

# Moldova: Needs Assessment of Older Refugees

14 September 2022

## Context

As of September 2022 there are over 90,000 Ukrainian refugees in Moldova. Of these, a predicted 13,500 are older refugees. However, while this data is available disaggregated by sex, it is not by age, therefore it is difficult to get a fully accurate picture of how many older refugees there are in the country. We also do not have an accurate geographical picture of where older refugees are residing in Moldova. While local authorities know this information, it has not yet been aggregated. What we do know is that most refugees live in the community, either in rented accommodation or with friends or family. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence suggests that refugees tend to be clustered around urban areas, especially in the big cities of Chisinau and Balti. It is also worth noting that Moldova is a country with significant inequality between urban and rural areas. Therefore, where refugees are based will have a significant impact on the types and amount of assistance, they will be able to receive from both the government and other humanitarian actors.



Anna from Kyiv in Chisinau

While over the last few months the number of refugees in Moldova has been stable, there are fears that numbers will increase when the harsh winter months begin in Ukraine. In coming winter months, temperatures in Moldova will also get very low. For example, in the capital, Chisinau, it can be as low as -5 °C in January. These harsh winter conditions are particularly concerning given the socio-economic challenges faced by both refugees and Moldovans.

Moldova is facing an inflation rate of 30%, eroding the value of the savings on which most older people rely. In addition, older people, as well as all refugees and residents of Moldova, will be hit by the massive rise in the cost of fuel, vital to heating homes. Moldova is also highly dependent on imports from Russia and Ukraine, and supplies are being disrupted by the war. In the context of rising prices and scarcity, tensions over resources, between the refugees and the host population are likely to grow. Moldovans have been extremely welcoming of Ukrainian refugees. However, this may become more difficult to sustain over the coming winter, as some Moldovans are becoming disgruntled about the amount of support the refugees are receiving and feel they are excluded from the assistance despite their own significant needs. Also, while many refugees are considering onward migration in the coming months, older people with less mobility may not have the same opportunities and are at risk of being left behind.

## Methodology

To provide a snapshot of the current needs, 485 older people were interviewed by research company, CBS (AXA) on behalf of HelpAge using a short multi-sectoral needs assessment between 1 to 16 August 2022. Of these 77% were women and 23% were men. In terms of age 35% were in their 50s, 45% in their 60s and 20% 70+. The data collection occurred across 30 of the 32 Raions (districts) of Moldova both targeting urban areas (73%) and rural areas (27%).

The sampling approach used was a purposive non-probability sampling approach, identifying people to interview based on pre-defined categories including age and location type. Nearly half to these interviews (46%) occurred in refugee accommodation centres while the rest (54%) occurred in the community including those staying in rented accommodations as well as with friends or relatives.

The need for this assessment arose due to the lack of available age disaggregated data. While needs assessments are being conducted by other actors, disaggregated data by gender, disability and age is not widely shared. HelpAge advocates that the anonymized disaggregated data be made publicly available to ensure that interventions can be appropriately targeted to meet the specific needs of each population group.

## Key Recommendations

1. Cash assistance is the preferred modality amongst older refugees, therefore this support should be expanded and sustained. Furthermore, the transfer value should reflect current rates of inflation and a specific market analysis. Also, greater support should be provided to older refugees who live in remote rural communities or are immobile and may struggle to register for cash assistance.
2. Guidance as well as cash support should be provided to help older refugees access their health care needs, especially those with a disability and/or a health condition.
3. Information on how to access humanitarian services, those related to winterisation, should be communicated through a variety of channels including in-person visits and phone calls. This to ensure that people who do not have access to a computer, Viber/WhatsApp/telegram groups or those unable to use them, are not left out.
4. Ensure that all relevant data on refugees can be disaggregated by sex, age and disability and ensure, when anonymized, that it is publicly shared.
5. With inflation and the upcoming cost of living crisis those at-risk older Moldovans should also be considered in any assistance programmes.

## Key Findings

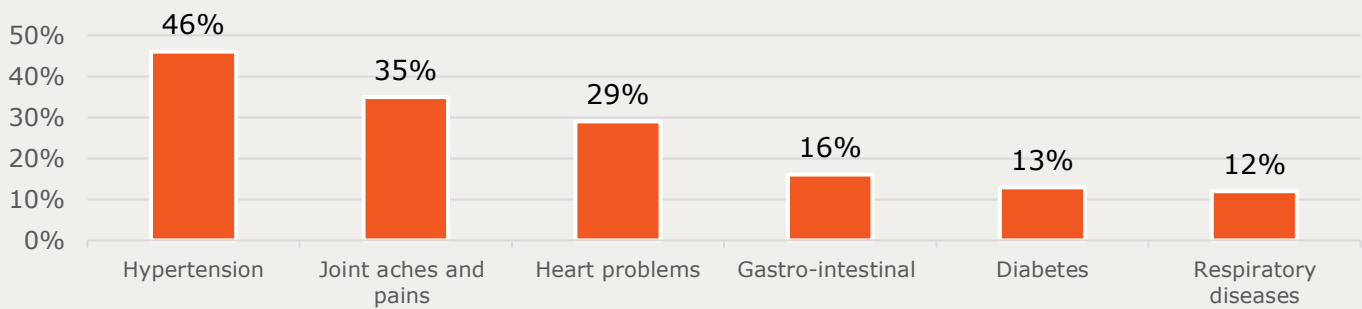
### Shelter



- Approximately 87,000 refugees live in the community, not in refugee accommodation centres (RACs). These shelter options range from hotels, rented houses, or accommodation provided by friends or relatives. Of the number of older people interviewed who live in the community, **69%** live with 'relatives or friends', **27%** in rented houses/apartments and **4%** responded 'other'. It also should be noted that in rural areas, refugees are more likely to be staying with relatives while those in urban areas stay in rented houses/apartments.
- **27%** of older people surveyed who live in the community reported that they pay rent for their accommodation. It should be noted that, this does not just apply for those living in rented apartments. Some of those (14%) living with relatives or friends are also paying rent. Furthermore, 20% of older people in the community reported that they are unable to pay for rent. In some cases, this may result in skipping payments, and in other cases, older people would like to contribute to friends or family members who host them but lack the resources to be able to do so.
- As of July 2022, 3,029 refugees are currently residing in the 68 RACs, of which approximately 303 refugees are over age 65. These are some of the most at-risk groups of refugees, as they lack the support network and/or resources to live independently. The numbers within these centres have been stable since April. These RACs typically are re-purposed buildings and may previously have been educational facilities, specialised institutions (e.g., for people with disabilities), hotels, or student dormitories. Therefore, there is substantial variability in terms of their appropriateness for longer stays, for example they may not have an accessible kitchen or sufficient toilet facilities. Also, some older people we support have complained that they find it difficult to climb the stairs (as their rooms are on higher floors) or they do not have trouble using the bathroom facilities (they only have a bathtub but have joint problems so cannot access).

- It should also be noted that most refugees (over 600,000 since February) who arrived in Moldova are either in transit to another country or quickly return to Ukraine. Therefore, many enter and look for short term accommodation before returning to Ukraine or moving on. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that some refugees are coming into Moldova to receive assistance and then subsequently returning home to Ukraine, sometimes with this process happening multiple times. This highlights the importance of distribution assistance equitably between the two countries.

### Top 6 health conditions



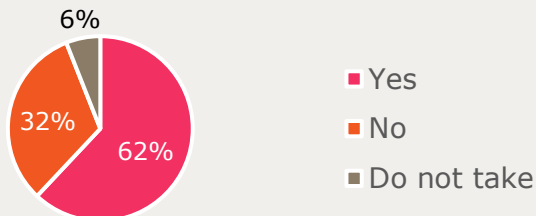
### Health



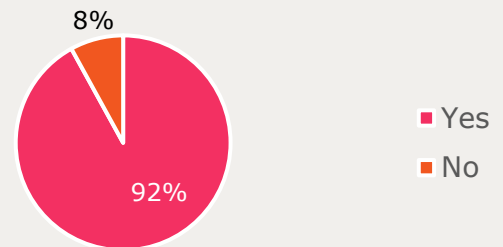
- **82%** of older people interviewed had at least one health condition, with 51% having more than one. The top six health conditions were: hypertension; joint aches and pains; heart problems; gastro-intestinal problems; diabetes; and respiratory diseases. As people increase with age, so do the prevalence of health conditions. Health conditions are also often exacerbated as people flee emergencies. The changes involve not only the physical strain of transit, but also the mental and emotional strain of learning to navigate new health services. Anecdotal information shared by older people noted that these challenges can result in older people skipping medicines and necessary health check-ups.
- According to a REACH assessment conducted in May 2022, **74%** of those over 60 years old have been able to access healthcare when required. This is compared with 84% of those under 60. Therefore, while access is high, this highlights that older people are struggling more as compared to the rest of the refugee population. Currently, the Moldovan government allows Ukrainian refugees to access public healthcare services free of charge. Of those older people we interviewed who used health services, the majority used public health services, while a minority used private health services. According to the REACH assessment the key reasons older people gave for not accessing healthcare's service were they chose to self-medicate; they did know where to go and there was no functioning health service nearby.
- **44%** of older people reported they do not have a COVID-19 vaccine. This is very concerning as older people are far more likely to die of COVID-19 than younger people. Currently the Moldovan government is offering free COVID-19 vaccines to refugees. However, there is a large degree of vaccination hesitancy in much of eastern Europe despite efforts to promote safe access to vaccines.
- Also, while our survey did not gather data on mental health issues, we know that many refugees are struggling. Some have experienced bereavements while all have faced the distress and anguish of leaving their homes and being separated from family members. Despite this need for support, the REACH assessment found that only **2%** of refugees, outside of the refugee accommodation centres, had received psychological support.

- According to the REACH assessment, the top four disabilities older refugees faced were vision loss, walking difficulties, hearing loss and difficulties remembering and concentrating. Therefore, it is integral that programmes should be designed inclusively ensuring they are accessible for those with disabilities.

### Those with health conditions access to medication



### Active pharmacies in local area



## Medicines



- Given the prevalence of health conditions among older refugees, it was concerning that only **32%** of those interviewed with a health condition reported they could fully access their medication. The key reasons given were cost, non-availability of medication is unavailable, followed by difficulty accessing the local market. The financial barrier highlights that with limited resources, families are also having to make difficult choices. The REACH assessment found that 29% of households reported reducing expenditure on health (including medicine) to cope with a lack of resources. As winter comes and inflation and fuel prices worsen this will result in families making tougher and tougher decision on how to allocate resources.
- Despite the need for older refugees to be supported in accessing medication, according to the REACH assessment only **1%** of refugees household outside the refugee accommodation centres report receiving specific medication support. Currently the government does offer some medicines for free (such as insulin for diabetes) but they do not cover most medicines.
- Encouragingly **93%** of pharmacies are operating with the local area. However, it should be noted that this lower in rural areas. Therefore, while the same medication older refugees used in Ukraine may not be available, they should be able to access appropriate replacements if given guidance and resources.

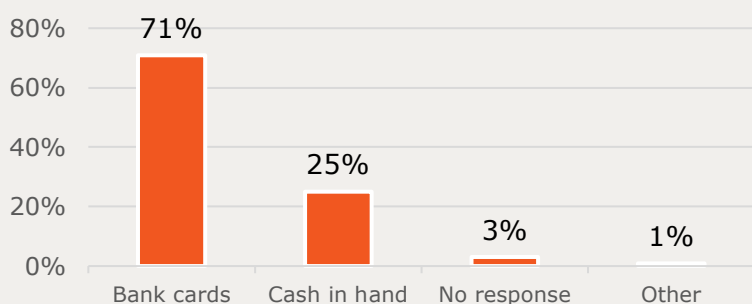
## Income & Assistance



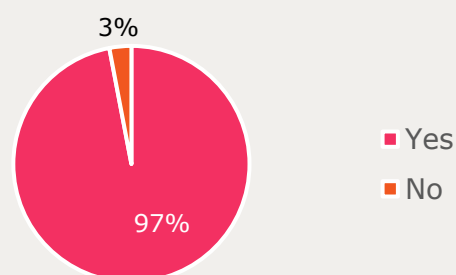
- **2%** of older refugees reported they receive a salary. It should be noted that this statistic may under-represent those employed as they may be active in the informal economy. Currently while the Moldovan government encourages refugees to join the work force, many have still been unable, or unwilling, to find work. However, it is important to recognize that some older people do want to work. Therefore, when developing livelihoods interventions, older people should be considered. Older people are not homogenous, and it is important to avoid ageist stereotypes in the design of programmes.
- According to the REACH assessment the top three forms of assistance provided were food (89%), cash (83%), and hygiene items (69%). In this assessment **85%** of older refugees reported that a major source of their income was the cash assistance provided by the government, UN, and/or NGOs.

- **46%** of older people interviewed, aged over 60, reported that pensions were important sources income, accessed through their Ukraine bank cards, which can be used in Moldova. However, with inflation, other cost rises and the unprecedentedly low exchange rate, the value of the pension is limited, and older refugee may not be able to rely on these indefinitely. For example, 11% of older people reported having to borrow money since the start of the crisis. Another risk faced by older people is by losing their Ukrainian bank card, this can cut them off from accessing their pension. While the Moldovan government has simplified the process of opening bank accounts to refugees, they have capped the amount of saving they can hold in these accounts to 10,000 euros.
- When asked what older people spent their money on in the last two weeks, 82% said food, 68% medicine, 49% transport, 25% hygiene items, 25% utility bills and 25% clothes.

### Preferred way of receiving cash



### Use cash safely



## Cash assistance

- According to UNHCR **cash is the preferred modality** amongst refugees in Moldova, as it gives people choice and freedom to decide what they need. A HelpAge assessment conducted with internally displaced people in Ukraine in May found that 88% of older people favoured multi-purpose cash, compared to in-kind assistance. Within this assessment **97%** of older refugees also reported that cash would be safe to use.
- The use of cash assistance works effectively within the Moldovan context. This is because the country has a diffused financial system with sufficient, accessible ATMs and a functioning market. **97%** older people interviewed reported that markets and stores were available in their area. This slightly lower in the Raions (districts) of Cimislia, Taraclia and Ungheni, which needs to be further explored. It should be noted that in the REACH assessment 13% of households reported they do not have (or are unaware) of a financial service provider in their immediate area.
- Currently UNHCR has set up the cash assistance transfer value which all humanitarian actors are advised to follow of \$116 (2,200 MDL) per person per month. However, there is limited publicly available information on how this figure is established and many think that it is set too low, especially with rising inflation. Furthermore, some older people may require additional cash to cover their basic needs due their health-related costs.
- UNHCR is also the largest provider of cash assistance inside Moldova. To register for this cash assistance the older person must visits a registration centre. This can be sometimes challenging for an unaccompanied older people, especially those with a health condition and/or a disability. This is because they may need to travel long distances on public transport which is often not easily accessible for these most at risk older people.



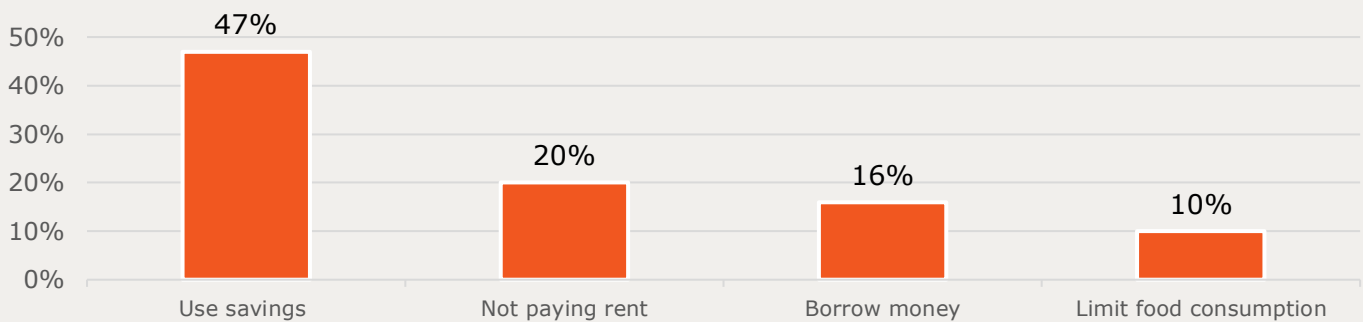
- Regarding the preferred transfer modality **71%** of older people preferred bank cards, while 25% preferred cash in hand (especially those over 70). This highlights the importance to tailoring the modality to match the wishes of those who will receive the cash assistance.

## Food



- 89%** of older refugees reported having 3 or more meals per day in the last two weeks, and 86% reported they have not had to reduce the quantity of food they eat. This highlights that currently the majority older refugees' have access to sufficient food.
- This high level of food security is largely based on the support provided to older refugees by friends and family as well as the government and humanitarian actors. Currently those in the refugee's accommodation centres are receiving food from a range of actors, including HelpAge who provided food to 31 refugee centres (or a total of 74). Therefore, to maintain food security, it is important that this vital supply continues, especially during the upcoming winter months.

### Top 4 negative coping strategies outside of the refugee centers



## Protection



- 60%** of older refugee in the community reported having to adopt negative coping strategies. This was significantly higher than for those in refugee accommodation centres (21%). This again highlights the support both in housing and food in the centres insulates refugees from having to adopted negative coping strategies. Outside of the centres the top three coping strategies adopted were using savings (47%), not paying rent (20%) and borrowing money (16%).
- While most older refugees have current IDs – namely passports, birth certificates or Ukrainian ID cards, a small percentage (4%) did not. Given the importance of IDs for accessing benefits, work is needed to ensure that all have appropriate documents. To do this, the older person must visit the Consulate of Ukraine in the Republic of Moldova, which is in Chisinau and Balti, and subsequently pay a fee for its replacement.
- One of the most traumatising experiences for many older refugees is family separation. Of those interviewed, **60%** have been separated from family members. According to a UNHCR assessment the common reasons are military conscription and family members choosing to remain in Ukraine. However, where justified, such as onward travel to other countries, family reunification for older people should be supported, as having this support network is vital.

- While most older refugees are living with family members, some are living alone. The importance of a support network especially to at risk groups such as older people is vital. An on-going UNCHR assessment found that 34% of the refugees interviewed were living alone.

## Victor and Nadezhda

HelpAge met Victor (64) and Nadezhda (68) when they arrived at our distribution point in Strășeni to receive vouchers for food and personal hygiene products.

The couple took refuge from Ukraine in the town of Bucovăț in central Moldova. They are currently staying in the house of a son of Nadezhda's father's friend. Despite only meeting him once he has offered to host them as long as needed.

The couple learned about the beginning of the war from their son who lives and works in a Europe. He asked his parents to leave the city immediately, but they did not listen to him. The

couple thought it would all be over in a few days and decided to wait. "It's not easy to give up everything you have earned in a lifetime. We regret we did not listen to what our son was saying. If we knew what awaited us, we would have left on foot without any hesitation", Nadezhda told us.

Soon after the start of the war their town was occupied by Russian soldiers. Endless columns of Russian tanks and armoured cars were constantly passing by their house. From that moment, internet ceased to work and they had no connection with their son. They stayed hidden in the house's basement for three weeks, without light, gas, heat, and water. After that they decided to leave.

The couple decided to flee to Moldova, where Nadezhda grew up. In the beginning, they were disturbed by any noise and were nervous. But now they feel much safer. Nadezhda likes to work in the garden and grow vegetables. She would like to go home. She often talks to her son, who asks his parents to wait. Therefore, they have decided that until things settle, they will not return.



Helpage project coordinator, Viorica, providing Victor and Nadezhda with food and hygiene vouchers in Strășeni

## HelpAge international's work in Moldova

HelpAge International started its operations and established an office in Moldova in 2005. The key areas of work focus on secure incomes of older people through improved inclusion in the livelihood activities and social protection (advocacy on pension levels); access to appropriate health and care services and health promotion; awareness about and protection from violence and elder abuse and voice of older people through national and local level advocacy action. HelpAge's main work methodology is peer support groups with the recruitment of volunteers who are the main experts about the lives of older people and whose voice is used in HelpAge work on advocacy.

*Click [here](#) to access dashboard of all the data form this assessment*

## CONTACTS

Tatiana Sorocan, Country Director, Moldova, Email: [tatiana.sorocan@helpage.org](mailto:tatiana.sorocan@helpage.org)  
 Daniele Pedretti, Humanitarian Manager, Moldova, Email: [daniele.pedretti@helpage.org](mailto:daniele.pedretti@helpage.org)  
 Alex Goldsworthy, Humanitarian Programme Officer, UK, Email: [alex.goldsworthy@helpage.org](mailto:alex.goldsworthy@helpage.org)