, without knowledge of the language and means of living.”

Taras (Refugee from Ukraine)

“I liked the trip, as along the way, I saw cows, nature, sky, mountains, and staying at hotels. I did not like the military, and the tanks. It’s a long drive, there were military checkpoints. It was also very tiring, boring, and scary.”

Olena (Refugee from Ukraine)

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Many disclosed the hardships endured during their journey to Bulgaria. Some recounted trekking through

rugged terrain on foot for 2-3 days, while others navigated dense forests teeming with wild animals. Several attempted to cross the border multiple times before succeeding. One child made six attempts, enduring encounters with pursuing dogs. Although some found comfort in traveling with companions, the sight of border police and dogs instilled fear, prompting some to flee, leap over fences, or seek concealment. The ordeal was compounded by the scarcity of food and water, coupled with the uncertainty of safely reaching a foreign land devoid of a familiar language or means of sustenance for their families.

Most travelled in groups, often accompanied by siblings or a family member/parent, while one child ventured alone. It was noted that younger children experienced a comparatively smoother journey, as border police interactions with them were minimal due to their age and being unaccompanied and were processed immediately.

Routes varied, with journeys spanning Turkey, and Greece before reaching Bulgaria. Majority of the families fled conflict zones, evading shelling and military presence on their journey and felt highly distressed, while others viewed their journey as a migration rather than fleeing a war.

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“The travel to Bulgaria was difficult as we came illegally after several attempts, and then managed to enter the country.”

Bassel (Asylum seeking, unaccompanied child from Syria)

“The interaction with the border police was difficult. We had to run away, hide in water, and even jump over fences when running away from the dogs.”

Karim (Asylum seeking children from Syria)

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Despite the challenges, the children predominantly felt safer in Bulgaria compared to their country of origin. However, as outlined above they continue to face barriers such as delays in asylum procedures, language barriers, discriminatory attitudes, and discomfort with living conditions or food quality. These challenges continue to be experienced and reported even during the 2022 AGD exercise with refugees and asylum seekers in the targeted locations.

When asked the reason of their onward movement to another country; majority of children responded that they intended to reunite with their immediate or extended family members who can take care of them, as they are alone in Bulgaria. A lower number responded on available working opportunities to be able to support themselves and family members financially.

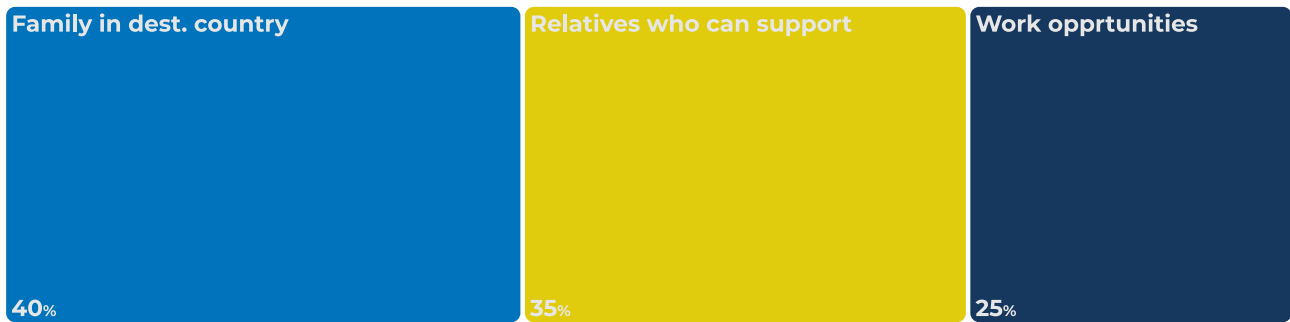
### Reasons for moving to another country

#### AS and Refugees from Syria and other countries

Family in dest. country

100%

## Refugees from Ukraine



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“I don’t like living in the reception centres and there are no services available. The condition in the reception centre affects people’s sanity.”

Reem (Asylum seeking, unaccompanied child from Syria)

“Some people have discriminatory attitudes in the local communities.”

Karina (Refugee from Ukraine)

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## 5. International Protection Procedures

For some of the children, the term ‘refugee’ denotes an individual fleeing from war and/or temporarily residing in a foreign country far from home. However, the majority remained unaware of the definition of a refugee and the rights associated with it.

The majority of children participating in the focus group discussions are asylum-seekers awaiting their appointments for an interview with the SAR officials who will examine their applications for international protection in Bulgaria. While some are familiar with the steps involved in obtaining asylum and the status of their applications, others, particularly younger children, rely on their peer group members to provide them information and guidance on the procedure.

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“The procedure is very slow, for example, I had to wait for 9 months, and I received the status one week ago so you can imagine I spent a lot of time here at the reception centre.”

Adnan (Asylum seeking, unaccompanied child from Syria)

“I was asked to sign many documents before the interview starts. I don’t know what the documents were about.”

Lamia (Asylum seeking, unaccompanied child from Syria)

“I signed a document at the end of my interview, but I don’t know what was written in the document. I think it was my interview transcript, but I don’t know what they recorded.”

Zuhair (Asylum seeking, unaccompanied child from Syria)

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A few had already undergone their international protection interviews, reporting that the questions posed were straightforward, typically concerning their journey and current circumstances. However, some expressed fear



of the police authorities during the process.

It is concerning that the children were required to sign numerous official documents without being provided translations or explanations. Additionally, their interview transcripts were not provided to them afterwards and they were not given an opportunity to review them. Another child endured six interviews. While most attended their interview with a guardian, at least two had to attend alone, resulting in them feeling unprepared.

One of the children believed that having a competent lawyer would expedite the process and improve the chance of receiving a response on their application.

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“No, we didn’t have any idea how the interview would go, someone comes in the morning, collected the registration cards, and said, you have to go to the interview.”

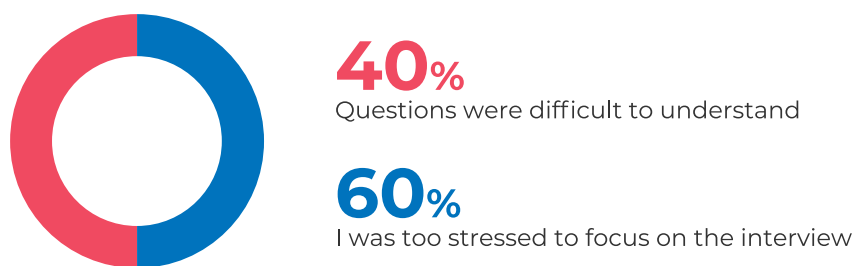
Saad (Asylum seeking, unaccompanied child from Syria)

“When they are doing the regular checks in the morning, they come to my room then they inform that I will have the interview.”

Lina (Asylum seeking, unaccompanied child from Syria)

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#### Problems faced in the interview\*



*\*the answers from both groups are identical*

In addition to the secondary concerns highlighted in the graph, such as nervousness and difficulty comprehending certain questions, the children participating in the FGDs expressed further apprehension regarding the international protection interview process. Specifically, a significant majority of them voiced frustration over the limited or non-existent information provided about the interview procedure. This lack of transparency left them feeling uncertain and uninformed about what to expect during this critical stage of the asylum application process. Furthermore, they highlighted the inadequacy of interpretation services as a significant obstacle, which hindered effective communication between themselves and the interviewers. The insufficiency of interpretation further exacerbated the challenges faced by the children, making it challenging for them to fully comprehend and articulate their circumstances and concerns during the international protection interviews. One boy said that the State Agency does not have a Kurdish interpreter, which made it difficult for Kurdish speakers to have the interview with Arabic interpretation. These concerns emphasize the importance of addressing procedural transparency and enhancing language support services to ensure a more equitable and accessible asylum process for child refugees in Bulgaria.

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“It will be helpful if they can ask questions in a simplified way during the interview so we can understand.”

Yazan (Asylum seeking unaccompanied child from Syria)

“Can they give us more time to respond to the questions?”

Nizar (Asylum seeking unaccompanied child from Syria)

“I speak Kurdish and understand some Arabic. During the interview I had an Arabic interpreter. I understood some of the questions but not everything during the interview. I would have been more comfortable with Kurdish interpretation.”

Zinar (Asylum seeking, unaccompanied child from Iraq)

Suggested improvements in the asylum procedure from the children were to provide clearer information on the interview process and for the interviewers to allow more time for the children to answer questions without feeling stressed or agitated.

## Reasons for moving to another country

### Refugees from Ukraine

Ask understandable questions

100%

### AS and Refugees from Syria and other countries

Listen to answers

38%

Explain the process better

31%

Give more time to answer

31%

While some children are aware of the temporary protection measures available in Bulgaria, many remain unaware of the progress of their international protection application and/or interview and decision-making process. The children were observed to be worried or saddened, with at least one expressing anxiety about the delay in the decision regarding their asylum status.

It is intriguing to observe that 60% of the children demonstrated awareness of the role of UNHCR, with a significant majority already familiar with the organization’s existence. The children reacted with curiosity, expressing interest in learning more about the assistance that UNHCR could offer them and their families throughout the asylum procedure and in facilitating family reunification.



## 6. Future Outlook

Upon departing from the reception centres, the refugee children from Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq and other countries aspire to reunite with their families and secure employment. The children from Ukraine ultimately yearn to return home. Some refugee children from Syria and other countries have relatives still residing in their home countries who are anxiously awaiting their support to relocate from conflict-ridden areas.

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“I want to reunify with my family through family reunification and move outside of the centre.”

Farah (Asylum seeking, unaccompanied child from Syria)

“I want to have a normal life.”

Mustafa (Asylum seeking, unaccompanied child from Syria)

“My hope is to return home once the war is finished.”

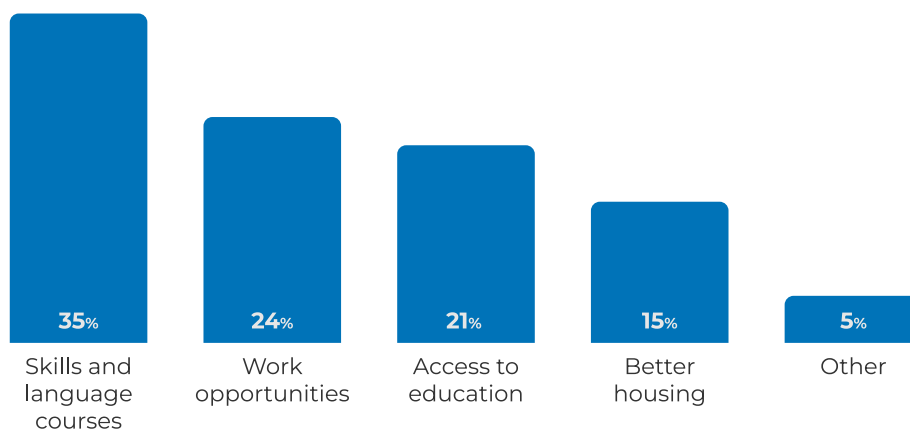
Dmytro (Refugee from Ukraine)

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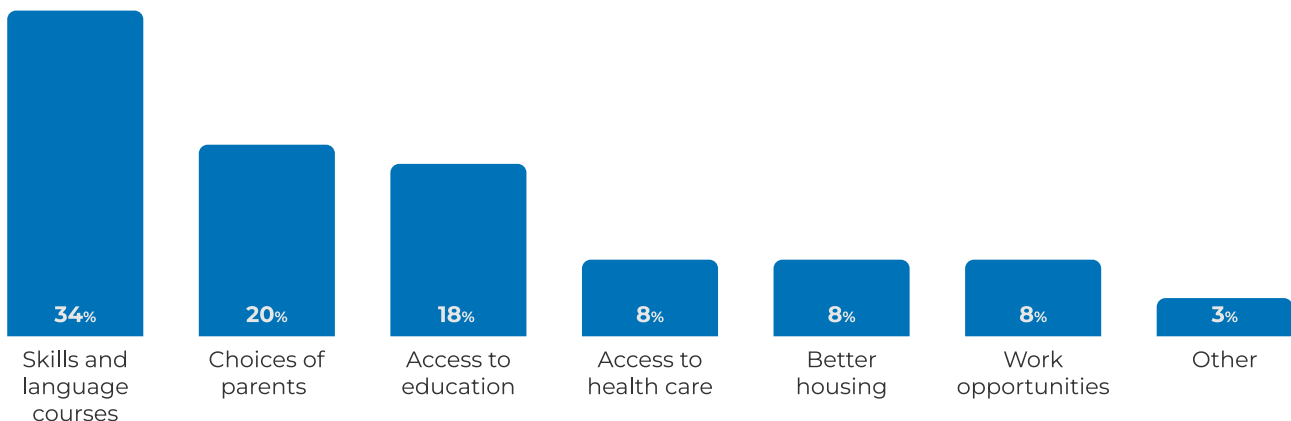
When asked about their priorities for successful integration in Bulgaria, the majority of children emphasized that their primary need was to acquire language skills and attend language courses to enhance their communication abilities. This aligns closely with their expressed need for improved access to education, which ranks as the second-highest priority in the graph. Additionally, many children expressed a desire for access to employment opportunities, as they feel they need to support their families and contribute to their daily expenses. This was further reinforced by better housing and improved access to healthcare. Furthermore, the children expressed a wish for the preferences and necessities of their parents, guardians, or family members to be acknowledged and addressed in the integration process.

### What are the Primary Requirements for Effective Integration into Bulgarian Society

AS and Refugees from Syria and other countries



Refugees from Ukraine





## 7. Complaint and Feedback Mechanism

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When it comes to grievances, over 50% of the children are knowledgeable about how to lodge complaints: they were aware they could report them to the social worker within the safe zone or discuss with their parents or family members. However, some had doubts about the effectiveness of submitting complaints, fearing they would receive no response even if they did. When asked, the children struggled to articulate an alternative mechanism for voicing their concerns.

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“We want to complain about a lot of things but don’t know how and where to complain.”

Sana (Asylum seeking, unaccompanied child from Syria)

“I want to personally complain to the organization by paying visit to their office”

Anastasiya (Refugee from Ukraine)

“I would like to go to the police to complain.”

Marina (Refugee from Ukraine)

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The children lack awareness of how to register complaints about services provided by UNHCR and its partners and prefer to verbally communicate their issues to the social workers in the facilities. As a result, they have not utilized any other complaints or feedback mechanisms. They expressed that they would place more trust in the system if concrete actions were taken upon the receipt of complaints and if they received responses or feedback to them. However, due to their lack of awareness of the Complaints and Feedback Mechanism, they are unable to comment on its purported ‘safe and confidential’ nature.

Some participants believe that only those residing in the emergency shelter facilities referred to as “safe zones” have access to raise complaints with IOM social workers, leaving children outside of these areas unable to avail themselves of the same services.

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“Children living outside of safe zone don’t have access to anywhere to complain. We are living in the “safe zones”, and we can complain to the IOM social worker and they support us. But those children living outside the safe zone with their parents can’t do this.”

Bilal (Asylum seeking, unaccompanied boy from Syria)

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# Conclusion

Bulgaria witnessed arrival of refugees, resulting from the conflict in Ukraine has underscored the urgency of an efficient and responsive social protection system tailored to meet the needs of asylum-seeking and refugee children. Through the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), UNHCR has garnered a comprehensive understanding of the experiences, challenges, and preferences of child refugees.

In addressing the plight of refugees, it is paramount to prioritize the needs of children, who are among the most vulnerable members of displaced populations. Their unique requirements, spanning from education to healthcare and emotional support, necessitate tailored interventions to ensure their well-being and future prospects. Neglecting these needs not only jeopardizes the immediate welfare of children but also undermines their long-term resilience and ability to thrive in their new environments.

Several salient observations have emerged from the FGDs warranting attention. Firstly, the need to consider the voices of the children to best discern how existing processes can be streamlined to better support their asylum procedure. There are also a number of key requirements to be met, ranging from improving awareness of the status of their asylum applications through to supporting the children to access education, healthcare and essential services. Notably, the child refugees face a number of significant barriers, including a lack of understanding of their international protection applications, challenging interview procedures, language barriers, and a lack of awareness navigating complaint mechanisms to voice their concerns.

Moreover, the FGDs underscored the importance of providing financial assistance to children as many felt compelled to engage in employment instead of, or while, attending school, to sustain both themselves and their families. Accessing education in the classroom also requires provisions of teaching materials in their native languages, alongside ongoing support to help integrate them into the national language.

Regrettably, the pervasive language barriers experienced by child refugees have resulted in a few documented cases of children disengaging entirely from educational pursuits. Their inability to comprehend lessons delivered in Bulgarian poses a significant impediment to their academic progress and integration into the educational system. Addressing these language barriers through targeted language support programs is imperative to ensure that every child has equitable access to education and opportunities for personal development.

While access to healthcare and medication was reported to be less of a problem for the children, the affordability of medications not provided within the Reception Centres, continues to be a challenge. There is also a pressing need to uphold optimal standards of medication quality to safeguard the health of child refugees.

Navigating the complaint and feedback mechanisms in Bulgaria remains a formidable obstacle for child refugees, who often find it more accessible to communicate with their social workers. Moreover, it has been highlighted that only children residing within designated “safe zones” have access to these mechanisms.

Child refugees also voiced scepticism of the efficacy of complaints mechanisms and the likelihood of receiving any response or feedback, due to experiences of bureaucratic inertia and language barriers. Such scepticism may exacerbate children’s feelings of alienation and isolation within their host communities.

Furthermore, the FGDs provided a platform for children from countries such as Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq to recount their experiences of traveling to Bulgaria, shedding light on the arduous journeys undertaken and the obstacles confronted along the way. From enduring perilous border crossings to navigating unfamiliar terrain, the children’s narratives underscore their resilience and fortitude exhibited amidst adversity. However, despite the challenges encountered, many children expressed a sense of relief and gratitude for their current circum-

stances in Bulgaria, emphasizing the importance of safety and stability in their lives.

Above all, the children consistently expressed a keen interest in understanding UNHCR's role in facilitating their asylum applications and sought clarity on the process therein. This underscores the importance of providing comprehensive information and support regarding UNHCR's assistance mechanisms to aid the child refugees in navigating their asylum journey effectively.

In summary, the insights obtained from the FGDs underscore the imperative need to prioritize the holistic well-being of child refugees. This entails addressing their immediate needs, bolstering support systems, and fostering environments conducive to their physical, emotional, and educational development. By placing the voices and experiences of children at the centre of refugee response efforts, we can better understand their challenges and aspirations, ultimately paving the way for a more inclusive and compassionate approach to child refugee assistance.



# Children's Recommendations

Based on the insights obtained from the discussions with child refugees, the following recommendations are proposed to address key areas of concern and improve the well-being and integration of asylum-seeking and refugee children in Bulgaria:

## 1. International Protection Procedures:

Ensure awareness and understanding of the asylum process among asylum-seeking and refugee children.

Children need detailed information that they can understand about their applications and the procedures, by using child-friendly techniques in the interviews. Information should be accessible to children, and delivered in languages that children are comfortable with and can comprehend adequately, enabling them to navigate the process with confidence.

## 2. Language Support:

Ensure awareness and understanding of the asylum process among asylum-seeking and refugee children.

Children need detailed information that they can understand about their applications and the procedures, by using child-friendly techniques in the interviews. Information should be accessible to children, and delivered in languages that children are comfortable with and can comprehend adequately, enabling them to navigate the process with confidence.

## 3. Education Support:

To provide accelerated learning opportunity for unaccompanied children who have never been to school and/or have missed the school age (above 15 years). To provide lessons with subjects on Mathematics, Science, and their native language. These learning opportunities will provide them with continuous access to education and can support in adopting to their new circumstances and prepare them for schooling.

To provide tutor/homework support for children attending Bulgarian schools. Children from Ukraine are attending local school in addition to the online Ukrainian schools. However, due to language limitation and lack of education support and MHPSS services, they are not able to follow all their lessons.

Bulgarian language courses and extra support outside of the school will help them in adopting to the Bulgarian schools and integrate with Bulgarian peers.

To provide scholarship opportunities to students, including those with outstanding performance, to ensure that they can continue their university studies.

## 4. Extra-Curricular activities:

To provide extracurricular and recreational activities for all children residing in the reception centres, state accommodation or in private accommodation. The children wished they could go on school trips

to learn about different cities of Bulgaria, going out for a walk in the park along with their friends and classmates, and playing football. Children in the reception centres expressed the feeling of being free when they have opportunity to walk in the parks and able to engage with the local community in the public areas.

To provide in-depth study courses of foreign languages, such as English along with Bulgarian language courses. Children expressed their interest to also have additional learning opportunities related to diploma courses on management and economics courses, painting, and other such courses.

## **5. Access to Healthcare:**

Improve the quality and accessibility of healthcare and medication provided in the reception centres.

This can be achieved by either providing financial aid to cover the costs of medications not available within the centres or increasing the availability of essential medications onsite at the reception centres to alleviate the financial burden on asylum-seeking or refugee children seeking healthcare outside the centres. Children also highlight the language barriers and support from professionals in accessing healthcare.

## **6. Language Support in Healthcare:**

Provide language support services within the healthcare system to assist asylum seeking and refugee children, including those from Ukraine, when accessing medical services.

This includes providing interpretation services and translated materials in the children's native languages to facilitate effective communication with healthcare providers. Ensuring language support in the healthcare process will enable children to express their health concerns, better understand medical instructions, and access necessary healthcare services with confidence and clarity.

## **7. Child Labour:**

Implement measures to alleviate the financial pressures driving child labour among asylum seekers and refugees, including those from Ukraine.

Providing educational opportunities and social assistance would enable children to refrain from working to sustain themselves or support their families, allowing them to focus on their personal and cultural development, education, and integration into Bulgarian society. This will also support in reducing the psychological stress on the children, regarding the need to support their families financially.

## **8. Complaint and Feedback Mechanisms:**

Streamline the existing complaint and feedback mechanisms to ensure that every complaint filed by the children receive a timely response and feedback. Additionally, extend the jurisdiction of the complaint and feedback mechanisms to encompass children residing in any location, enabling all children in need to access and benefit from the mechanism's support and protection. Speaking to children individually and in groups would help improve their protection, identify major risks before children are harmed, and contribute to their development and well-being. Complaint and feedback mechanisms also contribute to the children's psychosocial wellbeing and help activate their potentials.

By implementing these recommendations by the children, UNHCR, state institutions and other stakeholders can contribute to improving the well-being, protection, and integration of child refugees in Bulgaria, fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment for their future.