

# EDITOR'S CHOICE OF THE MONTH

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### **THE INTEGRATION OF REFUGEES IN ROMANIA: DIFFERENCES IN SUPPORT PROVIDED TO DISPLACED PERSONS FROM UKRAINE AND OTHER CATEGORIES OF REFUGEES**

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#### **February 24, 2022**

February 24, 2025, marked three years since the Russian Federation invaded Ukraine. At the time the war in Ukraine began, the NGO where Mariana works was implementing a project co-financed by the European Union through the Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund. This project was aimed at beneficiaries of international protection and third-country nationals in the designated region (counties of Alba, Sibiu, Bistriţa, Cluj, Maramureş, Zalău, Satu Mare, and Harghita).

Given the organization's expertise in immigrant integration, concrete ways to assist those arriving at the border were evaluated, and it was decided to actively participate in the actions undertaken by authorities and other NGOs at the border.



## **Initial Measures Adopted by the Romanian Government in the Context of the Events of February 2022**

In March 2022, the European Union activated the temporary protection mechanism for refugees from Ukraine. This mechanism was created in 2001, following large-scale displacements caused by the armed conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo<sup>1</sup>. It was activated for Ukraine and has been extended in this case until March 2026.

On February 27, 2022, the Romanian Government adopted Emergency Ordinance No. 15/2022 regarding the provision of support and humanitarian assistance by the Romanian state to foreign nationals or stateless persons in special situations coming from the armed conflict zone in Ukraine<sup>2</sup>.

**The first stage (April 2022 – April 2023)** of the program called “50/20” regulated the rights granted to Ukrainian citizens in Romania, including the right to access housing through a reimbursement mechanism for accommodation costs for institutions and legal entities hosting refugees from Ukraine.

Shortly after the activation of the Directive, reimbursement for accommodation costs was also regulated for private individuals. The following provisions from Emergency Ordinance No. 15/2022 are relevant:

“Article 1, paragraph (10): Private individuals who host foreign citizens or stateless persons in special situations coming from the armed conflict zone in Ukraine are entitled to reimbursement from the budget of the County Inspectorates for Emergency Situations / the Bucharest–Ilfov Inspectorate for Emergency Situations for expenses related to food and accommodation, amounting to 20 lei/day per hosted person for food and 50 lei/day per hosted person for accommodation. The reimbursement mechanism is established by Government decision.

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<sup>1</sup> European Council (2024)

<sup>2</sup> Coaliția pentru Drepturile Migranților și Refugiaților (2024): *PROGRAMUL DE SPRIJIN PENTRU CAZAREA REFUGIAȚILOR DIN UCRAINA (2023-2024) IMPLEMENTARE, CONTROVERSE, LECȚII ÎNVĂȚATE*

Article 5: The maximum value of accommodation costs for other locations designated by county committees / the Municipality of Bucharest for emergency situations is approved by Government decision. These provisions, in this form, were applied from April 1, 2022, to April 30, 2023. Since the maximum reimbursed amount for legal entities (as stated in Article 5) was also set at 50 lei/day per hosted person, through Government Decision No. 315/2022, similar to the case of private hosts (Government Decision No. 336/2022), the reimbursement system remained known as the “50/20 program” and was, throughout its implementation, the main direct support instrument for beneficiaries of temporary protection.”

However, this support system sparked numerous debates, raising suspicions of fraud, corruption, and even abuse by Romanian property owners. A direct effect of this version of the 50/20 program was a significant increase in real estate prices, which also affected Romanian citizens looking for rental housing.

Additionally, one of the most critical issues was the considerable delay in reimbursement of these costs. In some cases, delays exceeded one year, increasing the vulnerability of single mothers with children and individuals with no source of income.

In **the second stage**, several important changes were introduced: lump sum payments began to be transferred directly to beneficiaries of temporary protection, and both the amount and conditions for financial support were modified.

A new requirement was introduced: from the second month of receiving support, beneficiaries had to either be registered as employees in Romania or at least be registered with the County Employment Agency (AJOFM) in their respective counties as job seekers.

Additionally, minor children had to be enrolled in the Romanian education system and attend school or at least participate in activities conducted in educational centers opened by NGOs, with prior notification to the territorial School Inspectorates (ISJ).

This time, the lump sum financial aid was limited to:

- 2,000 lei per month per family for accommodation expenses;
- 750 lei per month for a single person for accommodation expenses;
- 600 lei per person per month for food expenses.

Persons with disabilities had to present documents issued by Romanian authorities to certify their degree of disability. This sometimes resulted in the denial of disability status due to Romania's specific assessment criteria.

### **Impact of the Legislative Changes**

According to an article published by migration expert Anatolii Coșciug, this legislative modification, along with delayed payments, forced approximately 1/3 of Ukrainians to leave Romania.

*"At the beginning of February 2024, there were 78.7 thousand Ukrainian citizens registered in Romania, the lowest number reported since March 2022. The highest number was recorded exactly a year earlier, in February 2023, with 113 thousand people. In other words, in the past year, nearly 35,000 people (approximately 1/3) have 'given up' their residence in Romania, choosing either to return to Ukraine or to migrate to other countries, as indicated by other studies."<sup>3</sup>*

From this perspective, this situation can be seen as a sign of the Romanian authorities' inability or failure to successfully integrate displaced people from Ukraine. There was and still is no long-term strategy for integrating these individuals into Romanian society—probably for the same reasons many of them hope to return home: the end of the war.

### **The New Support Program for Ukrainians**

In September 2024, a new version of the support program for displaced persons from Ukraine was introduced. Under this new system, only one-time assistance is provided for a maximum

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<sup>3</sup> Anatolii Coșciug (2024): *De ce „au plecat” din România o treime dintre refugiații ucraineni în ultimul an? O analiză a evoluției fluxului de refugiați din Ucraina în România.*

of three consecutive months, but only if the individuals entered Romania for the first time after July 1, 2024.

The same lump sum amounts have been maintained:

- 2,000 lei per month per family for accommodation expenses;
- 750 lei per month for a single person for accommodation expenses;
- 600 lei per person per month for food expenses.

The key new element in this version of the program is the allowance for Ukrainian children, which is conditional upon registering a residential address on their identity document. However, many people have encountered difficulties due to the refusal of Romanian landlords to register rental contracts with ANAF (National Agency for Fiscal Administration). As a result, many families struggle to complete the necessary procedures to obtain state allowances for children.

Looking at the past three years, we can see that the Romanian government has implemented three different versions of the support program for displaced persons from Ukraine.

#### Support Provided to Other Categories of Refugees

For individuals who have applied for asylum in Romania and have been granted a form of international protection, legally referred to as refugee status or subsidiary protection, the Romanian state has not implemented the same policies as for other categories of refugees. Instead, for beneficiaries of international protection, Romania and other European countries have adopted different integration measures.

For this category of refugees, the state recommends enrollment in the integration program established by the General Inspectorate for Immigration, facilitated by integration officers, and, where applicable, with the involvement of NGO personnel implementing EU co-financed projects aimed at the integration of immigrants and beneficiaries of international protection into Romanian society.

Through this program, individuals are required to attend Romanian language courses as well as other educational or cultural adaptation activities. Additionally, a non-reimbursable financial aid of approximately 120 euros per month is provided; however, this support is conditional upon mandatory participation in the aforementioned activities.

### **Selected Articles from Government Ordinance No. 44/2004**

#### *Article 10*

*(1) In order to facilitate integration into the Romanian education system, minors who have been granted international protection in Romania are entitled to an intensive and free preparatory course in Romanian language learning for a duration of one academic year. Enrollment is open throughout the calendar year, and attendance at the course may continue into the following academic year, as applicable.*

*(2) Upon completion of the Romanian language initiation course, an evaluation committee, whose composition and operational framework are established by order of the Minister of National Education, assesses the proficiency level in Romanian and determines the appropriate grade level for the enrollment of minors who have been granted international protection in Romania.*

*(...)*

#### *Article 23*

*(1) Foreign nationals who have been granted international protection in Romania following the signing of the protocol have, primarily, the following obligations:*

- a) To participate regularly in activities stipulated in the individual plan;*
- b) To make efforts to complete all stages of the integration program, in accordance with the signed protocol;*
- c) To adhere to the rules of discipline, conduct, and the guidelines established by course instructors, as well as the internal regulations of accommodation centers;*
- d) To inform the General Inspectorate for Immigration of any changes that may affect their participation in integration activities.*

*(2) Failure to comply with the obligations set forth in paragraph (1) shall result in the termination of one or more measures provided in the individual plan, including the withdrawal of the right to accommodation, material*

*assistance granted for access to housing as stipulated in Article 21, paragraph (6), the financial aid specified in Article 22, paragraph (3), or the non-reimbursable assistance referred to in Article 18, paragraph (2), letter (e), as applicable.*

Furthermore, if a beneficiary is enrolled in the integration program and receives non-reimbursable financial assistance from the state, they are no longer eligible for other types of financial aid provided by NGOs through the AMIF (Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund) program. This is an explicit condition imposed by the General Inspectorate for Immigration.

## **Conclusions**

For more effective integration, the Romanian Government could have adapted the legislation to include individuals from Ukraine in the national integration program. This measure would likely have increased interest in the recognition of academic qualifications, allowing immigrants to participate in the Romanian labor market in positions more closely aligned with their professional experience and expertise.

Many of these individuals hold higher education degrees and professional certifications in fields experiencing a shortage of specialists. Facilitating this process could have mitigated language barriers and addressed, for example, the issue of insufficient general practitioners or nurses. Numerous refugees faced the repeated refusal of Romanian doctors to include them on patient lists and had to constantly rely on volunteers for communication with medical professionals. This has led to many similar challenges.

Considering these aspects, I believe that a government more committed to developing a medium- and long-term integration strategy could have capitalized on the high qualifications of individuals arriving from the conflict zone in



Ukraine. A better-structured and more attractive program might have convinced more people that Romania is a country worth integrating into.

Hopefully, this will serve as a lesson learned, and with the support of civil society, the Government will be able to establish a sustainable and long-term integration process in the future.

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