

# VOICES OF REFUGEES IN BULGARIA



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



**UNHCR**  
The UN Refugee Agency

## **Glossary**

AS: Asylum-Seeker

BRC: Bulgarian Red Cross

FGD: Focus Group Discussions

MHPSS: Mental Health and Psychosocial Support

MLSP: Bulgarian Ministry of Labor and Social Policy

PA: Participatory Assessment

RRC: Registration and Reception Center

RSD: Refugee Status Determination

SAR: Bulgarian State Agency for Refugees

TP: Temporary Protection

LAR: Law on Asylum and Refugees

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# A WORD FROM THE UN REFUGEE AGENCY REPRESENTATIVE IN BULGARIA



**Seda Kuzucu**  
UNHCR Representative in Bulgaria

It is my privilege to introduce the report on Participatory Assessment conducted with asylum seekers and refugees in Bulgaria. This report, focusing on refugee and asylum-seeking men, women, and 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 refugees and asylum seekers who are often unheard and a lens for UNHCR and partners advocacy and operations.

This comprehensive document sheds light on the challenges faced by refugees in Bulgaria, emphasizing several critical themes, such as child labor, health and mental health services, uncertainty of long-term plans, and asylum services.

During the assessment, it has been identified that there is a high incidence of child labor among refugees in Bulgaria. Suggestions were made for social assistance programs to mitigate this issue. Difficulties exist in accessing medical services, especially for refugees from Syria and other countries. Barriers include language differences, travel costs, and sometimes discrimination. There are significant disparities in health insurance coverage between Ukrainian refugees and those from other countries. Mental health support availability varies, with many refugees relying on self-help.

Refugees express their uncertainty about remaining in Bulgaria long-term, and these factors are mostly influenced due to uncertainty about employment and accommodation, and access to social services. The document emphasizes the need for Bulgarian authorities with support from UNHCR and other partners to improve asylum services. This is particularly important given the ongoing conflicts in different parts of the world.

In summary, the report sheds light on the challenges faced by refugees in Bulgaria and highlights areas where improvements are needed. The situation calls for collaborative efforts to address the needs of displaced individuals and ensure their well-being. These are urgent issues and collective action is paramount to create a more supportive environment for refugees in Bulgaria.

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 all refugees and asylum seekers, regardless of their origin, status, or circumstances, are 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 for all refugees. 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 refugees and asylum seekers 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 people we serve.



# Summary

In January, the UN Refugee Agency in Bulgaria, with the support of Ukrainian Support and Renovation Foundation (USRF), Energy (NGR), Caritas Sofia, and Bulgarian Red Cross (BRC), conducted a participatory assessment (PA) based on 21 focus group discussions (FGDs), involving 177 refugees and asylum seekers – mainly from Ukraine (108) and Syria (55) followed by Morocco (9), Afghanistan (4) and Algeria (1). The FGDs took place during the dates of 10-25 January in Sofia, Bansko, Burgas, Harmanli, Nova Zagora, Pas-tragor, Plovdiv, Stara Zagora, and Varna. The different groups were held with Ukrainian refugees under temporary protection (TP), and Syrian, Moroccan, Afghan, and Algerian asylum-seekers and refugees who have been granted international protection or humanitarian status.

The main topics discussed were: 1. Awareness of Bulgaria's international protection procedures; 2. Awareness of temporary protection procedures; 3. Registration of newborn children and family reunification; 4. Community support, safety, Complaint and Feedback Mechanisms; 5. Socioeconomic inclusion (employment, financial services/banking, accommodation); 6. Social assistance; 7. Child protection with a focus on education; 8. Health and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS).

Among the main and most-common challenges cited by the participants was the language barriers in the procedures and in accessing their rights in Bulgaria. Language barriers can make accessing and obtaining information as well as accessing services extremely difficult in general. The participants frequently suggested that information should be more available in their languages, that updates on their status be more regular, and that language lessons be more accessible.

Bulgaria will continue to host refugees from Ukraine and from third nation countries, given increasing arrivals. The focus group discussions showed that there is a need to further strengthen the international protection system and rights under the Temporary Protection Directive to ensure that asylum-seekers and refugees have easy access to the procedures and their rights under the national law.

When asked whether they planned to stay in Bulgaria, there were important differences between refugees from Ukraine and refugees and asylum seekers from Syria and other countries. Among the asylum seekers and refugees from countries other than Ukraine, just over 11% said they planned to stay despite negative experiences, more than half (52%) answered no and more than one-third (36%) were not sure of their future plans. All groups emphasized that some of their most-important considerations underlying their decisions to remain in Bulgaria or search ways of moving onwards to other EU countries included the ability to access employment, accommodation, social assistance, healthcare, and education – for themselves and their families.

By contrast, more than half (53%) of the Ukrainians under temporary protection said they planned to stay in Bulgaria despite limited assistance and socio-economic inclusion, with just 15% saying no and, about one-third (32%) being unsure. They cited access to accommodation followed by access to employment/self-employment as the two main factors underlying their intentions. Both the groups, those from Ukraine and those from other countries, gave similar reasons why they might leave Bulgaria, including when they have the perception that there are better job opportunities in another EU country, family reunification in another country and better healthcare access elsewhere. In particular, family reunification is a major driver for asylum-seekers and refugees from Syria and other countries, while their wishes to reunite with families and communities may not always match their eligibility for family reunification elsewhere in view of cultural differences relating to the definition of family. However, the results of the FGDs demonstrate once again that the support of community is clearly key to access essential information and navigate a complex environment to find accommodation, access health care, enroll children in schools, among others.

Other thematic recommendations that came out of the FDGs included the need to improve the accessibility and efficiency of the **international protection procedures**.<sup>1</sup> Asylum-seekers wished to receive more information and updates about their applications and their legal rights and obligations.

Concerning **temporary protection** (TP) procedures, the Ukrainian participants suggested to have a scheduling procedure and to fix an appointment at the MOI registration sites and at all registration and reception centers<sup>2</sup> to avoid the overcrowding and long waiting-times that can occur there when everyone shows up at the same time, and without appointments. The refugees also wished that they could renew their TP identification cards at more locations across Bulgaria to save time and money on the cost of long hours of travel. An important concern was the unclarity of how long TP was to remain in effect. Lastly, the participants pointed to the importance of TP identification being accepted when they apply to obtain a driver's license or open a bank account.

On **community support and safety**, the participants shared that they were interested in activities available to all refugees, including cultural pursuits (such as dancing and music), parental-support groups, language courses, cinema, MHPSS, women's groups as well as vocational training. The refugees and asylum seekers residing in RRCs requested that they should be able to lock their doors and that there should be guards on duty who can check for weapons. Participants also proposed electing representatives who could bring residents' concerns to management.

Regarding **employment**, the refugees said they need more information in general about job and training opportunities, and refugees from Ukraine shared that they would like to learn about opportunities for entrepreneurship, and about accessing healthcare and social benefits. Moreover, all groups asked Bulgaria to recognize the education and work experience that they obtained in their home countries or elsewhere. Both groups requested more free language courses and specialized technical and vocational training.

When it comes to **child protection**, both refugees from Ukraine and asylum-seekers and refugees from other countries highlighted the need for mental health and psycho-social support for children traumatized by war as well as specialized services for children with disabilities and specific needs. The participants proposed installing access ramps at all school buildings to allow access for children and adults with disabilities. They added that tutors or teaching assistants should be available to work with refugee children.

Asylum-seekers and refugees accommodated at RRCs also emphasizes the need for mental health and psycho-social support (MHPSS), and asked for more educational and cultural activities for children as well as an improvement in the quality of the food at the RRCs. They wished that healthcare staff could be more responsive and helpful, and that healthcare services be made more accessible and efficient. There was a need for accessible information about the available services and their location.

Comparing this 2023 Participatory Assessment to the results of the AGD Report 2022, it is clear that there have been positive developments for both groups of participants. However, challenges reported in 2022 were also identified in the 2023 Participatory Assessment:

- Some pushback reported, though fewer than in 2022.
- Reported cases of violence or confiscation of belongings at borders, although fewer than last year.
- Complaints about lack of sufficient interpretation services.
- Widespread calls for enhanced access to Bulgarian-language classes for both adults and children.
- Concerns with long waiting times for appointments, for issuing decisions in the international protection procedures, and for updates on their applications.
- Lack of information in general concerning access to available assistance and services.
- Long distance to registration sites to renew TP cards.

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<sup>1</sup>Average processing time from registration to the first instance international protection decision is six months.

<sup>2</sup>The re-registration is done at the MOI registration sites at specific timeline. In case if someone misses the date, they can also re-register at the RRCs.

- Reception conditions at RRCs, including the level of cleanliness and bedbugs, lack of heating and hot water, as well as poor-quality food.
- Concerns for security at the centers, including daily violence among men living under stress and in close quarters.
- Continued concerns about a lack of separation between females and males at the centers, from the perspectives of safety and limited space given to women and girls in the center. Currently most of the space are being occupied and used by the male residents.
- Difficulty in accessing specialized healthcare, including for mothers.
- Difficulty in finding and affording their private accommodation.
- Negative experiences with officials and local communities as well as bullying in schools.
- A lack of ramps at schools to enable access for adults and children with disabilities.



# Context

Since the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine in February 2022, over 2.3 million refugees from Ukraine have entered Bulgaria. As of end-February 2024, the Bulgarian Government has granted temporary protection to almost 179,000 refugees fleeing Ukraine, with the majority being women and children. As of February 2024, more than 72,000 Ukrainian refugees remain in Bulgaria, compared to 67,000 in 2022. As an external EU border, Bulgaria plays a strategic role in refugee protection within Europe. In 2023, Bulgaria's State Agency for Refugees (SAR) registered over 22,500 asylum seekers, primarily from Syria and Afghanistan, surpassing the numbers for the same period the previous year. On the other hand, cases of 13,200 asylum-seekers have been closed as the individuals abandoned their cases and moved to other EU countries in the same period. In reference to Law on Asylum and Refugees (LAR), SAR operates six reception centers for the registration, Refugee Status Determination procedures, and accommodation of asylum seekers.

Addressing protection risks faced by forcibly displaced people upon their arrival in Bulgaria is central to UNHCR's immediate response to their urgent needs. This is done in close coordination with relevant government entities to ensure the early identification of persons with specific needs and a differentiated approach based on age, gender, and diversity considerations. UNHCR promotes a comprehensive refugee response grounded in a whole-of-society approach. UNHCR supports government-led efforts to provide protection, including legal assistance, information on services, education, and psychosocial support and foster inclusion and integration. This support extends to reception and accommodation, as well as to the delivery of core relief items for winterization and cash assistance for the most vulnerable groups. UNHCR's priority protection interventions include access to territory and asylum procedures, inclusion of refugees in state-led programs, Child Protection, Gender-Based Violence response and risk mitigation, support to persons with specific needs, and the mitigation of risks related to trafficking and other forms of abuse and exploitation. UNHCR and its partners also assist refugees and asylum seekers with legal information and legal aid, a dedicated legal hotline, and other outreach mechanisms, along with communication through community channels.





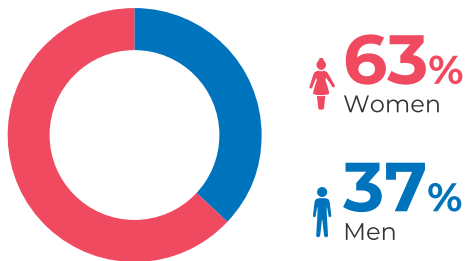
# Methodology

Participatory assessment is a process of building partnerships with refugee women and men of all ages and backgrounds by promoting meaningful participation through structured dialogue. It includes holding discussions with small groups to gather accurate information on the specific protection risks they face and the underlying causes, to understand their capacities, and to hear their proposed solutions.

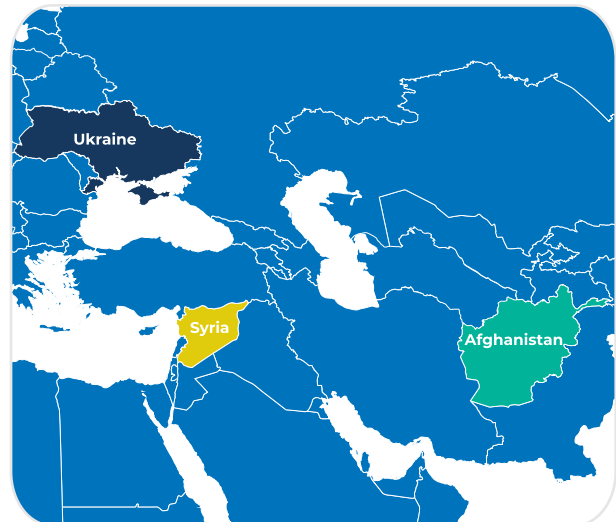
These focus group discussions (FGDs) with refugees constitute an essential tool for shaping the protection and inclusion programs of UNHCR and its partners. FGDs allow for a direct dialogue between protection actors and refugees. By shedding light on the refugees' perspectives through FGDs, UNHCR aims to promote an environment of trust and accountability. This analysis aims to harness the power of collaborative dialogue and pave the way for a more responsive, tailored, and efficient system of social protection for refugees and asylum seekers in Bulgaria.

In January, the UNHCR and partners in Bulgaria conducted focus group discussions with 177 refugees and asylum seekers. They were mainly temporary protection (TP) beneficiaries from Ukraine (108) asylum-seekers and international protection beneficiaries from Syria (55), Morocco (9), Afghanistan (4) and Algeria (1). The FGDs were held in eight locations across Bulgaria, in the capital, Sofia, as well as in Burgas, Bansko, Harmanli, Nova Zagora, Pastragor, Plovdiv, Stara Zagora and Varna in partnership with USRF, NRG, Caritas, and BRC. There were 21 discussion groups comprised of an average of 8 participants each.

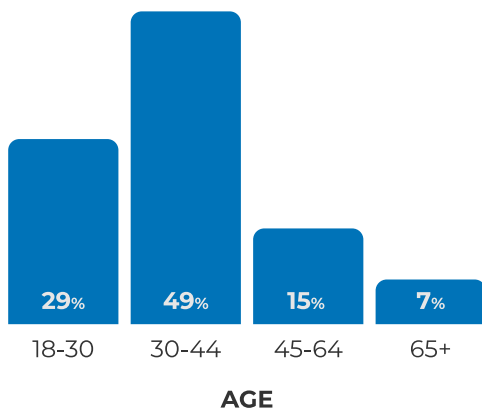
Participants by Gender



Countries of origin

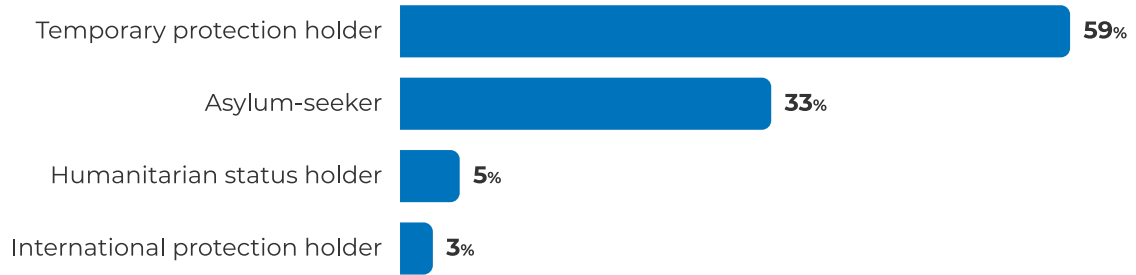


Participants by Age



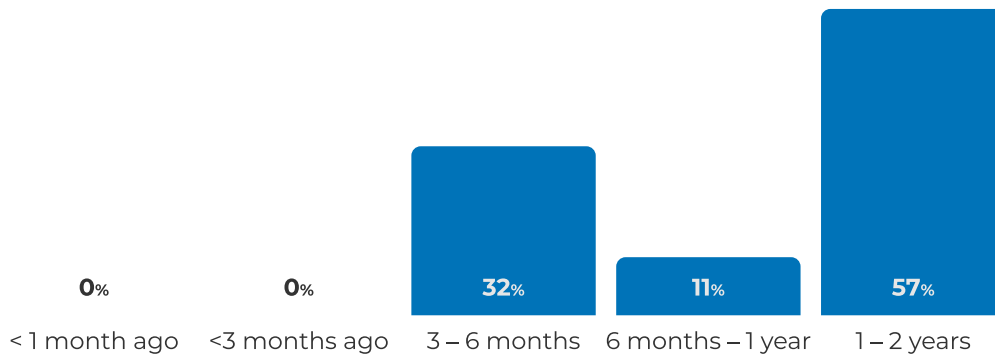
Ukraine	52,38%
Syria	42,86%
Afghanistan	4,76%

### Participants by Legal status\*

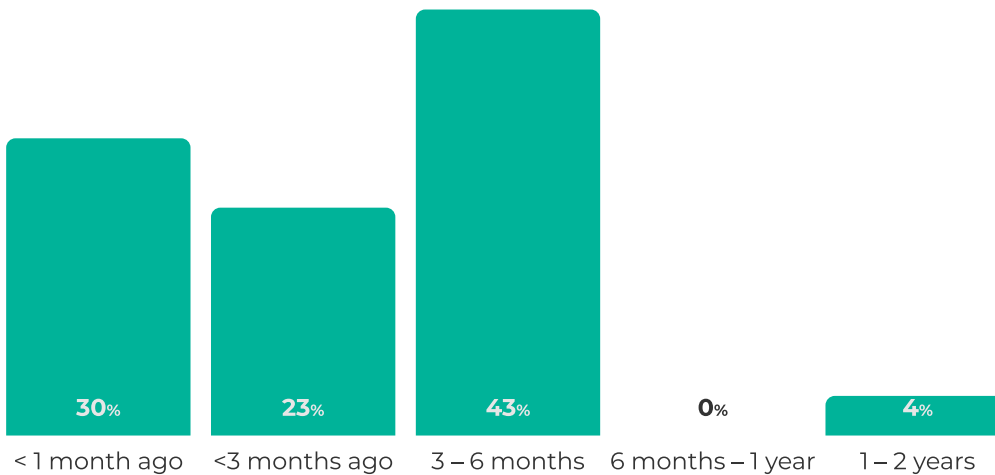


Family compositions among the participants were mixed, ranging from single men to families with multiple members, and from children to older people. Likewise, the participants' levels of education varied widely, from grade school to university. Most of the participants arrived recently in Bulgaria, with almost half indicating that they arrived in last six months, while about one-third arrived between one to two years ago. More than three-quarters (78%) of the refugees from Ukraine, said they did successfully entered Bulgaria on the first attempt compared to just over one-quarter (26%) of the asylum-seekers from Syria and other countries.

### AS and Refugees from Syria and other countries

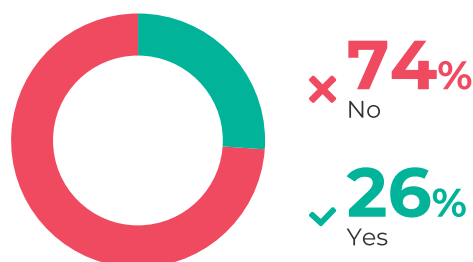


### Refugees from Ukraine



### Did the participants enter from their 1st attempt?

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

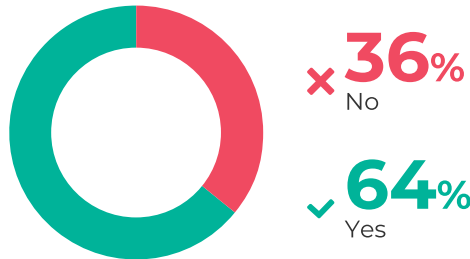




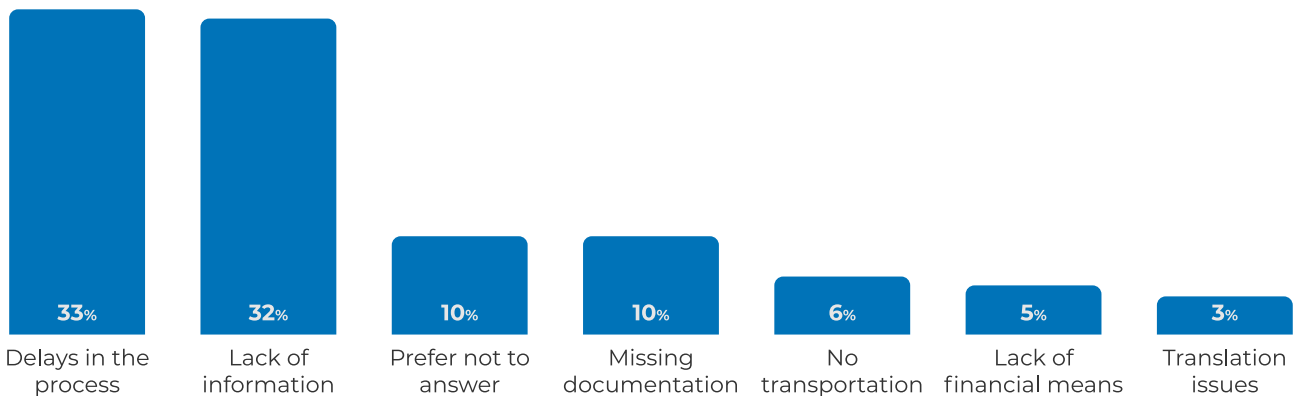
## 1. International Protection Procedures

Concerning their familiarity with the international protection procedures in Bulgaria, almost 64% (compared to 36% in 2022) of the asylum-seekers who participated in the FGDs said that they were generally familiar with them whereas 36% answered that they were not.

Do the participants understand the international protection procedure?



Challenges accessing the asylum process



On challenges **accessing the international protection procedures**, the most cited reasons were delays in the process / long waiting times for appointments, followed by lack of information and missing documentation, lack of transportation and money, and language barriers. Specific challenges shared by participants included being denied entry into Bulgaria by border officials. One refugee woman from Syria described being threatened and having her money stolen by a smuggler. A group of Refugee Syrian men, who said they had been relocated from Cyprus complained about a lack of information about the time required to obtain legal status in Bulgaria and a lack of support in finding accommodation outside of a refugee reception center (RRC). The participants relocated from Cyprus expressed frustration, complaining that they were misinformed about what support and assistance would be available to them in Bulgaria.

The living conditions are deliberately made difficult, so that refugees are encouraged to simply leave Bulgaria.

Mohammed<sup>3</sup>, Refugee from Syria

“Both of us want to speed up our procedures because I have children and family to be able to reunite with them. We would like the quality of the procedure to be improved, also in terms of time.”

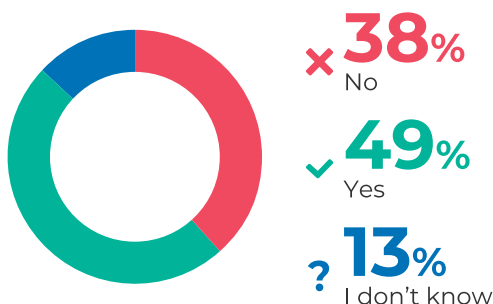
Ali, Syrian asylum-seeker

<sup>3</sup>The name is fictitious to protect the personal information of the refugee. The same applies to all names provided in the quotations.

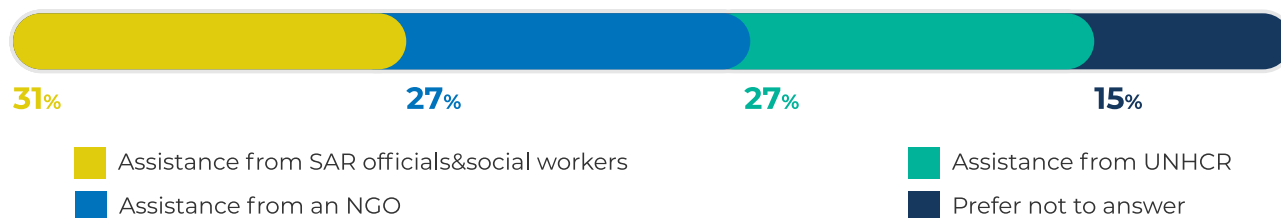
When asked how their problems are solved, less than half (49%) of asylum seekers and refugees responded that their challenges or problems had eventually been solved. Specifics ranged from having received help from Sofia municipal authorities and from their own community. Approximately 11% of participants indicated receiving assistance from SAR, with less than 10% mentioning the assistance from NGOs or UNHCR in solving the challenges.

Almost 40% of respondents answered that there are services that they cannot access with their SAR registration card (green card).

### Were the challenges solved?



### How were the challenges solved?



In response to the question of what else they need to know about the asylum system, several mentioned wanting to have a better idea of how long their asylum applications take and having regular updates on their status. Some participants negatively commented, however, that it is pointless to know anything more about the system, describing it as ineffective. About where to obtain more information, the most-popular response was within the refugee community and refugee channels and groups on social-media platforms such as Facebook, Viber, and WhatsApp. Other sources cited included NGOs and social workers from SAR.

“We want to find somewhere to get information about our rights, the procedures.”

Ahmed, Refugee from Syria

#### Recommendations

Among the proposals offered for improving the international protection procedures, a popular one was enhancing information provided on the procedures and timely updates on the progress of their cases. Arranging in person discussions with lawyers on weekly basis, providing time to time information on the status of our RSD procedure and to explain the expected timeline.





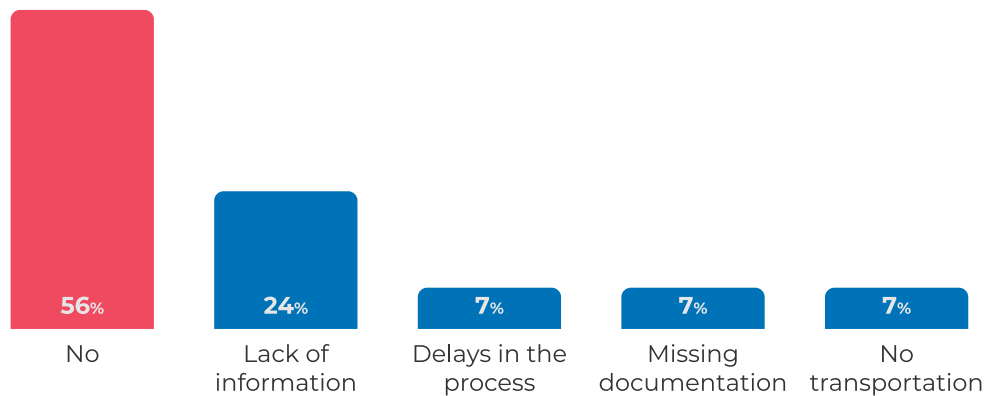
## 2. Temporary Protection and Registration

All refugees from Ukraine participating in the focus group discussions stated to understand the temporary protection procedures in Bulgaria. They generally agreed that obtaining information is relatively easy, and that locals, including a hotel manager of the accommodation in one case, were also helpful in directing them. The Ukrainian respondents said that, now that almost two years have passed since they were displaced from their homes, much more is known about the Bulgaria’s TP procedure and where to find information online. They did not mention any challenge in accessing any rights and services through their TP cards.

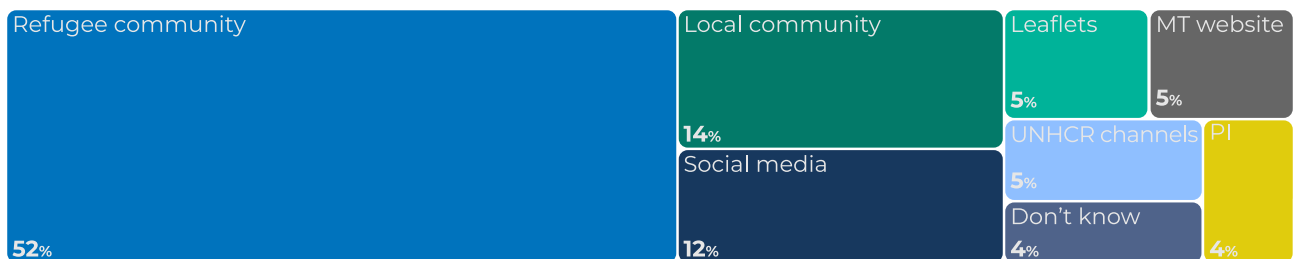
“Two years ago, there was not that much information, but nowadays other refugees from Ukraine share information through social media channels.”

-Olga, Refugee from Ukraine

### How were the challenges solved?



### Sources of information about the TP registration procedure



A key finding is that refugees rely on the community communication channels for information. Other most-popular sources for obtaining any additional information were refugee-run social media (Facebook, Viber, and WhatsApp) and humanitarian workers, in particular NGO workers at Blue Dots<sup>4</sup>.

The respondents cited a lack of information and transportation as well as missing documentation among the challenges to accessing the TP process. One woman said her family had ended up being separated in different parts of the country.

<sup>4</sup>Blue Dots are Information and support Hubs established during the Ukraine Crisis to provide critical protection services as well as reliable multi-language and multi-format information.



### **Recommendations**

Suggestions for improvements to the TP procedures included scheduling appointments at the registration centers and later at the RRCs to avoid overcrowding and long wait-times. Another was to make it possible to renew TP identification cards at more locations across the country to avoid long travel time to registration sites. Indeed, following these focus groups discussions, the re-registration of refugees from Ukraine took place in several additional locations in February 2024.

Refugees continue facing challenge in accessing essential services with their AS or TP cards, including for obtaining driver's licenses and opening bank accounts. Therefore, they proposed a key proposal to make it clear how long temporary protection remains in effect and what will happen afterwards.



### 3. Birth Registration and Family reunification

When asked about registering newborn children, just over one-third (35%) of asylum seekers and refugees who addressed the topic said they know about registering newborn children while in Bulgaria. On the other hand, few difficulties with the process were cited. In one case among Ukrainian refugees, the child's name was misspelled and, consequently, the registration was not accepted by Ukrainian authorities.

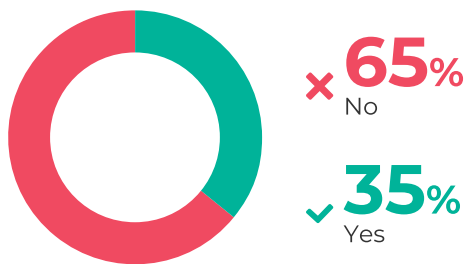
And other countries mostly responded being in the family reunification process or going to start the process. Most of their families are in their home country and waiting to be reunited with them in a safe country. The most challenge mentioned regarding family reunification, was delays in the process and long waiting times for appointments.

“I am interested in family reunification for my wife and children but waiting to start the process as my asylum application is not yet completed.”

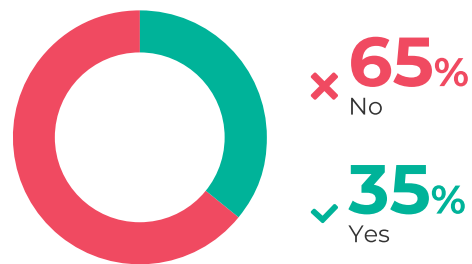
Mahmoud, Asylum Seeker from Syria

#### Do they know about the processes of registering newborn children?

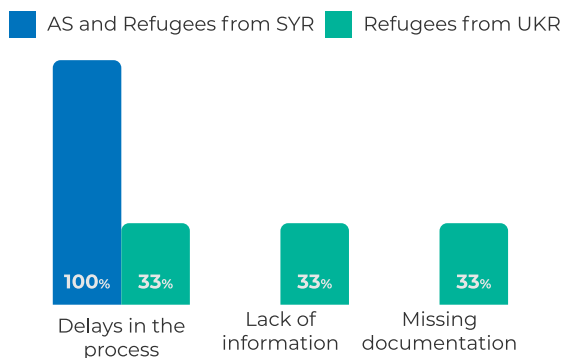
AS and Refugees from SYR & other countries



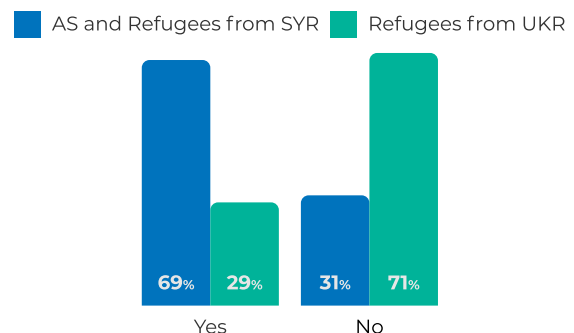
Refugees from UKR



#### Difficulties with family reunification procedures



#### Have they faced any difficulties in registering newborn children?



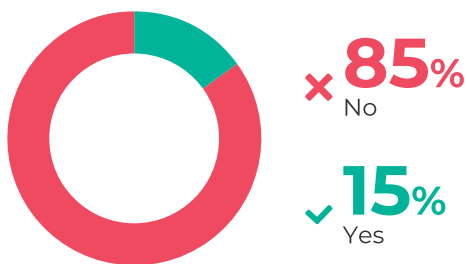


## 4. Community support

The first question concerned who the refugees reach out to if they find themselves in a difficult situation. The most popular answer was the refugee community itself. The responses were followed by NGOs (for example, the Bulgarian Red Cross, Mati Ukraine, Za Dobroto, Ot Nas Zavisi, and Ukrainian Vulik), family, the police, and the local community. Responses concerning what safe community spaces are accessible were: the offices of the BRC and other NGOs that are available or existing in the reception centers. Especially among asylum-seekers and refugees from Syria and other countries, there was a demand for safe spaces, especially at the Reception Centers.

### Participation in activities with the local community

AS and Refugees from SYR & other countries

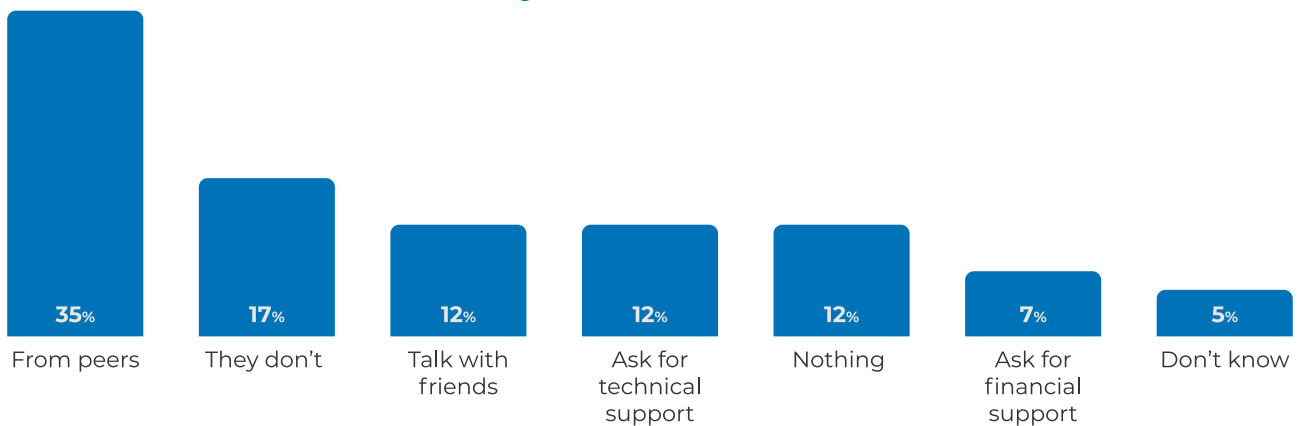


Refugees from UKR

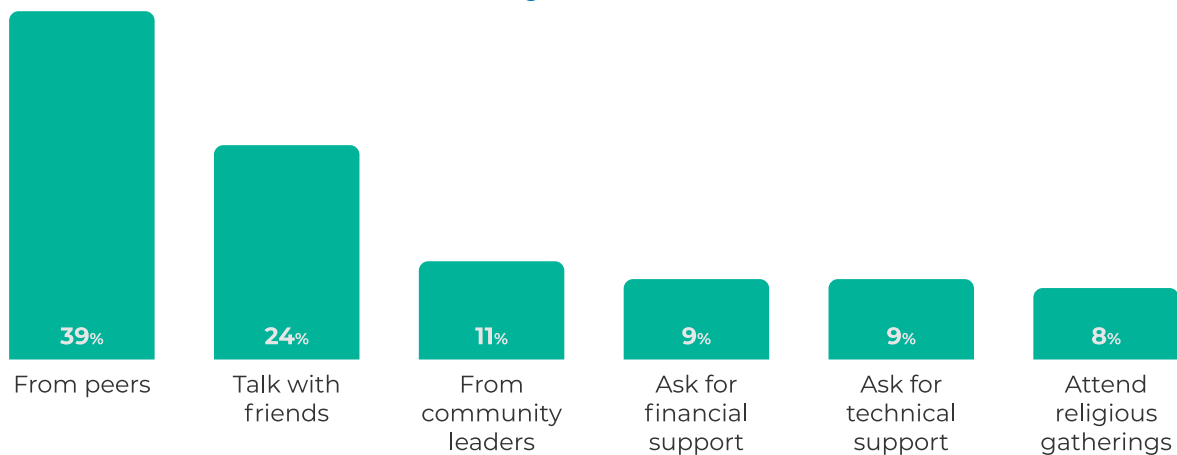


### How do they get support from the refugee community?

AS and Refugees from SYR & other countries

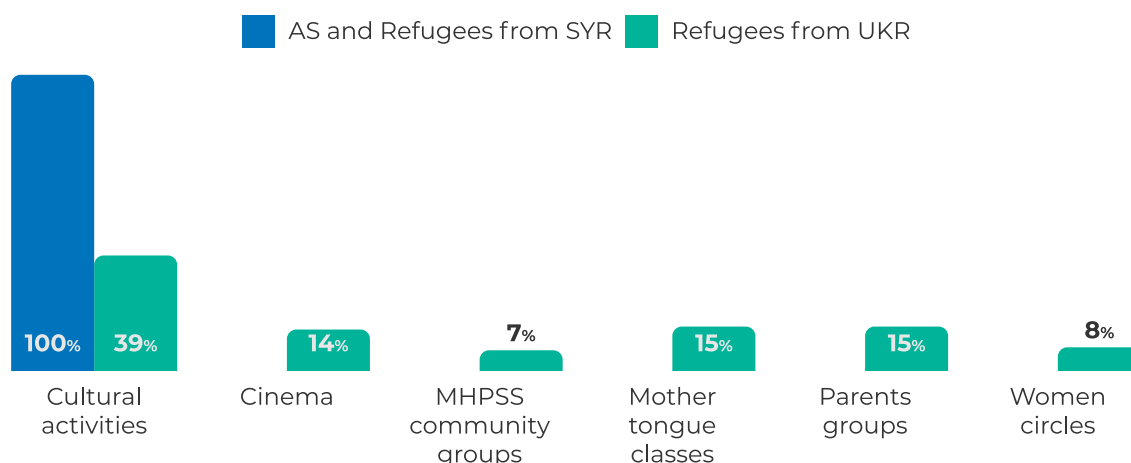


Refugees from UKR





## What kind of activities would they like to see happening?



“We feel like prisoners in the center even though we have not done anything wrong – we have no activities and only eat and sleep.”

-Group of Asylum-Seeking women from Syria

There was a significant difference between the responses by the asylum seekers and refugees from Ukraine to the question whether they participate in events organized by the host community – with only 15% of the asylum seekers from Syria and other countries then answering yes compared to 100% of the Ukrainian refugees. In terms of what kinds of activities, they would like to see offered, the asylum seekers from other countries focused on cultural pursuits (such as dancing and music) while refugees from Ukraine also mentioned language courses, parental support groups, cinema, MHPSS and women’s groups.

“Anything that could be useful for us, so please teach us something new.”

Yusuf, Asylum Seeker, Syria

### Accommodation in Reception Centers:

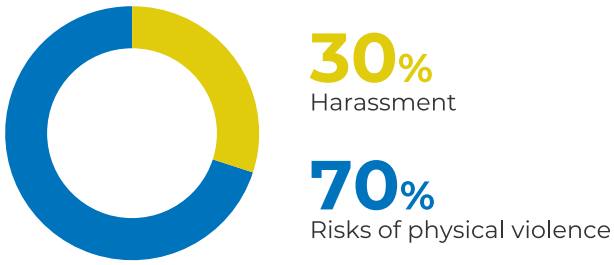
Participants in the FGDs gave a wide range of responses to the conditions in the RRCs or other accommodation centers. Some replied that they have everything they need. But concerns and complaints included overcrowding, a lack of heating and hot water, a lack of cleanliness, women feeling unsafe living in close quarters with unknown men, and poor-quality food. Some women notably reported concerns for their safety over having to use a bathroom close to the men’s facilities, sometimes with broken locks.

The participants in the different FGDs were divided on the question about feeling safe in general at the reception centers. Many said they did, including when compared to the violence they fled in Syria. But among the reasons given for not feeling safe were perceived a bias against refugees in general by local residents, threats from smugglers, a lack of trust in the police, and a general lack of confidence in the future. When asked to specify, the asylum seekers said that major challenges include the risk of physical violence, harassment, and exploitation as well as a lack of legal status due to which they do not have a reliable residence status and financial support. Asylum seeking and refugee women considered themselves to be at risk of harassment and violence. There were also concerns that children, having fled war zones, were also at risk of being re-traumatized.

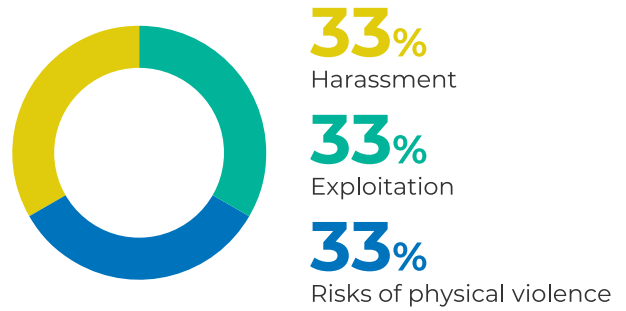
If they felt there was a risk to their safety, the participants said they would reach out to the police, peers in the refugee community, family and friends, leaders in the refugee community and religious leaders, MHPSS services, SAR and the accommodation of Reception Centers and accommodation centers. Refugees from Ukraine also mentioned friends and refugee-community leaders as sources of support.

## What are the main risks?

### AS and Refugees from SYR & other countries

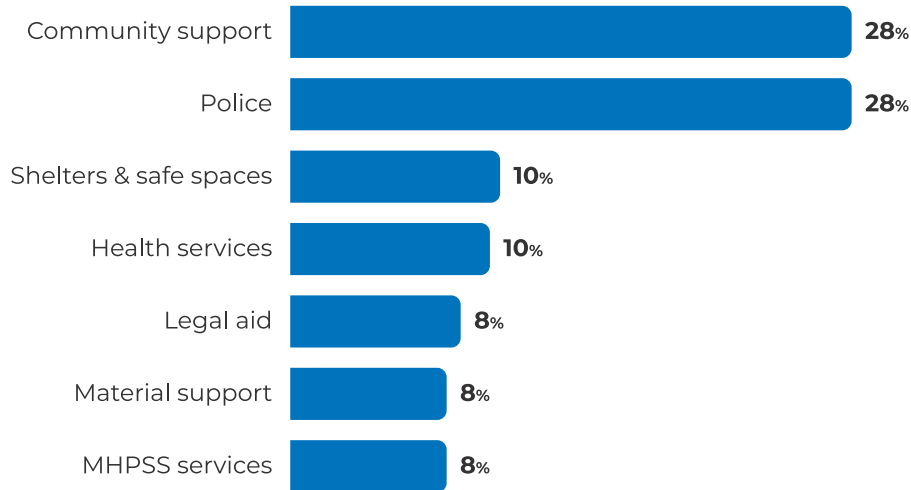


### Refugees from UKR

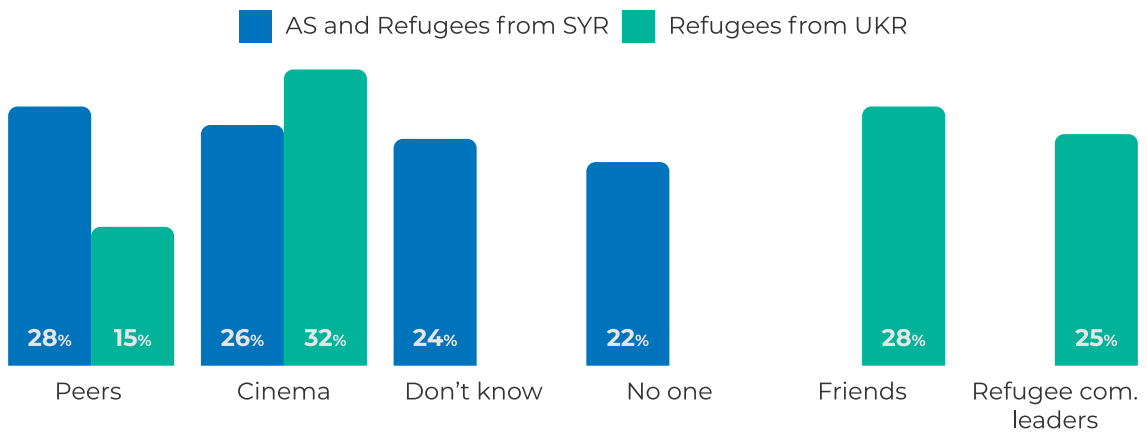


## Services they are aware of when at risk

### AS and Refugees from SYR & other countries



## Services they are aware of when at risk



### Recommendations

Suggestions by the participants for reducing risks and needs at the Reception Centers included doors that can be locked, need for security personnel at the centers and the ability to check residents for weapons, and more information being made available about their rights and available services. One woman said that there should be a separate dining area for women and girls at the RRCs. Recommendations also included electing refugee representatives who could bring residents' concerns to management – so that management would, in turn, work with residents to improve living conditions.

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“We try to solve some issues on our own – to calm people down, so that a situation does not escalate. The group can help to avoid bigger problems.”

Abdullah, Refugee from Syria

“The election of a community leader for each building would help to mediate problems.”

Hameed, Asylum Seeker from Syria

“The Reception Centre are difficult: no proper beds, bedbugs and other insects, no shower, no proper toilet, no Wi-Fi – and there’s no one to complain to.”

Faisal, Asylum Seeker from Syria

“We are trying to make a schedule for cleaning each room.”

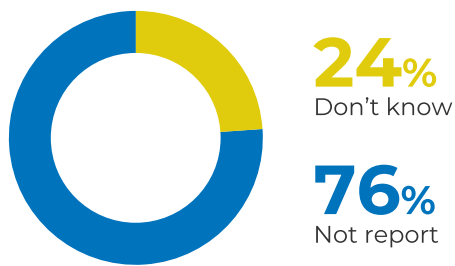
Majed, Asylum Seeker from Syria

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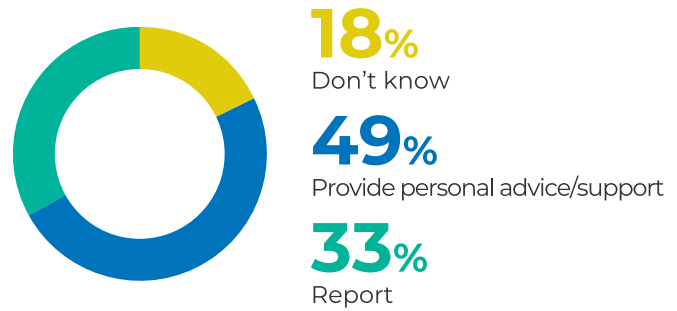
There are significant differences in the feeling of vulnerability and safety between refugees from Ukraine and those from other countries. Responses of the asylum-seekers and refugees from Syria and other countries to the question what they would do if they knew someone had been subject to misconduct by a humanitarian/social worker indicated that they either did not know what to do or that they would not report it or complain because their positions in Bulgaria were simply too vulnerable. By contrast, one-third (33%) of the Ukrainian refugees participating in the FGDs said they would report such misconduct while almost half (49%) said they would at least offer their personal advice and support. Asked to whom and how they would report misconduct, more than three-quarters (76%) of the participants from Syrian and other countries confirmed that they would not report it – compared to only 15% of Ukrainian refugees. This is a critical finding: it shows, among others, that asylum seekers and refugees from countries other than Ukraine may be more vulnerable to misconduct, including exploitation and abuse, and lack a sense of safety to report misconduct.

## What to do when they know that someone has been subject to misconduct by a humanitarian/social worker?

AS and Refugees from SYR & other countries

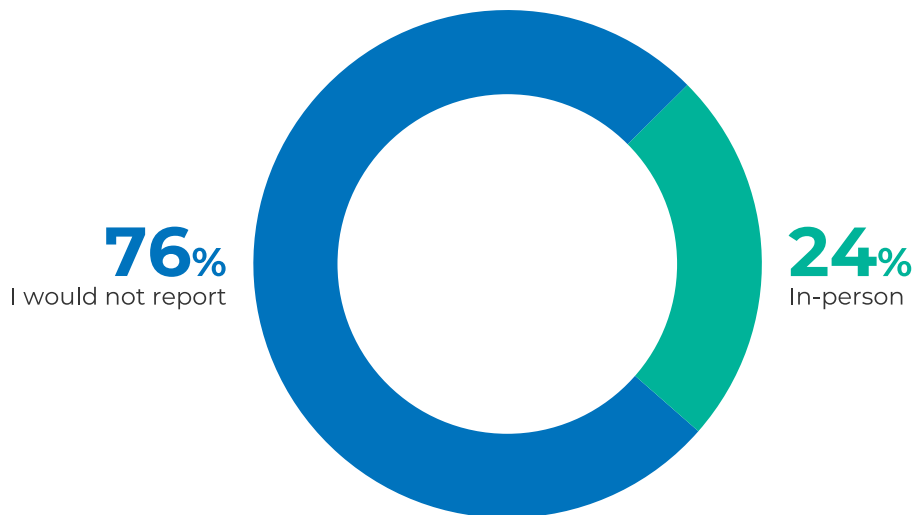


Refugees from UKR

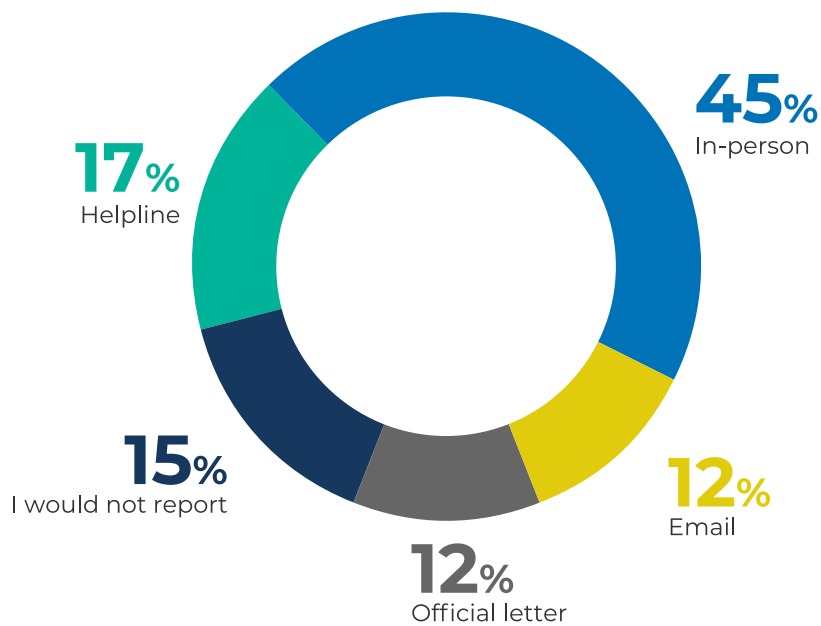


## To whom and how would they report?

AS and Refugees from SYR & other countries



Refugees from UKR







## 5. Livelihoods and basic needs

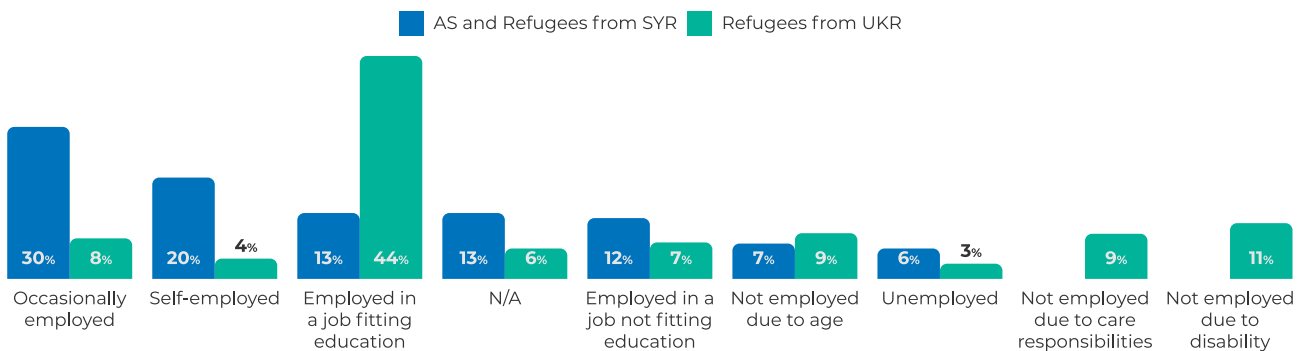
### Employment

Among the participants who replied to questions on employment, most said that they had been employed in jobs fitting their education and skills in their home countries before their displacement. There was a wide range of replies as to whether they were currently employed in Bulgaria. These ranged from a psychologist and two teachers who are working in their professions to others who have informal jobs that are unconnected to their qualifications, such as babysitting. Among the asylum-seekers, most were awaiting a decision on their international protection application, they did not yet have the right to work, or they did not know they could work.

“I learned from a Syrian woman at the camp that they were looking for an Arabic speaker at the call center, so I called them and went right over.”

Female Asylum Seeker

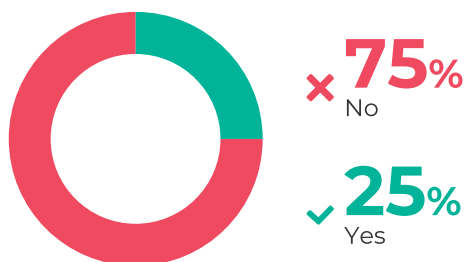
### To whom and how would they report?



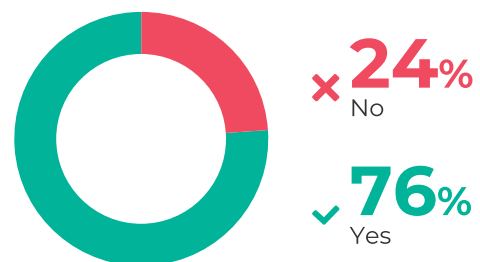
Many of the participants cited language as a major barrier to employment in Bulgaria, while Ukrainian refugees have an advantage in that as their native language has more affinity with Bulgarian. Among non-Ukrainian participants, one-quarter said they were currently enrolled in Bulgarian-language courses – including through Caritas Sofia, the INTEGRICO Centre and the Chervona Kalina women’s club – compared to more than three-quarters (76%) of Ukrainian refugees. Some refugees from both groups said they were not studying Bulgarian because there are no available courses in their areas or because of connectivity problems for online courses. In general, they certainly acknowledged the importance of knowing Bulgarian to manage their stay in the country successfully.

### Are they currently enrolled in a Bulgarian language course?

AS and Refugees from SYR & other countries

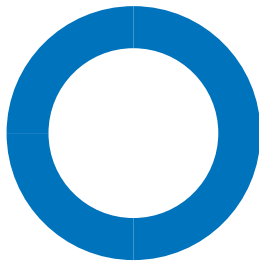


Refugees from UKR



### If no, what are the reasons?

AS and Refugees from SYR & other countries



**100%**  
Not available for them

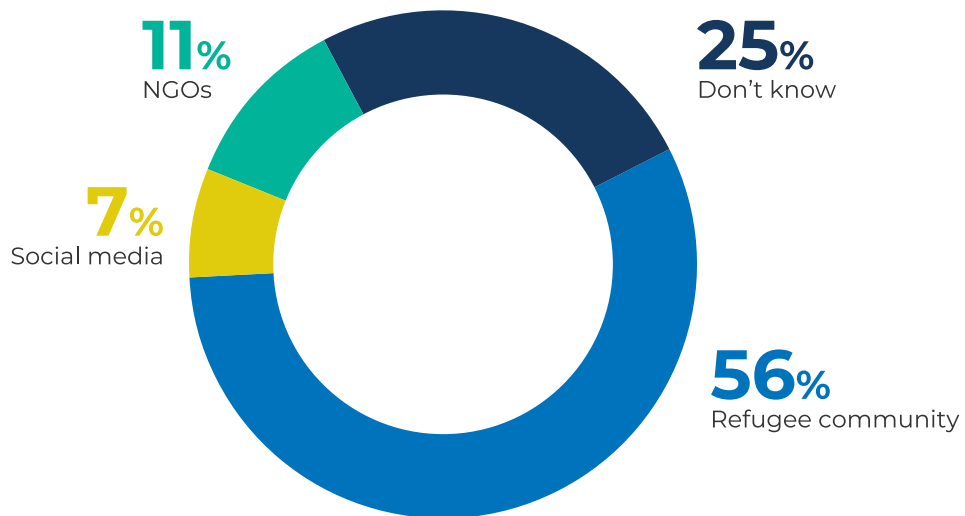
Refugees from UKR



**25%**  
No need  
**50%**  
Not available for them  
**25%**  
No connectivity

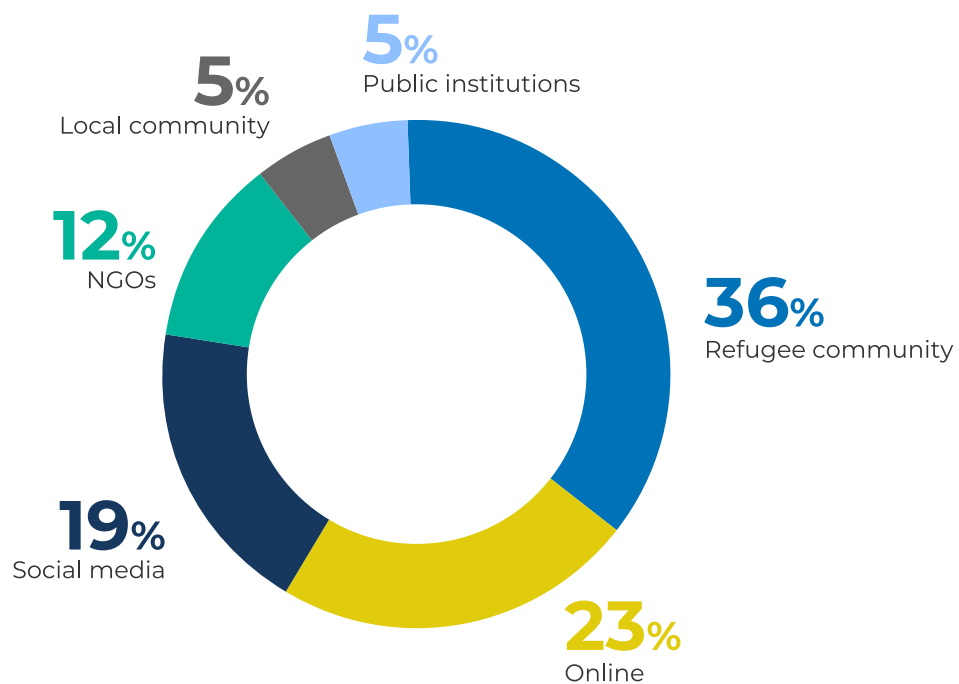
### To whom and how would they report?

AS and Refugees from SYR & other countries



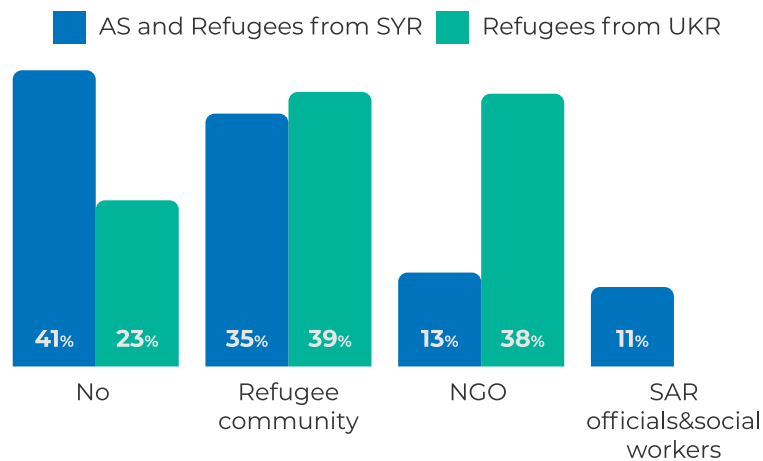
**11%**  
NGOs  
**7%**  
Social media  
**25%**  
Don't know  
**56%**  
Refugee community

Refugees from UKR



**5%**  
Local community  
**5%**  
Public institutions  
**12%**  
NGOs  
**19%**  
Social media  
**23%**  
Online  
**36%**  
Refugee community

## Did they get help from anyone to find jobs?



The main source of information about job opportunities for both groups is the refugee community itself and its social-media groups, following by online job sites and boards, NGOs, local communities, public institutions like the municipal and labor offices.

There was a mix of responses to the question of whether the refugees, have access to healthcare and social services in Bulgaria. Answers included that many do and that pensioners are also supported. But others replied that they have access to neither and must pay out of pocket for any medical treatment.

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“I am trying to find a job, I tried, and I found something but only for 1-2days.

Ghafour, Refugee from Syria

“Our higher-education diplomas are not recognized here in Bulgaria, which leads to especially younger specialists being unable to find good jobs that correspond to their level education and qualifications.”

Refugee from Ukraine

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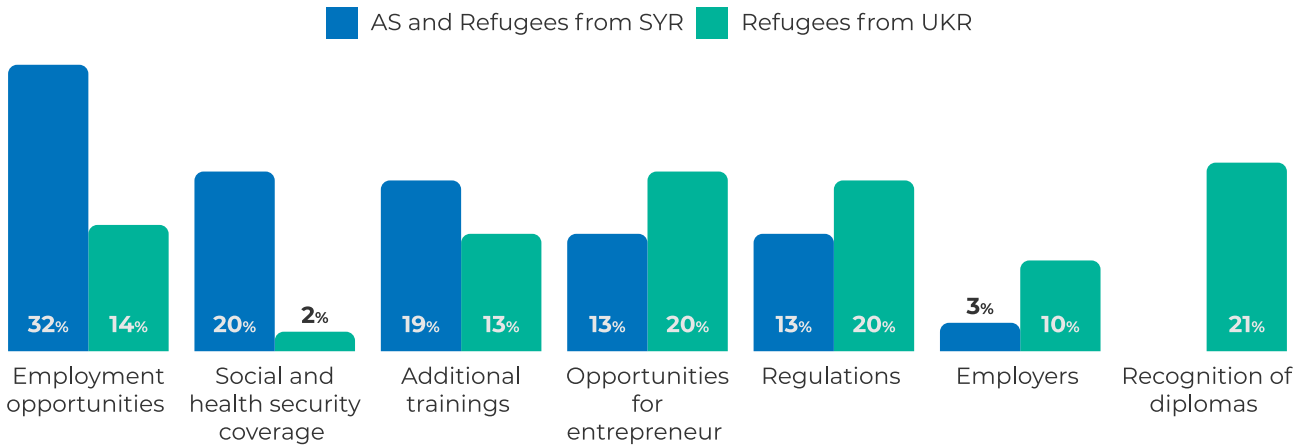
### Recommendations

The participants would like to know more about their rights in general, for example, job and training opportunities, about having their diplomas and qualifications recognized, opportunities for entrepreneurship, and about healthcare and social benefits that come with employment.

They needed more information and guidance about employment opportunities, access to tailored vocational training and free language courses available, and the recognition of their foreign qualifications and diplomas.

Young asylum-seekers were anxious for job opportunities and technical and vocational training while waiting in the reception centers, often without anything to do.

## What topics would they like to have more information in relation to employment in Bulgaria?

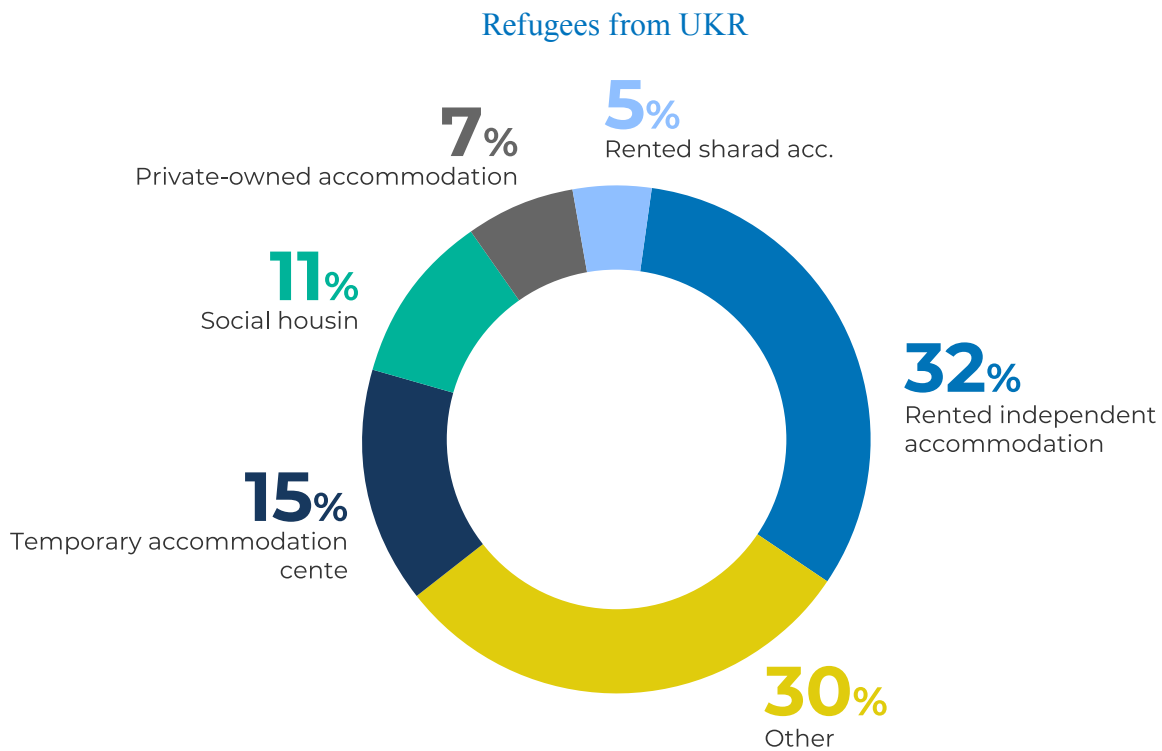


## Accommodation

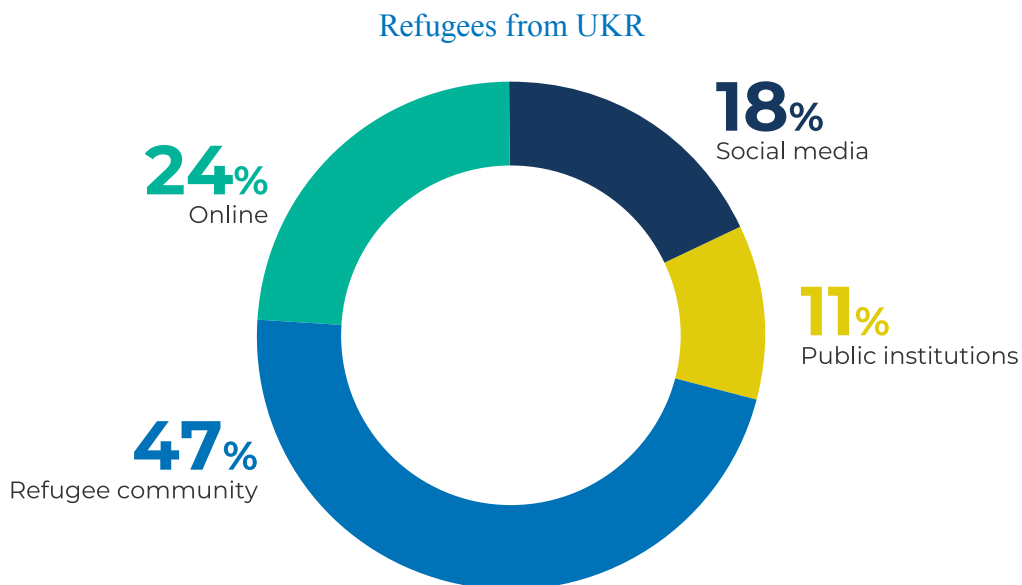
The participants listed a range of accommodation where they were currently living, including rented independent accommodation, a temporary accommodation center, social housing, shared rental accommodation, private accommodation, a government-funded hotel, and RRCs.

Regarding participants living outside of RRCs, they said that they typically found their accommodation through the refugee community and its social-media groups, online websites, and real estate agents. But, among the challenges finding accommodation, the participants cited high rents, discriminatory attitudes by landowners, language barriers, and a lack of information, documentation, and rental contracts.

## What kind of accommodation are they living in?

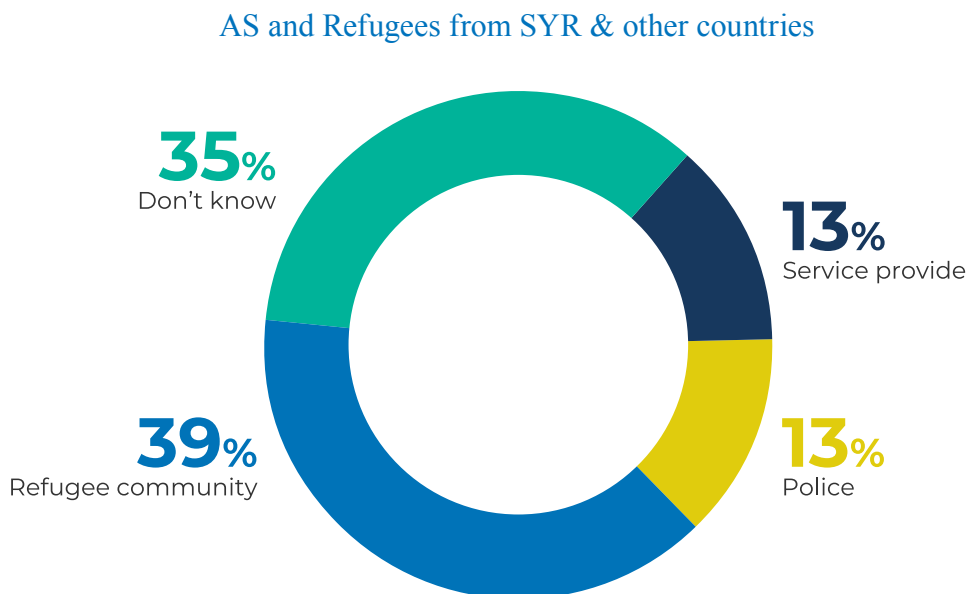


## How did they find the accommodation they are living in?

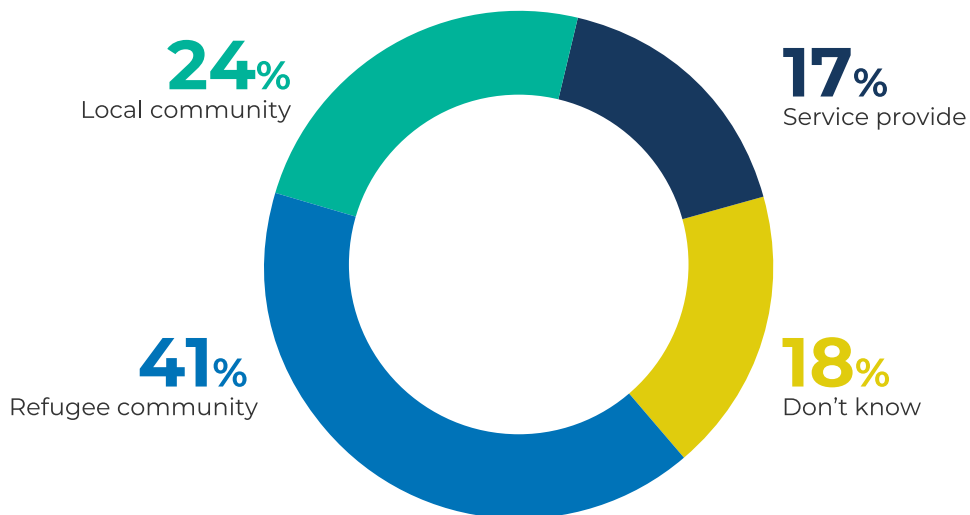


On the question as to whether the address on their ID card corresponds to their current address responses by the refugees from Ukraine were divided between yes and no. Some said they had not updated their addresses after moving because of the difficulty, distance and expense involved.

## Who to report complain about accommodation?



### Refugees from UKR



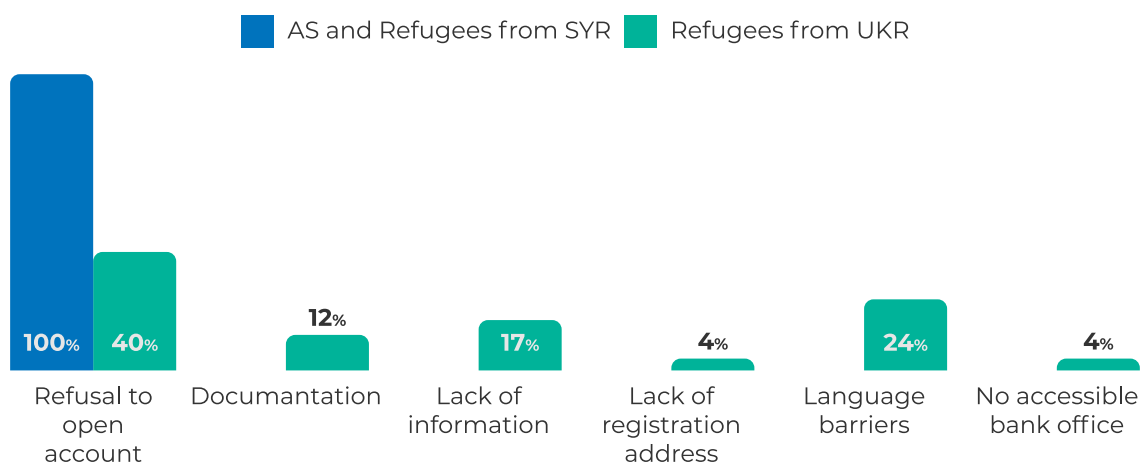
Participants living in RRCs appeared to be unsure who to approach with any complaints related to accommodation services. They did mention their own refugee communities or local communities or the service providers themselves. During the FGDs, for example, there was some criticism of the conditions at government-run centers, including bedbugs. But the refugees said they were reluctant to complain officially and are, rather, resigned to the situation.

### Financial inclusion

Most participants said that they were not able to open accounts with a Bulgarian bank. Some, especially refugees from Ukraine, who had bank accounts in Bulgaria described the process to open an account as a long and bureaucratic process, even after having their documentation in order and being employed. One Ukrainian refugee said it wasn't necessary to have a Bulgarian bank account because Ukrainian bank accounts can still be accessed in Bulgaria.

Some people said that some banks have simply refused to open accounts to refugees. One Ukrainian participant said it was easier in 2022, when only a TP registration card and Ukrainian passport were required – and that now the banks are requiring foreign identity numbers and work contracts, treating them as migrants rather than as refugees with rights.

### Challenges in opening bank account?





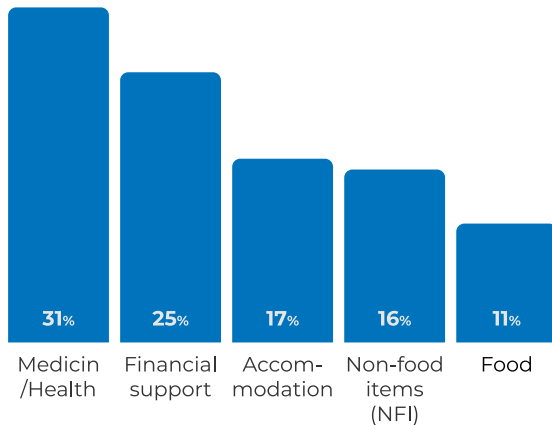


## 6. Social Assistance

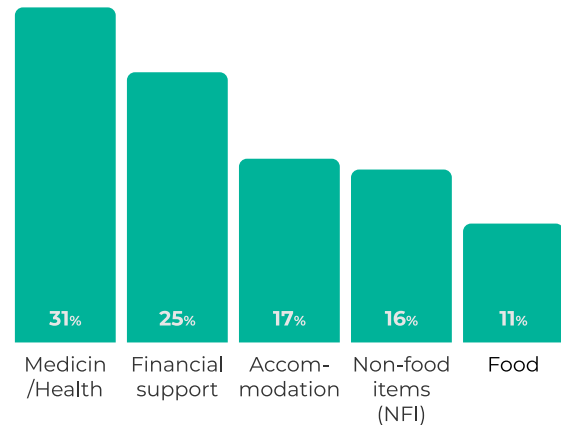
The participants received social assistance in terms of healthcare, financial assistance, accommodation, food, and non-food items (NFI). Most common sources of information on available assistance were refugee communities and social media sites (Facebook, Viber, and WhatsApp), NGOs, local communities, and UNHCR official channels – as well as the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy (MLSP) website.

### If no, what are the reasons?

AS and Refugees from SYR & other countries



Refugees from UKR



Both groups of Ukrainian refugees and asylum-seekers and refugees from Syria and other countries noted that groups such as single parents, people with disabilities, older people, unaccompanied children, and minorities typically require more assistance than others. They also highlighted the needs of families with multiple children. The participants noted that such vulnerable group can face additional challenges when it comes to obtaining information about available services, communicating in Bulgarian or other languages, accessing transportation, and possessing the necessary documents.

Concerning what difficulties mothers face in Bulgaria, obtaining access to a pediatrician, gaining access to childcare or a municipally run kindergarten or educational programs in general, and securing clothing, diapers, milk and even towels as well as basic financial support were among the most cited. The specific types of support mothers may need included improved access to healthcare, forms of social assistance, psycho-social support, legal assistance and counselling, and interpretation services.

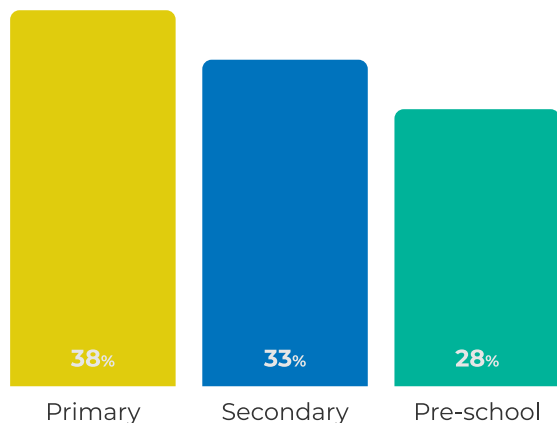


## 7. Child protection with a focus on education

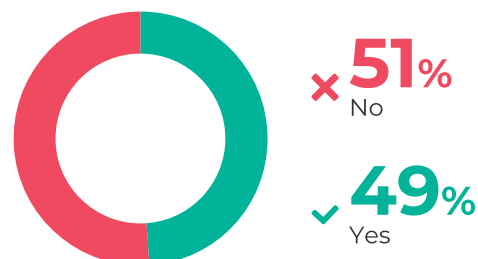
Most of the participants from Ukraine in the FGDs had children enrolled in a Bulgarian school – in a pre-school, primary or secondary school. Over half of participants had their children attend extra Bulgarian-language courses at their schools. Concerning what informal education opportunities are available to children outside of school, the participants mentioned online/distance learning (for Ukrainian Children), language courses, extracurricular activities provided by NGOs, and extracurricular activities offered by the state. There were less out-of-school educational opportunities available to refugee and asylum-seeking children from Syria and other countries.

## Refugees from UKR

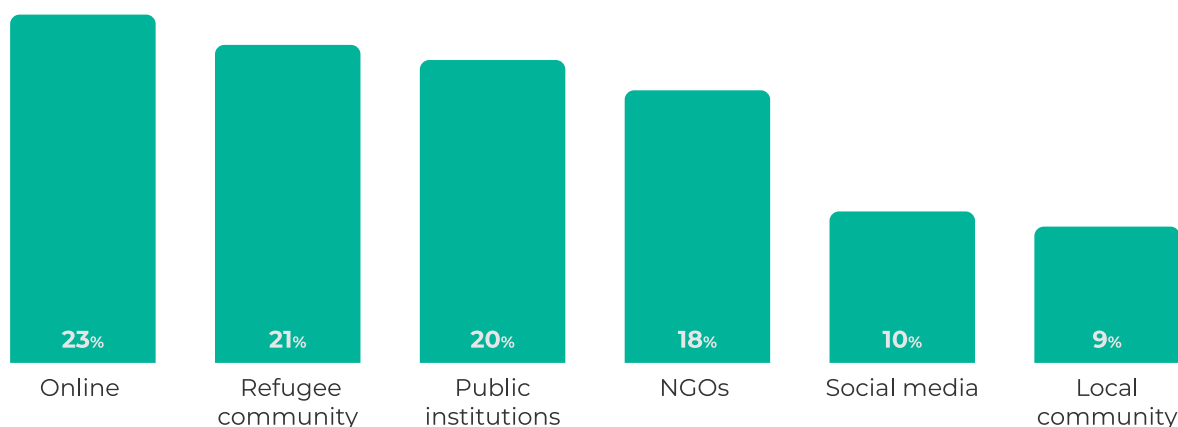
Are the participants' children enrolled in a Bulgarian school?



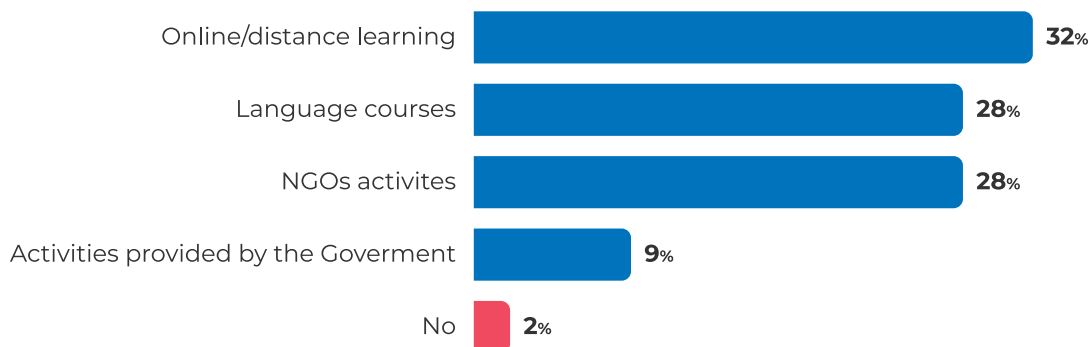
Do the children attend additional Bulgarian language classes at school?



How do they find information on education?



What non-formal education opportunities are available to the child?



Participants cited the language barrier as being the main reason their child or children were not attending a Bulgarian school. One group of Syrian refugees said that, while they had not known they could enroll their children in Bulgarian schools, language would likely make it difficult anyway. Other reasons shared included that the children from Ukraine are continuing their education in the Ukrainian system, lack of vaccinations to enroll their children in a school and a lack of information about enrolling or a lack of documentation. There were also families who did not want to send their children to a national school or who could not convince their children to continue to attend the school for reasons such as not understanding the classes, feeling isolated in the classes, or dropping out of school as a result of bullying by classmates. There were also concerns among Ukrainian parents that their children's education in Bulgaria may not be recognized back home in Ukraine.

“My children aren’t going to school because they are working – I’m really unhappy about that, but at the moment they’re forced by circumstances to work.”

-Fatima, Syrian refugee parent

## Children with disabilities

Several participants said that children with disabilities attend school in their community. They said that challenges such children can face attending school include a basic lack of accessibility, lack of specialized teachers, bullying by classmates. As a result, there was less willingness among the parents of children with disabilities expected to enroll.

### Recommendations

Among the possible solutions that the participants discussed were mental health and psycho-social support (MHPSS) for children traumatized by war, specialized services for children with disabilities and specific needs, and Bulgarian language courses for all children.

Access ramps for school buildings were also proposed, as were tutors or teaching assistants to work with the children. The parents of a child with autism were not aware of an autism center in Bulgaria or how they could access specialized assistance. If their communities had more resources, the refugees would invest in more support for the children – such as educational support, MHPSS and specialized support for those with disabilities.

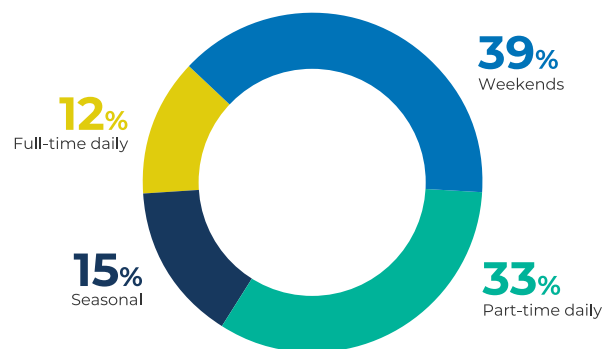
## Child Labor

### How many hours are the children working?

AS and Refugees from SYR & other countries

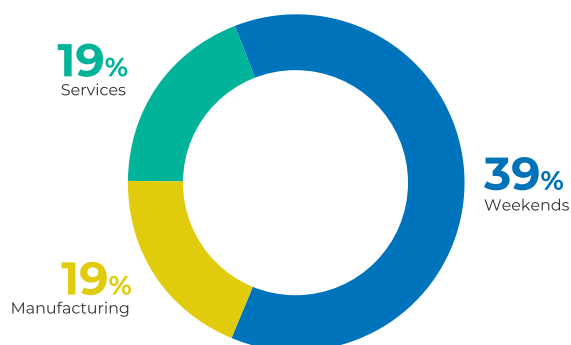


Refugees from UKR

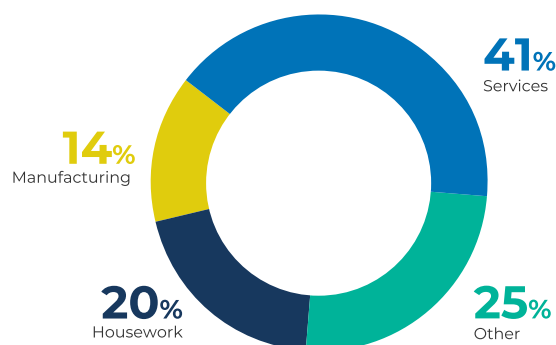


## What kind of work are children undertaking?

AS and Refugees from SYR & other countries



Refugees from UKR



About half of the participants shared that refugee children under the age of 18 were working in their communities. There was a significant difference between refugees from Ukraine and asylum seekers and refugees from Syria and other countries, with 36% of the parents in the second group saying that children are working full-time daily, compared to the 13% among Ukrainian refugees. Similarly, 33% of Ukrainian parents have children working part-time while this figure is 64% among others.

### Recommendations

The participants suggested that the risk of child labor could be mitigated through social assistance and benefits for children to continue their education and development. The families also needed support and counselling to support themselves without children's financial contributions as well as employment opportunities for the parents.



## 8. Health and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS)

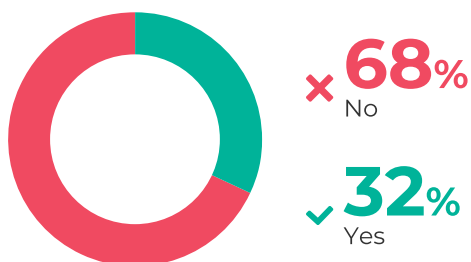
Asked who they turn to if they need medical services, refugees from Ukraine shared that it is their own general practitioner, the most-popular answer, closely followed by the hospital in their area or other medical facility, their family or refugee community. An outstanding finding was shared by refugees from Syria and other countries, that it is difficult accessing a medical doctor in the reception centers, as well as accessing specialists. Some participants for example shared that they had not been able to access to a dermatologist or dentist despite their needs.

“I haven't visited a doctor yet outside of the center because I wasn't in need of basic things. I can go to the doctor here.”

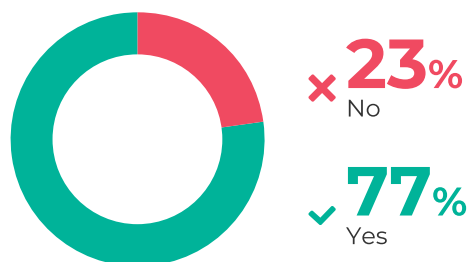
-Asylum Seeking man from Syria

## Do participants have health insurance?

AS and Refugees from SYR & other countries

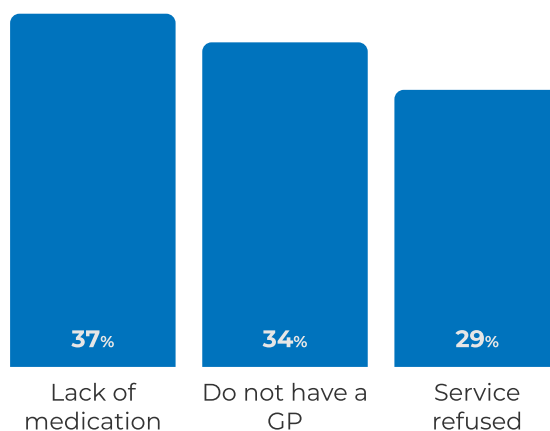


Refugees from UKR

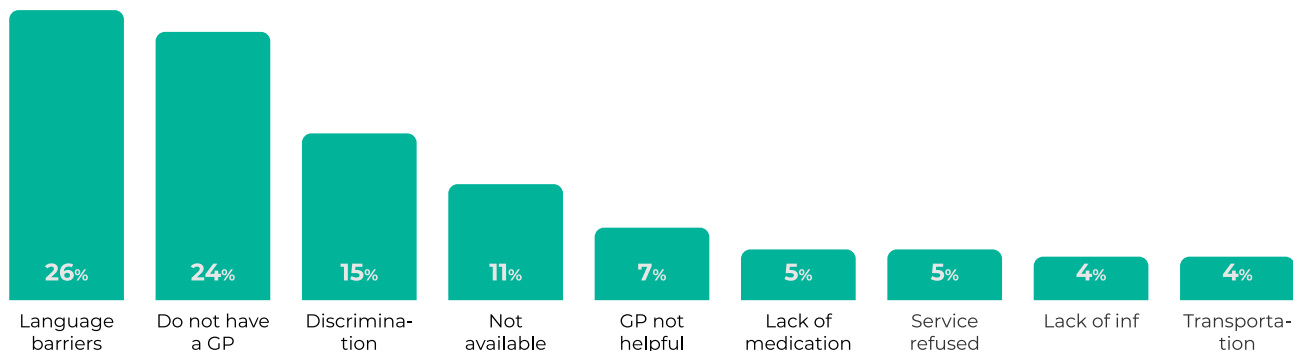


## Do participants have health insurance?

AS and Refugees from SYR & other countries



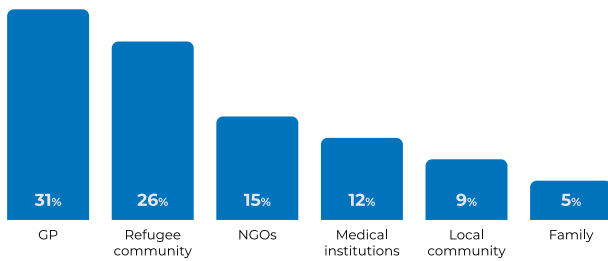
Refugees from UKR



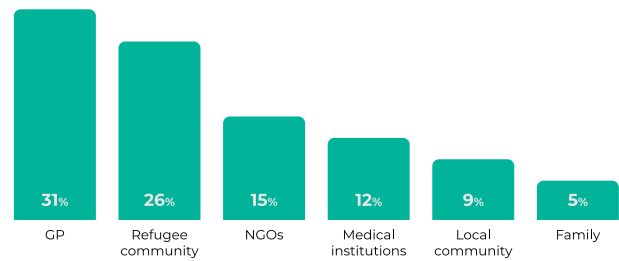
Refugees were also asked if they and their family members have access to medical services whenever they need. Only a few more than half answered yes. The reasons given for not having access to medical services included not having a GP assigned to them, travel costs, lack of information, and the language barrier. Refugees also shared that the GP was not helpful or the services poor or the facilities were not satisfactory. 15% among Ukrainian refugees felt that they faced discrimination in accessing health care. Among asylum seekers and refugees in the reception centers, accessing prescribed medication was a common issue.

## Where to find information when the children are sick?

AS and Refugees from SYR & other countries



Refugees from UKR



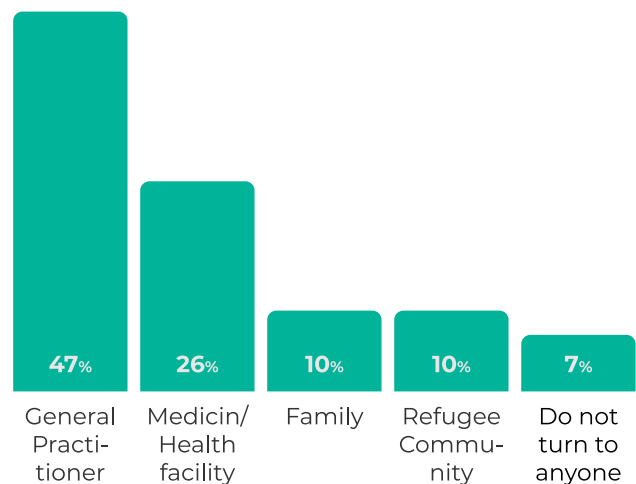
Concerning whether they have health insurance, there was again a significant difference between the responses of asylum seekers and refugees from third countries (32% said yes) and refugees from Ukraine (77% said yes, or more than twice as many). The reasons for lack of health insurance included a GP as not having been helpful or not having a GP, which also limits their access to other health services since they need reference from their GP to the specialist, lack of information on how to access health insurance, feeling of discrimination, language barriers. In general, challenges in accessing health care include not having a GP assigned to them, language barriers, lack of medicine, staff refusing to serve them, difficulties in travelling to medical facilities, medical staff not being helpful and lack of information about health care.

## In case they need medical services, to whom do they turn to?

AS and Refugees from SYR & other countries

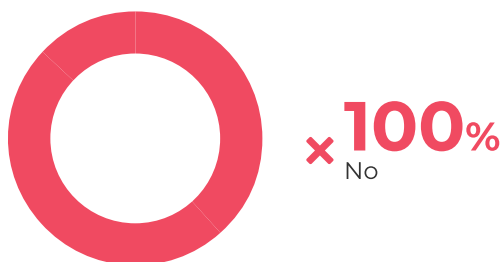


Refugees from UKR

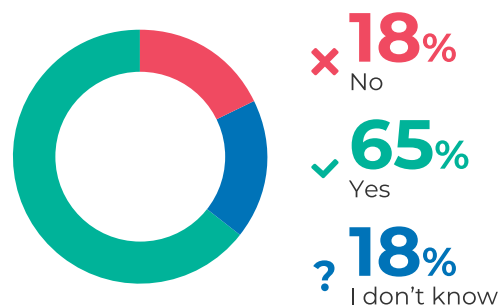


## Immediate access to health care, when needed

AS and Refugees from SYR & other countries



Refugees from UKR





Concerning information about services supporting mental health and wellbeing, the participants gave a wide range of responses. Some referred to mental health support being available through certain centers, such as INTEGRICO, NGOs or a hotline. Others said their efforts to ask about support were rebuffed. There were many asylum seekers and refugees who said that they must rely on themselves.



## 9. Establishing a Life in Bulgaria

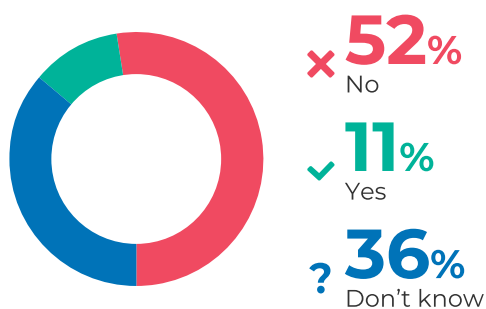
Whether the refugees remain in Bulgaria is, however, uncertain and depends on several factors. Overall, the participants in the FGDs were split on the question – whether they planned to stay, leave or were unsure. There was a significant contrast when the answers are taken separately for refugees from Ukraine and asylum-seekers and refugees from other countries. Among the asylum seekers and refugees from Syria and other countries, just over 10% (11.36%) said they planned to stay in Bulgaria over the longer term, more than half (52.27%) answered no and more than one-third (36.36%) were not sure. They emphasized that some of their most important considerations underlying their intentions to remain in Bulgaria or move onwards to other EU countries include ability to access employment, accommodation, social assistance, healthcare, and education - for themselves and their families.

That compares to the more than half (53%) of refugees from Ukraine who said they planned to stay in Bulgaria, with just 15% saying no and, again, about one-third (32%) being unsure. They cited access to accommodation followed by access to employment/self-employment as the two main factors in their decision-making.

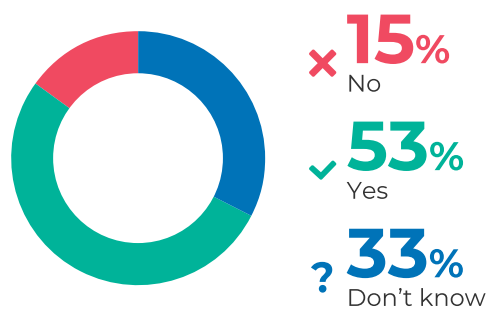
Meanwhile, both groups gave similar reasons why they might leave Bulgaria, including the perception that there are better job opportunities in another country, family reunification in another country and better health-care access elsewhere in the EU.

### Participants\* Intensions to remain in Bulgaria

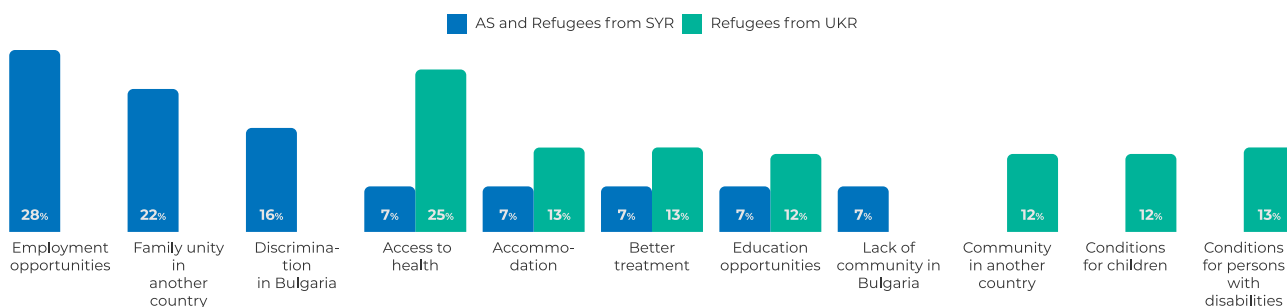
#### AS and Refugees from SYR & other countries



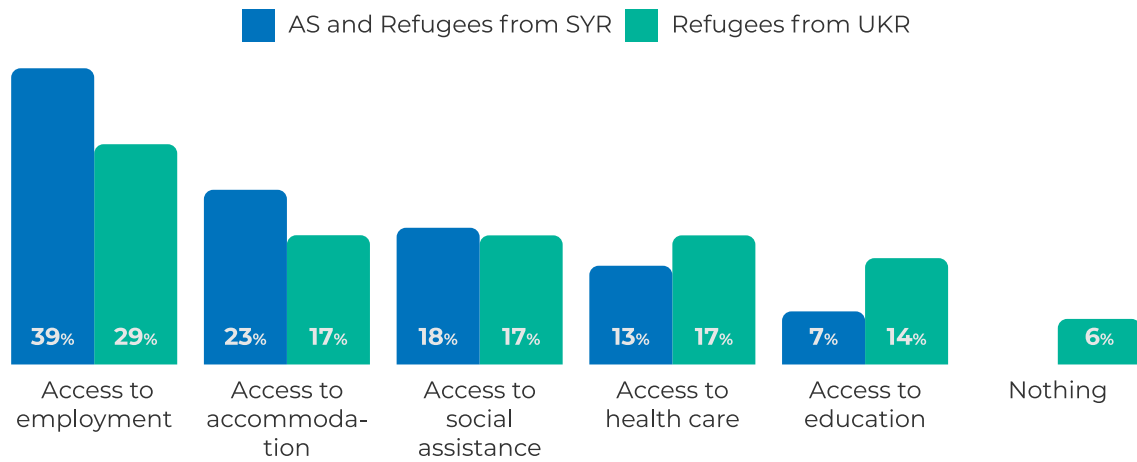
#### Refugees from UKR



### Factors, underlying intention to leave Bulgaria, compared to the factors the intended destination country



## Factors, affecting the decision to remain in Bulgaria



# Conclusion

The focus group discussions show that the Bulgarian authorities as well as UNHCR and its partners still have work to do to improve the country's asylum system and better serve those individuals and families under Bulgaria's protection. With the war in Ukraine continuing and violence ongoing in Syria and elsewhere, Bulgaria will continue to serve as a destination for refugees and asylum seekers. All the participants in the FGDs said they arrived in Bulgaria within the last two years, and many of them within the last year. But they also have different needs, with refugees indicating to be more likely to remain in Bulgaria.

