



Safer Havens



Better Protection for Refugees in Romania



IGMAP

Institute for
Genocide and
Mass Atrocity
Prevention



the auschwitz institute
for the prevention of genocide
and mass atrocities

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Executive Summary

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February of 2022 created an unprecedented crisis of forced displacement, with millions of Ukrainians crossing international borders to escape armed conflict and atrocity violence. Not a traditional refugee hosting country, Romania received hundreds of thousands of refugees, and was required to come up with a range of emergency humanitarian responses to cope with this sudden influx. A range of actors, including the Romanian national government, regional governments, international organizations including UNHCR and IOM, international NGOs, and Romanian civil society organizations were required to coordinate to provide emergency humanitarian services. Already at high risk

of sex and gender-based violence (SGBV) in Ukraine, the predominantly female displaced population of Ukrainian refugees also encountered elevated risks of identity-based violence, predominantly in the form of SGBV, once they reached the safe haven of Romania. The Romanian government's initial emergency response was largely gender-neutral, with no programming that responded to the specific risks faced by women and girls. However, within several months a range of policies and mechanisms were introduced that addressed concrete risks of SGBV, human trafficking, and exploitation. By the end of 2023 and during 2024, however, conditions changed markedly in Romania. The recognition of the protracted nature of the conflict in Ukraine prompted a general policy transition from emergency humanitarian response to long-term integration for refugees, a transition that has been exceptionally challenging with fading state involvement and support. International funding for integration policies has sharply fallen. Popular Romanian attitudes toward the influx of Ukrainian refugees, positive in the first months of the war, changed dramatically with rising levels of anti-immigrant and xenophobic public opinion, which were quickly seized on and amplified by many of Romania's political parties, and far-right parties in particular. These developments have contributed to increased risk and vulnerability for refugees, making the task of integration still more challenging. As the refugee crisis enters its fifth year, addressing and reducing SGBV risks for Ukrainian women has become more challenging and complex. Robust, responsible, and sustainable coordination with, and support for, Romania's civil society actors is the most promising route toward effective socio-economic integration of refugees together with policies that address and reduce the risk of SGBV, human trafficking, and other risks of identity-based violence.



Ukrainian families with luggage in Romania.
"MALTESER Ukrainehilfe" by Simu Radu Matei/
Malteser Romania, used under CC BY 2.0.

Introduction and Overview of the Safer Havens Project

The Auschwitz Institute for the Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities (AIPG) and the Institute for Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention (I-GMAP) at Binghamton University, the State University of New York, are collaboratively implementing the three-year “Safer Havens” project. This research, advocacy, and convening project was born out of the conviction that the work of addressing and reducing risk factors for mass atrocity crimes through cooperation between states and civil society organizations faces obstacles that significantly reduce effectiveness and chances for better outcomes. Consequently, the project brings state and civil society actors into a productive and sustainable dialogue, to identify better policies for the protection of displaced persons from all forms of identity-based violence in their host or transit countries. The project has two main goals: building and sustaining networks of actors across States and Civil Society in order to facilitate more productive dialogue and cooperation in preventing atrocities against displaced persons, and developing policy analyses and proposals, including concrete recommendations, for these actors to better protect displaced persons.

At the core of this project are three annual forums in 2023, 2024, and 2025 in Colombia, Kenya, and Romania, whose goal is to gather AIPG and I-GMAP staff and state and civil society representatives from countries showing significant obstacles, but also considerable promise, for state-CSO collaboration for protecting displaced persons. In advance of each meeting, I-GMAP conducts outreach and in-depth interviews with potential CSO partners, and issues invitations for representatives from CSOs to participate in each respective event. Each event generates a comprehensive, country-specific policy document with concrete recommendations for stakeholders and additional follow-up,

including coordination and support for post-forum collaborations. A final comprehensive policy document on better policies for the protection of displaced persons from identity-based violence, including a detailed roadmap for sustaining the networks of professional cooperation that have been established, will conclude the three-year project.

Following the inaugural workshop in Bogotá Colombia in 2023 and the second in Naivasha, Kenya in October 2024, the third and final workshop took place in Oradea, Romania in October 2025. Participants from Romanian government (at the national and municipal levels) and civil society, representatives of Ukrainian-led non-governmental organizations, and international organizations including UNHCR and IOM spent two days in open deliberation on a core number of questions: what are the core factors important for risks of identity-based violence for Ukrainian refugees in Romania? How have Romanian state and non-state actors responded to these risks? How could enhanced and improved coordination between actors make prevention-focused policies more effective?

UNHCR notes that the world has over [120 million forcibly displaced persons globally by mid-2026](#), double the number it had 10 years ago and a 10% rise since 2022. This figure includes 41.6 million refugees who have crossed international borders to escape severe forms of persecution, including atrocity violence. Of all refugees globally, 75% are hosted in low or middle-income countries while 70% are hosted in neighboring countries from their sending country.

The contexts and factors that forcibly displace populations are complex and varied, and we must be careful not to generalize. However, with such a huge number of human beings,

and with such a trend toward increase, we desperately need to know more, and better understand, what these different contexts of forced displacement have in common: what are the most significant factors that lead to forced displacement, what are the consistent risks that they face across the arc of displacement, and most important, whether we can identify shared sources of resilience, across as many actors and organizations as possible, to reduce these risks.

We are all familiar with the challenges of providing humanitarian assistance and access to housing and livelihood to displaced populations. We must also focus on the concrete risks of identity-based violence that come with the new, unwanted status as a displaced person. A crucial push factor for displacement is the threat or reality of mass atrocities: genocides, crimes against humanity, and war crimes, whether in the context of armed conflict or not. The majority of the world's forcibly displaced persons are

internally displaced; displacement across a national border currently makes up just under fifty million people. Refugees frequently cross borders to physically move themselves and their families away from the risk of atrocity violence. Displacement to a transit country or countries and a host country can often be effective in reducing this immediate risk. However, we know that the safe haven that displaced persons seek and frequently find in host countries is never perfect. Often, crossing an international border is in itself not enough to protect persons from atrocity violence. And displacement itself can, and frequently does, introduce new kinds of risk associated with persons' new status as displaced.

Without adequate access to food and shelter, health care and medicines, and means of income, whether in transit or in a hosting country, displaced populations are at a heightened risk for a spectrum of harms including murder and assault, sex and gender-based violence, robbery, kidnapping and human



Participants of the Safer Havens workshop in Oradea, Romania. Photo by I-GMAP.

trafficking, extortion, forced sex work, forced marriage, and forced recruitment into criminal organizations. Lack of timely and reliable information also places displaced persons at risk of violence when they must transit through areas experiencing armed conflict. In both transit and host countries, displaced persons also are at risk of xenophobic violence, harassment, and discrimination. The explosive rise of social media-driven misinformation and disinformation, usually for political gain, has sharply increased this risk over the past several years.

At AIPG and I-GMAP, we refer to this form of violence based on a person's belonging (or perceived belonging) to a social group as identity-based violence. It is this form of violence that our project focuses on, often less visible than the large-scale atrocity violence that so often drives people to leave their homes.

If we are able to identify sources that drive the risks of identity-based violence directed at displaced populations that are common across different displacement contexts, we will also be better able to act in concert, proactively, to address these risks “upstream,” before they result in loss of life, safety, health, and hope.

We can also share ideas, experiences, and strategies for identifying common sources of resilience. We can identify unused, or under-used resources, engage new actors, and foster more efficient forms of cooperation and collaboration amongst societies coping with large influxes of forcibly displaced persons.

In this way, we can contribute to the transition from a “protection-based” model, one that is essentially reactive, to a proactive “prevention-based” model that will be flexible enough to contribute effectively to different country contexts.



“Ukrainian refugees offered meals, clothes, shelter in Kraków” by Silar, used under CC by 4.0

Background

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 triggered [the largest refugee crisis in Europe since the Second World War](#). Along with assaults by Russian ground troops, artillery bombardment, and other forms of military attacks, Ukrainian civilians also suffered severe and widespread atrocities by Russian military personnel. In the weeks following the initial invasion, millions of Ukrainian civilians fled their homes: some 3.7 million civilians were internally displaced, fleeing fighting (predominantly in the eastern Donbas region) to safer areas of Ukraine. Since the beginning of the armed conflict, [nearly 7 million people](#) crossed international borders as refugees. This massive and rapid exodus has constituted a profound test of Europe's complex refugee and labor policies, with significant implications for risks of identity-based violence for refugees and other migrants. Romania's refugee policy responses, both successful and less than successful, are part of this broader continental crisis. But in many crucial respects they are distinctively different from Romania's neighbors in Eastern and Central Europe. Understanding this distinctive national context is crucial to evaluating Romania's overall policy response, and its protection approaches in particular.

Romania's contemporary approach to migration cannot be separated from its broader historical and social context. The country's twentieth-century experience was marked by authoritarianism, political violence, forced displacement, and identity-based persecution, from the Holocaust under the Antonescu regime to the repressive practices of the communist dictatorship. Although these histories have been addressed over the past decades through scholarly and institutional efforts, public reckoning with the traumatic past has remained partial and uneven. This has contributed to a fragile culture of memory,

in which past forms of exclusion are not always connected to present-day debates about vulnerability, discrimination, and social protection.

For much of the post-1989 period, migration in Romania was discussed primarily through the lens of Romanian emigration. Public debate focused on the departure of skilled professionals, the social consequences of labor migration for families and communities (particularly the growing number of children left behind by migrant parents), and the image of Romanian migrants abroad. By contrast, immigration attracted relatively little attention and remained largely absent from public and policy debates. The European refugee crisis of 2015–2016 brought migration more visibly into the Romanian public sphere, but often through narratives imported from other European contexts rather than through direct domestic experience.

This changed significantly after 2022, with the arrival of Ukrainian refugees and the growing presence of economic migrants, particularly from South and Southeast Asia. These developments mark a structural shift: Romania is increasingly moving from being mainly a country of emigration and transit toward becoming a destination country. As a result, migration is no longer an abstract or external issue, but a concrete social, political, and institutional challenge.^[1]

This shift creates risks for migrants when it overlaps with weak public services and a [widespread lack of public trust in governance and state institutions](#).^[2] In communities where citizens already experience difficulties accessing housing, healthcare, social assistance, or decent employment conditions, migrants and refugees can be framed as competitors

for scarce resources. The risk is not that migrants objectively cause these shortages, but that existing institutional failures can be redirected politically against newcomers. This is particularly relevant in Romania because integration support remains heavily dependent on NGOs and EU-funded projects, and private actors, while beneficiaries of international protection continue to face both formal barriers and practical difficulties in accessing housing, employment, and specialized support.

Economic migrants face a distinct but connected set of [risks linked to labor market dependency](#). Romania's labor shortages have led to a sustained reliance on third-country nationals, especially in sectors such as construction, retail, hospitality, services, transport, and logistics. This creates concrete risks of exploitation: unpaid or delayed wages, excessive working hours, poor housing, misinformation about contracts, recruitment debt, dependency on employers for legal status, and reluctance to report abuse.

Refugees from Ukraine face different vulnerabilities. As humanitarian solidarity slows down and support needs continue over time, refugees may become more vulnerable to narratives portraying them as permanent beneficiaries of state or international assistance. The risk increases when public communication does not clearly explain the legal basis, scale,

and limits of support, or when refugees are rhetorically opposed to Romanian citizens facing poverty or inadequate services.

After a long period in which migration remained relatively marginal in Romania's public debate, narratives about migrants and refugees have increasingly begun to follow broader European patterns. Migrants may be portrayed alternatively as threats to jobs, public services, security, or cultural identity; as victims of war, poverty, trafficking, or exploitation; or as contributors to economic development and social diversity. At present, positions within Romanian society do not yet appear to be firmly entrenched, and anti-migrant polarization remains less pronounced than in several other European contexts. However, this very fluidity makes the debate vulnerable to capture by auto-declared anti-system political actors, who may instrumentalize economic anxieties, social insecurity, declining trust in institutions, and broader geopolitical uncertainty to normalize nationalist, xenophobic, or explicitly anti-migration messages. From a preventive perspective, the main risk lies not only in the existence of negative attitudes towards migrants, but in the possibility that such attitudes may be politically articulated, amplified through media discourse, and gradually transformed into a dominant interpretive framework for understanding migration.

Risks of Identity-Based Violence

The gender demographics of forcibly displaced Ukrainians is noteworthy. With most men of military age required to remain in the country during the opening months of the invasion, flows of refugees across Ukraine's borders were predominantly composed of younger women and minors in 2022 and 2023, with women [making up over 80% of refugees](#). While that gender imbalance has become less severe over the four years of the war, as of mid-2026 women make up roughly half of all Ukrainian refugees in Romania, with children constituting roughly thirty percent, and adult men at approximately twenty per cent. Therefore, it is imperative to understand the significance of the demographic of younger women who are solely responsible for the care of their young children when describing the intersectional risk profile of refugees.

Especially in light of their demographic composition, the primary risks for experiencing identity-based violence by Ukrainian refugees concentrate on the spectrum of Sex and Gender Based Violence and human trafficking. Recognized risks of SGBV for displaced populations are particularly relevant in the context of Ukraine. For those escaping areas of eastern Ukraine occupied by Russian troops, widespread grave breaches of humanitarian law by Russian invading forces have included [numerous instances of rape and sexual assault](#), and evidence supports the [claim that rape has been systematically employed by Russian forces as a weapon of war](#). Sexual violence has been committed against both women and men. While under-reporting is widespread and reliable data are scarce, it is evident that many Ukrainian women (and some Ukrainian men) arrived in Romania having already experienced some (or multiple) forms of SGBV including rape and sexual assault, persecution, and harassment.[\[3\]](#)

In the initial surge of border crossing in the weeks following the outbreak of war, Ukrainian women, including women accompanied by their small children, [experienced elevated levels of vulnerability](#) to sexual harassment, sexual assaults, and [false offers of help](#), including housing and transportation and increased risks of [human trafficking](#). Once registered and eligible for services and other forms of assistance, [most refugees \(roughly 85%\) are housed in private accommodations](#), with the remainder residing in state-run refugee accommodation centers (RACs).[\[4\]](#) For this majority housed in private rentals, access to services and direct interface with government and NGO service providers can be more difficult than for the small minority housed in RACs.[\[5\]](#)

Female refugees encounter a spectrum of SGBV-related risks in their public life in Romania. Risks include harassment and [targeting](#) while using public transportation, while seeking accommodation or dealing with landlords, exploitation or harassment in their workplace, online violence including cyber-stalking and various forms of online harassment. Private accommodation is also a persistent source of risk, given the potential for control and manipulation of private landlords. Workplace sexual harassment ([which is frequent in Romania overall](#)) remains a concern given the leverage that employers hold over vulnerable female Ukrainian employees.[\[6\]](#)

According to a [recent \(2026\) survey](#) conducted by FRA (European Agency for Fundamental Rights), over 25 per cent of all female Ukrainian refugees in Europe have experienced some form of physical and/or sexual violence since the beginning of the Russian invasion. This is a very significant (in some cases six times higher) increase from a baseline SGBV risk of

women in European hosting countries overall. The survey indicates that the majority of these victims of SGBV suffered violence in Ukraine, and nearly half of those reporting were victims of intimate partner violence. However, even taking this complex picture into account, risks

for women in hosting countries remain elevated. Ten per cent of Ukrainian women surveyed said that they do not feel physically secure in their current housing situation. Roughly 25% report receiving potentially exploitative offers for work, housing, or transport.^[7]



Ukrainian refugees at a Lviv railway station waiting for trains to escape to Europe.
Ruslan Lytvyan/Shutterstock.com

Romanian Responses: Successes and Shortcomings

As a member of the European Union, Romania could take advantage of substantial economic and logistical support to cope with the massive influx of Ukrainian refugees. The most visible form of that support was the EU's decision to activate its [Temporary Protection Directive](#), which the EU mobilized for the first time [in response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis in late February 2022](#), only days after the Russian invasion. The TPD [waived a range of legal restrictions](#) for entry into EU countries, allowing Ukrainians legal residence in any EU country for the duration of the protection period, access to labor markets, social and financial support to assist with housing, and free access to medical care, and education for minors.

However, the initial emergency response, including the operationalization of the EU TPD, were largely gender-neutral, in the sense that policies and service tools took into explicit account neither the overwhelmingly gendered (female) demographic of the first waves of incoming refugees, nor the specific needs for services and protections that this demographic might have recommended.^[8] Among the specific needs that were initially either unaddressed or under-addressed included the need for childcare given the overwhelming number of female refugees travelling alone with their young children. Moreover, the specific forms of vulnerability, specifically SGBV and human trafficking risks, that these refugees encountered from their initial entry into the country and in the process of securing housing, registering for services, and looking for work were not adequately reflected in this largely gender-neutral policy stance.

This initial approach, based on a principle of fully equal access to all services, was effectively gender-neutral in the sense that it did not deliberately respond to the heavily gendered demographics of the initial refugee surge.

Over the course of the first year of the refugee crisis, this was gradually replaced by a more gender-informed approach.^[9] Within months of the invasion, in June of 2022, a National Plan of Measures, an annually updated [national refugee action plan](#), outlined concrete policy priorities specifically designed to receive, register, and provide a range of humanitarian services to refugees.^[10] The National Action Plan began the process of explicitly including gender-based protections along with other forms of service provision.

Romanian citizens, organized into civil society groups or individually, exhibited exceptional solidarity in mobilizing to welcome and assist the thousands of Ukrainians fleeing armed conflict who appeared at their border. In the chaotic first days of Ukrainian flight, established reception centers at borders were supplemented by mobile centers to accommodate, greet, help and register refugees. Volunteers were essential in providing emergency services, especially transportation and shelter. A 2023 analysis of this multi-stakeholder response describes it as composed both of state actors and “a vast array of volunteers and private citizens getting involved.”^[11]

Even more notable was the considerable flexibility that Romania's national government demonstrated in its willingness to coordinate with relevant civil society actors and organizations to manage its emergency response in the Spring of 2022. The government spearheaded the formation of a rapid response mechanism that coordinated humanitarian aid provision, registration, transport, and security across multiple state, international, and non-state actors. It created digital platforms that allowed Ukrainian refugees and NGOs to track which agency provided which services, where, and with what procedures, reducing duplication of services and improving access to services by

providing refugees with actionable real-time information, and advocating for a more refugee-centered approach at the local level.^[12]

The national government frequently waived lengthy and cumbersome administrative requirements in collaborating with well-positioned non-governmental organizations in order to speed service delivery and reduce administrative costs and delays. The government was effective at securing joint funding agreements and setting up coordinated funding pipelines that eased the path for increased EU emergency funding as well. National border police have [won praise](#) for establishing effective and dignified contact procedures with entering Ukrainian refugees, setting the tone for other state actors. The establishment of a dedicated coordinator in the office of the Prime Minister signaled strong political commitment; visible national leadership accelerated decision-making processes and boosted stakeholder confidence. Romania's Regional Refugee Response plan, with annual updates and in coordination with other CEE countries, included working groups enabling state authorities to receive vital technical assistance from UNHCR and regional and national civil society organizations.

Coordination between national and local governments and civil society organizations was also central in responding to risks of identity-based violence directed at the influx of Ukrainian refugees, in particular risks of SGBV and human trafficking directed at the predominantly female refugee population. Even where a host country mobilizes to welcome an unexpected influx of displaced persons, irregular conditions can generate risks. Offers of emergency housing, rides to different parts of the country, or other forms of on-the-spot assistance by unregistered citizens can create ideal conditions for predatory

actors. Even well-intentioned volunteers often had minimal or no training for best practices in responding to traumatized persons or important safeguards and security guarantees. Social media platforms were quick to post massive amounts of information for refugees in transit, but the reliability of this information was uneven and notoriously difficult to monitor or correct. "While mostly driven by the best intentions," write Brass, Moy and Iwasa, "such initiatives – and more generally, the online space – have provided a fertile ground for criminals and offenders to prey on vulnerable people, especially as those platforms have minimal to non-existent content moderation and reporting features."

In response to the risks generated by this broad-based social response, government integrated anti-SGBV and anti-human trafficking measures into its initial action plan: only two weeks post-invasion, all Romanians volunteering at high-volume border crossing sites were required to register with officials, who also checked the documentation of any Ukrainians who left the initial reception stations with them, to ensure that Ukrainians were leaving with fully informed voluntary consent. As scholars Incaltaru and Mocernac write, "[t]his measure was an effort to monitor and curtail potential trafficking or exploitation situations, ensuring that everyone entering the country did so under genuine and safe circumstances."^[13]

The coordination across different sectors and with both state and non-state actors, then, was a notable success in Romania's initial national response to the humanitarian emergency at its borders beginning in the late winter of 2022. This success included proactive and largely effective state/civil society cooperation targeting risks of identity-based violence against Ukrainians, in particular risks of SGBV and human trafficking.



Participants listen to an I-GMAP facilitator at the Safer Havens workshop in Oradea, Romania. Photo by I-GMAP.

However, as armed conflict in Ukraine continued into its third and now fourth years, this initial success began to encounter significant challenges, which have in the meantime unfortunately reversed a substantial amount of the progress that was made in protecting Ukrainians from identity-based violence.

By early 2024, it had become clear that a protracted war would make safe and dignified return of refugees to Ukraine difficult if not impossible. As a result, a general need arose to shift the goals of refugee policies from short-term emergency humanitarian services and protection to long-term socio-economic integration. [This is a notoriously difficult transition for governments, international organizations,](#) and dedicated civil society partners to manage successfully. Policies and actors aligned for immediate, crisis-based service provision and physical protection do not necessarily translate easily, or at all, to the very different set of challenges of long-term, potentially permanent integration of refugees. Organizations specializing in emergency service provision are, generally, very distinct from those focusing on labor and education, long-term quality housing and health care, language instruction, financial services,

professional credentialling, and so on. Funding cycles, needs, and sources for these two policy goals are usually very distinct, threatening the continuity of even successful programming. Economic integration of refugees frequently focuses on [short-term, low-wage employment](#), running into friction especially when, as in Ukraine, many refugees are professionals.

Even powerful emergency responses such as the EU Temporary Protection Directive, which was undoubtedly successful in the first months of the crisis, can become highly problematic in an integration policy framework, since its effect is to create strong forms of economic and practical dependency for refugees while assigning them [a status tantamount to legal and political limbo in their host country](#) makes the move toward full legal and political integration more challenging.

Integration policies also encountered frictions that were specific to the Ukrainian situation. Language barriers have proven a durable obstacle. In contrast to other Slavic language-speaking countries such as Poland, for example, Ukrainian and Romanian languages are entirely mutually unintelligible. While an older generation might still have found a common mode of communication in Russian, this was

a highly problematic option even for the very few of the younger Russian-speaking Ukrainian refugees. Ukrainian-speaking Romanians filling emergency response roles were exceptionally rare. Most refugees and Romanian responders were required to draw on their English-language skills. The thousands of Ukrainian mothers who entered Romania with their young children had to make difficult decisions about whether, when, or how much to introduce their children to Romanian schools and language. Access to services and crucial information was made much more costly and ineffective by the absence of a lingua franca.^[14] Meanwhile, Romanian efforts to provide quality and affordable Romanian language training to refugees were modest at best, plagued by under-funding, inconsistency across regions, and cumbersome registration requirements. Language barriers directly bear on both the perception and the reality of women's safety in the face of risks of identity-based violence.^[15]

Another feature of the complex transition from emergency aid to integration was the Romanian government's decisions to make continued access to services and financial assistance conditional on a number of requirements. By May of 2023, for example, Ukrainians had to document that their school-aged children were enrolled in Romanian schools, that they themselves were either employed or participating in job-training and job-placement programs, that they had opened a Romanian bank account, proof of permanent residence, and more, adding still more to the difficulties in understanding, accessing, and meeting bureaucratic requirements for services as well as for information on physical security for themselves.

Further, the distinctive situation of Ukrainians taking refuge in countries on Ukraine's western border such as Romania, Poland and Moldova,

combined with the deep uncertainties about how and when armed conflict in eastern Ukraine would finally cease, made possible temporary or pendular visits by refugees to family (especially husbands), friends and property in Ukraine to a degree that is unusual for conflict-displaced persons.^[16]

Ongoing reductions in funding, especially from donor states in the global North such as the United States and the United Kingdom, exacerbated all of these challenges in transitioning to long-term integration. The result, overall, is that the integration initiative is largely stalled. Many observers have noted a significant gap between Ukrainian "integration on paper" and realities on the ground. Refugees thus find themselves in a classic "waiting dilemma:" a chronic logistical and psychological limbo for refugees as costs for permanent integration rise, discouraging the kind of substantial investments and commitments in a new society that full social and economic integration demands while simultaneously prospects for returning home remain tantalizingly just out of reach given the military stalemate on the battlefield.^[17]

If the pivot from emergency response to long-term integration has been rocky, this is also strongly reflected in the background conditions that refugees must navigate: prevailing social attitudes and political realities in Romania itself. The initial enthusiasm and solidarity on the part of regular citizens began to wane as early as 2024, once it became clear that Ukrainian refugees would not be able to make a permanent return to their homes in the foreseeable future. As scholars Kaima et. al. have explored, a pivot "from compassion to controversy," both in popular attitudes and in state policy response took place in Romania roughly at this time,^[18] as emergency humanitarian response transitioned to longer-term efforts toward

social and economic integration of displaced Ukrainians on an indefinite or permanent basis.

Along with these factors, many of the significant challenges in moving from emergency humanitarian aid provision toward long-term integration arise from the very successes of Romania's initial response, including the state-civil society coordination that made those successes possible. Despite early national plans, Romania lacks a coherent, comprehensive, and operationally ready refugee integration strategy that lays out the terms of state/NGO cooperation in detail. National funding commitments needed to secure long-term resilience and continuity of programs have dwindled even as formerly reliable international donors have dramatically scaled back their support. This has had the (perhaps largely unintended) effect of shifting more and more responsibility for funding, implementation and assessment to civil society partners, even as the capacity for coordination between government and civil society organizations begins to fray. The result is that NGOs increasingly have to step in to assume core state functions, with the accompanying risks of uneven service delivery across regions and shortcomings in monitoring, assessment and learning.

Shortcomings in state capacities for data collection and data analysis, under-reporting, and limited state capacity across different regions shift data collection to international organizations such as UNHCR and IOM and national or international NGOs. Romania lacks a unified, reliable system for collecting and analyzing data on refugees, especially 'soft' indicators such as discrimination, harassment, labor exploitation, and community tensions, and although large-scale assessments like UNHCR's Multi Sector Needs Assessment and Socio-economic Insights Survey gather demographic and service access information, they explicitly

note major gaps in protection-related reporting due to inconsistent data collection, under-reporting, and limited coverage across regions. Frontline government staffers are often poorly trained in asylum procedures and refugee rights, leading to inconsistencies and lack of predictability. Romania has not fully domesticated EU rules and minimum standards, which leads to further implementation gaps especially regarding reception conditions and procedures, access to legal aid, and more.

These headwinds against a successful pivot from emergency response to integration have been substantially worsened by a dramatic shift in popular attitudes toward immigrants in general, including refugees from Romania, since 2024. That negative shift from solidarity to resentment and suspicion has driven (and has been made immeasurably worse by) the capture of migration and refugee issues by Romania's rising far-right political parties, which have been highly successful in making anti-foreigner resentment a potent national political issue.

According to UNHCR, incidents targeting refugees for harassment have become so frequent that a full 40% of the agency's work now goes to addressing xenophobia and discrimination instead of humanitarian service provision. In Bucharest, Romania's capital city, municipal government integration policies have sparked widespread public protests, online hate speech as well as attacks against refugees.

Romania's controversial national elections in 2024 saw this weaponization of migration issues reach a crucial inflection point. The far-right party Alliance for Romanians, led by George Simion, made the elimination of support for Ukrainian refugees a [prominent part of its party](#) platform in national elections. At the same time, faced with by stalled integration,



Small group discussions were an integral component of the Safer Havens workshop in Oradea, Romania. Photo by I-GMAP.

financial stress, loneliness, and concern for their young children, more and more Ukrainians appear to be abandoning the prospect of long-term integration in Romania, often deciding to relocate to other EU countries or even [returning to Ukraine](#), despite the ongoing grave risks to their physical security.

There is nothing surprising, or distinct to Romania, about refugee-related “compassion fatigue.”^[19] In fact, the 24-month span between the initial refugee surge and the change of popular attitudes towards refugees is, if anything, [relatively long](#). But in the Romanian context this pivot combines with structural, economic, and administrative obstacles to integration, with the overall effect that Romania’s initial successes specifically in protecting Ukrainian women refugees from recognized risks of identity-based violence (SGBV and human trafficking) are at serious risk of being undermined and, possibly, reversed.^[20] As the authors of the [VOICE/HIAS study of SGBV](#) risks write, “The Romanian

Government’s policy shift from emergency relief to integration of refugees has brought additional challenges and risks for women and girls displaced to Romania by the war in Ukraine. The second phase of the government’s aid program for Ukrainian refugees is still unclear, and refugees are having difficulty accessing timely information about the program and how to apply for support.”^[21]

An illustrative example is a program created and funded by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) creating safe spaces for women and girls in several Romanian cities. This Women and Girls Safe Spaces initiative also created a physical space for service delivery including contraceptive and reproductive health care, perinatal care, and domestic violence counseling. These safe spaces also became important sources of other forms of information and advising for Ukrainian women, with frequent meetings to discuss issues relating to women’s healthcare, rights, and access to services in Ukrainian language.

As a [UNFPA report](#) describes, the Safe Spaces program provided Ukrainian women and girls “a rare opportunity to ask questions in a private and supportive environment and to receive answers translated back to them in their own language.”

“The lobby of the Braşov Safe Space was transformed into a health care coordination, triage and treatment center, with reception tables for women to register and group trips organized every day for medical consultations. Each patient was assigned a translator who was trained to communicate their health needs while ensuring their privacy. At the doctor’s office, the patient would receive immediate care, medical prescriptions or be referred for specialist treatment. For Ukrainians, this offered a streamlined system that took into account their language and cultural sensitivities. At the same time, it helped to ease the pressure on Romania’s public hospitals, which were not equipped at the beginning of the refugee crisis to handle such a rapid influx of Ukrainian patients.”

And yet the Women and Girls Safe Space project – whose sustainability over time would have been a key priority in the pivot from emergency response to long-term integration policies – sunset in 2023. Project funding from the United States (the Federal Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration within the US State Department) and the UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office was discontinued. The Safe Spaces project still exists, though at a greatly diminished scale and degree of reach and effectiveness. UNFPA provides some modest funding, and some Romanian NGOs, such as [Carusel](#), have taken on some of the program’s financial and logistical needs.

The Women and Girls Safe Spaces project example illustrates the difficulties that even

highly successful policies and programs encounter when a large-scale shift from emergency response to long-term integration is not supported by adequate commitments (especially from the national government) to develop and implement the kind of comprehensive, multi-stakeholder plan that provides a clear road map for how different sectors (national, international, civil society) will adapt and adjust in order to preserve successful programs while pivoting toward integration as a primary policy objective. A “permanent emergency mindset” inhibits creative pathways toward the sustainability of effective programs and undermines the prospects for successful socio-economic integration of Ukrainians. Moreover, this mindset and its results can exacerbate and even accelerate the rise of popular anti-refugee sentiments, creating a vicious circle, in which the government’s response to flagging integration efforts, sensitive to rising popular anti-migrant attitudes, effectively undermines prospects for satisfactory long-term outcomes, including protection from identity-based violence.

In sum, the ongoing success of effective anti-SGBV programmes, along with the state-civil society coordination that enabled them, has been endangered by a flawed transition from emergency response to long-term integration. Romania’s early response created important safeguards for Ukrainian refugees, particularly women and girls exposed to SGBV and trafficking risks. However, as displacement has become prolonged, these safeguards have not been fully embedded in a coherent, adequately funded, and state-led integration framework.

Language barriers, bureaucratic conditionalities, unstable funding, weak data systems, uneven service provision, and growing anti-refugee sentiment have combined to create a more precarious protection environment. The risk

Conclusion

is that Romania's initial achievements in emergency protection may be gradually eroded during the transition to long-term integration.

Romania's response to the arrival of refugees fleeing the war in Ukraine demonstrates both the possibilities and the limitations of emergency humanitarian action. The country succeeded in mobilizing state institutions, international organizations, and civil society to provide rapid protection at an unprecedented scale. Over time, important mechanisms were developed to prevent and respond to identity-based violence, including sex and gender-based violence (SGBV), human trafficking, exploitation, and other forms of abuse disproportionately affecting displaced women and girls.

These achievements illustrate that effective protection is possible when political commitment, institutional coordination, and civil society engagement converge around a shared humanitarian objective.

At the same time, the Romanian experience highlights that the greatest challenges for refugee protection often emerge after the emergency phase has passed. As displacement became prolonged, the policy agenda shifted from emergency assistance toward long-term socio-economic integration, but this transition was not accompanied by an equally robust institutional, financial, and political commitment. Declining international funding, reduced state engagement, fragmented coordination, and the rise of xenophobic narratives have

combined to weaken protection systems that had proven effective during the first years of the crisis. Rather than representing distinct policy phases, emergency protection and long-term integration should be understood as mutually reinforcing components of a single prevention and protection continuum.

The Romanian case also demonstrates that socio-economic integration is itself a protection strategy. Access to decent employment conditions, housing, healthcare, education, legal status and community participation reduce exposure to exploitation, trafficking, and gender-based violence while strengthening the resilience of both refugees and host communities.

Sustaining the gains achieved during emergency response requires predictable public funding, strong state leadership, meaningful partnerships with civil society and refugee-led organizations, and sustained efforts to counter xenophobia and other forms of identity-based violence.

Finally, the findings of this report extend beyond Romania. As displacement from Ukraine enters its fifth year, and as other situations of protracted displacement continue to reshape humanitarian responses globally, the transition from emergency assistance to long-term integration should be recognized as a critical stage in refugee protection, and consequently, an essential component of broader atrocity prevention efforts.

Recommendations

• For the Romanian Government

Prepare for the transition out of temporary protection

Since temporary protection has been extended until 4 March 2028, Romania should use the remaining period to prevent legal uncertainty. Displaced Ukrainians should receive clear, multilingual information on their options after temporary protection, including residence permits linked to employment, education, family life, or other legal grounds. Legal counselling should begin well before the expiry date, with particular attention to women with children, elderly persons, persons with disabilities, survivors of violence, and those without stable employment.

Establish a national coordination mechanism on SGBV prevention and refugee integration

The Romanian government should create a dedicated inter-institutional coordination mechanism bringing together relevant ministries, county and municipal authorities, police, labour inspectorates, health and social service providers, international organizations, Romanian NGOs, and Ukrainian-led or Ukrainian-serving organizations. This mechanism should not duplicate existing structures, but should give them a clearer mandate: identifying protection gaps, harmonizing referral pathways, monitoring access to services, and ensuring that SGBV prevention is integrated into long-term refugee policy.

Conduct a national audit of access to SGBV-related services

Romania should undertake a rapid but comprehensive review of the obstacles Ukrainian women and girls face when seeking support. This should examine access to healthcare, sexual and reproductive health services, psychosocial support, shelters, police reporting, legal aid, interpretation, childcare, transport, and information. The audit should be conducted with NGOs and Ukrainian community representatives and should result in a concrete action plan, including county-level gaps, responsible institutions, and realistic timelines.

Create predictable public funding for refugee protection and integration services

The Romanian state should avoid transferring core responsibilities to NGOs without adequate resources. A feasible first step would be to establish dedicated annual or multiannual funding lines for refugee integration and SGBV prevention, including support for local NGOs, women's organizations, and Ukrainian-led initiatives. Funding should be linked to clear service-delivery objectives, simplified reporting, and transparent evaluation, while ensuring that responsibility for protection remains with the state.

Recommendations

Standardize referral pathways for SGBV cases

Romania should adopt a clear national referral protocol for SGBV cases involving refugees and migrants. The protocol should define the roles of police, social assistance services, healthcare providers, shelters, legal aid providers, schools, labour inspectors, and NGOs. It should include survivor-centred principles, confidentiality safeguards, informed consent, interpretation procedures, and specific guidance for cases involving children, persons with disabilities, Roma refugees, and women without family or community support.

Train public-facing state actors

Police officers, border police, social workers, medical staff, school staff, labour inspectors, and local officials should receive practical training on SGBV risks, trauma-informed communication, cultural mediation, referral procedures, and the specific vulnerabilities of displaced women and girls.

Treat labor-market inclusion as a protection measure

The government should strengthen targeted labor inspections in sectors where refugees are concentrated, create accessible multilingual complaint mechanisms, and cooperate with employers to prevent harassment, wage theft, unsafe working conditions, and exploitation. At the same time, Romania should simplify access to recognition of diplomas and professional qualifications, so that Ukrainian refugees are not trapped unnecessarily in low-wage or high-risk employment.

Strengthen public communication against xenophobia and disinformation

The rise of xenophobic narratives, online hate speech, and stereotypes about refugees should be addressed through coordinated public communication. The government should work with civil society, journalists, schools, local authorities, and Ukrainian community representatives to develop campaigns that counter misinformation and present Ukrainian refugees as members of local communities rather than as temporary beneficiaries of aid. These campaigns should be accompanied by monitoring of hate incidents and rapid public responses to dangerous narratives.

• For Romanian Civil Society and International Organizations

Support, rather than substitute, state responsibility

NGOs and international organizations should continue to provide expertise, community trust, and specialized services, but should also advocate for the state to assume predictable responsibility for long-term protection and integration. Civil society partnerships should be formalized through memoranda of cooperation, referral protocols, public funding arrangements, and regular consultations.

Integrate Ukrainian-led and Ukrainian-serving organizations into policy and service networks

Romanian NGOs and international organizations should ensure that Ukrainian community representatives are included not only as beneficiaries, but as advisory and implementation partners. This should follow the principle “nothing about us without us.” Ukrainian-led organizations can help identify barriers to reporting, improve outreach, correct misinformation, and build trust between refugees and public institutions.

Consolidate information tools and avoid fragmented communication

Instead of creating multiple disconnected information channels, state and non-state actors should maintain and update common, accessible platforms for services, rights, and referral information. Existing tools, such as service-mapping platforms for refugees in Romania, should be strengthened, translated, and kept current, especially for services outside Bucharest and other major cities.

End notes

[1] See Coșciug, Anatolie and Cosciug, Andriana and Porumbescu, Alexandra and Kyrychenko, Viktoriia and Msercea, Andreea and Adamescu, Alexandra, Bridging Communities: An Exploratory Study on Labor Immigration in Romania (September 26, 2024). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=5007017>, accessed 2 June 2026.

[2] See Roxana Toma, “Twenty-Five Years After the Fall of Communism: The Cultural Peculiarities of Fighting Corruption and Building Civil Society in Romania,” *Sociology Compass* volume 9, issue 11, November 2015, 951-961.

[3] For a summary of available statistical data on SGBV against Ukrainian women, see in particular the 2024 report by the Socio-Economic Insights Survey (SEIS) at <https://microdata.unhcr.org/index.php/catalog/1226>. Accessed 20 June 2026.

[4] https://scholar.google.com/citations?view_op=view_citation&hl=en&user=-GRMF0MAAAAJ&sortby=pubdate&citation_for_view=-GRMF0MAAAAJ:ZHo1McVdvXMC. Accessed 18 June 2026.

[5] See Gender-Based Violence Safety Audit Report, Ukrainian Refugee Response, ANAIS Association, December 2024, 30.

[6] See VOICE/HIAS, Gender-Based Violence in the Context of the Ukrainian Crisis: Romania Assessment, 2023, 26.

[7] See FRA (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights), Violence and Rights Abuses Against Women from Ukraine: FRA Survey, June 2026, 12.

[8] See Gender-Based Violence Safety Audit Report, 7ff.

[9] The Gender-Based Violence Safety Audit credits this more gender-sensitive approach to pressure by international organizations including UNHCR and international and national NGOs: “GBV risks were overlooked in the initial response actions, despite being well-known to be very high, particularly given that women and children make up the majority of the refugees from Ukraine. It was only after the intervention of International Organizations and NGOs specializing in women’s and children’s rights that the response included GBV, SEA, and trafficking services and support. The gender-blind regulations and programs, along with the disregard for GBV risks, highlight several challenges to perform in an informed manner. Mainstreaming GBV, SEA and GE in all programs, services and support should be a priority both for Romanian authorities and International Organizations. As gender stereotypes, sexism and patriarchal values are dominant, they affect the entire population (and refugees) as well as personnel of public and private entities. A trans-sectoral and comprehensive approach could substantially reduce GBV risks.” 30

[10] “Romania was the first European country to develop a National Plan of Measures (NPM) for displaced people, adopted on 30 June 2022, focusing on long-term protection and inclusion. More recently, Emergency Ordinance 96/2024.3 established the framework for the inclusion of refugees from Ukraine in the national social protection schemes in Romania and introducing time-limited conditional assistance for new arrivals, covering emergency shelter and basic needs or a lump sum payment covering three months to address immediate needs.”

[11] Carolin Dulin Brass, Manuela Moy and Yoko Iwasa, “Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse: Reflections on the First Year of the Emergency,” *Forced Migration Review* 72, August 2023. “Examples include students staying at reception centers at night-time to receive new arrivals, pensioners translating for border guards, and Ukrainian diaspora and church groups handing out food and toys at assistance hubs in neighboring countries. Individuals and companies from across Europe drove buses and minivans to the border areas to offer transport, and in border towns many local residents offered Ukrainians free housing or help to find work.” 2.

[12] Dincă, D. V., Nicolescu, C. E., Dumitrică, C. D., & Dogaru Cruceanu, T. C. (2023). The impact of the Ukrainian war on the resilience and sustainability of the local public administration in Romania: An exploratory study, *Romanian Journal of European Affairs* vol. 23, no. 2, December 2023. “Civil society played a crucial role alongside public authorities in addressing the refugee crisis. During the initial phase of the crisis, before the public authorities could fully organize and respond to ensure optimal conditions for receiving Ukrainian refugees, various components of civil society, including NGOs, businesses, and regular citizens, demonstrated exemplary mobilization at all border crossings between Romania and Ukraine, as well as in cities that became focal points for refugees. According to a report by the Chancellery of the Prime Minister of Romania, in April 2022 approximately 160 national non-governmental organizations and over 2,000 volunteers were consistently active at Romania’s border crossings with Ukraine”.

[13] Cristian Incaltarau, Alexandru Mocernac, “Political Institutions and Society Reaction to the Ukrainian War Refugees in Romania,” *Eastern Journal of European Studies* Oct 2024, vol. 15, 66.

[14] See Christine Fricke, Nataliia Gusak and Andrii Kryshstal, “How Language Affects Access to Service and Information,” *FMR* 72: Ukraine: Insights and Implications, 9/2023. “The Ukrainians we talked to had encountered numerous situations where language barriers made it hard or impossible to get information or access services. These ranged from getting health care to applying for cash assistance or registering a child at school – in finding out what is available, understanding the procedures, completing the paperwork and engaging with staff.” 2.

[15] “Even after they have reached the ‘safety’ of a new country, refugee women across countries experience a generalized fear of harassment when going about daily life. In response, they are adopting protective behaviors, such as restricting their movement at night. Language is a major barrier to refugee women feeling safe and integrated, as they are not easily able to access information and services, report abuse or violence to authorities, or connect with other women in their new communities. The language barrier also impedes their access to education, employment opportunities, health care, and the cultural and social resources that help facilitate resilience, adjustment, and adaptation to life in border countries.” *VOICE/HIAS, “Gender-Based Violence in the Context of the Ukrainian Crisis: Romania Assessment,”* 2023.

[16] See IOM Global Data Institute, Displacement Tracking Matrix, Romania Ukrainians Crossing Back to Ukraine July – November 2024, July 2025, https://www.google.com/search?q=OM+Global+Data+Institute%2C+Displacement+Tracking+Matrix%2C+Romania+Ukrainians+Crossing+Back+to+Ukraine+July+%E2%80%93+November+2024&rlz=1C5GCCM_en&oq=OM+Global+Data+Institute%2C+Displacement+Tracking+Matrix%2C+Romania+Ukrainians+Crossing+Back+to+Ukraine+July+%E2%80%93+November+2024&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUyBggAEEUY-OTIGCAEQRRhAMgYIAhBFGEAyBggDEEUYNIBBzg4NWowajeoAgCwAgA&sourceid=chrome&source=chrome.ob&ie=UTF-8. Accessed 23 June 2026.

[17] On the “waiting dilemma” of Ukrainian refugees see in particular Eurofound, “Social impact of migration: Addressing the challenges of receiving and integrating Ukrainian refugees” 2024.

[18] “From Compassion to Controversy: Unraveling the Impact of Societal Resilience on the Tapestry of Attitudes towards Ukrainian Refugees,” Arielle Kaima, Shaul Kimhia, Maya Siman-Tovb, Dalia Bankauskaite, Maria Baranf, Tomasz Barang, Anatolie Cosciugh, Yohannan Esheld, Salome Dumbadze, Manana Gabashvilij, George Jiglah, Krzysztof Kaniastyk, Alice Kouboval, Hadas Marcianod, Renata Matkeviciene, Marius Matichescun, Naomi Scholdera, Dmitri Teperiko, Jemal Sukhashvilij, Bruria Adinia International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction 105 (2024).

[19] See Fassman and Reeger, “‘Old’ Immigration Countries in Europe: The Concept and Empirical Examples (Heinz Fassmann and Ursula Reeger European Immigrations: Trends, Structures, and Policy Implications Edited by Marek Okolski, Cambridge UP 2012.

[20] Devon Cone, “Romania Needs a Longer-Term Approach to Welcoming Ukrainian Refugees,” Refugees International March 2, 2023. <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/perspectives-and-commentaries/romania-needs-a-longer-term-approach-to-welcoming-displaced-ukrainians/>. Accessed 28 June 2026.

[21] VOICE/HIAS, “Gender-Based Violence in the Context of the Ukraine Crisis: Romania Assessment,” 6.

