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Refugee Integration in Bulgaria: Conditions and Challenges

Between 2013 and 2016, the inflow of Middle Eastern refugees to other European countries increased sharply. Their transit migration through Bulgaria was determined by their preliminary intention to settle in countries with a higher standard of living, affording better reception and better conditions for social integration. Few asylum seekers from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran prefer Bulgaria as their final destination. The article focuses on their case and analyses the national legal framework and the policy decisions in the field of social and cultural integration by comparing these with society's attitudes to refugees and with the asylum seekers/refugees' expectations, impressions and experience, surveyed through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions held in 2018. The results of this comparative research show that refugees in Bulgaria have developed adaptive socio-economic and cultural strategies of their own according to their specific characteristics and needs in the context of different government integration programs lacking a clearly defined vision of integration, of blurred responsibility of state institutions, limitations and minimal effects of the existing legislation on social integration of refugees, negative public speech, and stereotypical social attitudes.

Key words: asylum seekers, refugees, refugee integration, refugee adaptation

Интеграција избеглица у Бугарској: услови и изазови

У периоду између 2013. и 2016. године прилив избеглица са Блиског Истока у друге европске земље нагло се увећао. Њихова транзитна миграција преко Бугарске била је опредељена њиховим прелиминарним намерама да се населе у земље високог животног стандарда, које омогућују бољи пријем и боље услове социјалне интеграције. Мањи број тражилаца азила из Сирије, Ирака, Авганистана и Ирана преферира Бугарску као крајњу дестинацију. Овај рад је фокусиран на њихов случај и анализира национални правни оквир и политичке одлуке на пољу социјалне и културне интеграције упоређујући их са ставовима друштва према избеглицама, као и са очекивањима, утисцима и искуствима тражилаца азила / избеглица добијеним на основу дубинских интервјуа и дискусија фокус групâ одржаних 2018. године. Резултати поменутог компаративног истраживања показују да су избеглице у Бугарској развиле сопствене адаптивне социо-економске и културне стратегије, у складу са својим специфичним карактеристикама и потребама, а у контексту различитих државних интеграционих програма, којима недостаје јасно дефинисана

визија интеграције, нејасних одговорности државних институција, лимитираности и минималних ефеката постојећег законодавства на социјалну интеграцију избеглица, негативни јавни говор и стереотипизирани друштвени ставове.

Кључне речи: тражиоци азила, избеглице, интеграција избеглица, адаптација избеглица

Introduction

A key challenge for the implementation of the common European policy on migration and asylum in the member states of the European Union is the integration of non-European citizens seeking international protection. The number of foreigners granted refugee or humanitarian status and the right to settle in Bulgaria and apply for citizenship totals 22,722 people (1993–2016), of whom 18,114, mainly from Syria and Iraq, became refugee or humanitarian status holders during the period from 2013 to 2016.¹ Most asylum seekers/refugees prefer to settle in West or North European destination; only few prefer to stay in Bulgaria: statistics on their number is not available, but according to various data and observations, it amounts to less than 1,500 people (Tashev 2018, 163–164). Even fewer have benefited from the right to acquire Bulgarian citizenship – only 426 people for the period 2001–2017 (Reference from the Ministry of Justice, quoted by Tashev 2018, 164–165).

Between 2013 and 2016, with the increase of refugee inflow from the Middle East to Europe, and respectively to and through Bulgaria, asylum seekers have become a hot topic in a number of negatively inclined public debates. The rather negative public image of the refugees has excluded the possibility of a public and scientific discussion regarding their integration into the Bulgarian society and their possible impact on improving the socio-economic and demographic situation in the country. Even in some national scientific studies, the possibility of an ‘external reserve’ for improving the demographic situation in the country is considered only in terms of ‘attracting persons of Bulgarian ethnicity from abroad’, ‘return of Bulgarian citizens from abroad’, ‘attracting persons coming from countries, speaking languages and having a culture close to those of the Bulgarians, from countries where the main religion is Christianity’. It is pointed out that ‘it is desirable to avoid settlement of immigrants (except in certain cases) who practice Islam because of their particular behavior and mentality’ (Arkadiev 2017, 56–57). Provoked by the dominant, one-sided national discourse on refugees integration, this study aims at a multifaceted analysis of the possibilities for integration of refugees in Bulgaria in terms of the normative conditions, political programs and decisions, the public attitudes, the expectations and intentions of the asylum seekers/refugees themselves, seeking and granted international protection; the analysis is based on various research techniques (focus group discussions, in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations).

¹ Information for asylum seekers and decisions taken 01. 01. 1993 – 28. 02. 2019, State Agency for Refugees with the Council of Ministers.

Towards an understanding of the concept of refugee integration

At first glance, the adaptation of Middle eastern newcomers to the Bulgarian society is similar to those of other foreigners (Turkish, Ukrainian, British citizens, etc.) who temporarily and permanently reside in the country for various reasons, such as temporary and permanent employment, education, the so-called 'lifestyle', marriage, and so on. But in this case, the various migration patterns and immigrant groups should be studied separately. Refugees differ from other immigrants in that they are deprived of the legal protection of their country of origin or their country of citizenship (Costello 2016, 64–67). Empirical studies show that the emigration of refugees from their native places can be described as forced rather than voluntary. The respondents indicate various factors and circumstances motivating them to leave their homes, such as lack of security conditions for their lives, violation of their human rights, lack of conditions for satisfaction of their basic life needs, lack of protection by the state institutions, etc. In addition, it can also be noted that the integration and adaptation of refugees in the host society differs from that of other immigrant groups, because to a large extent it is determined by their specific legislative status and the rights, responsibilities and obligations deriving from it.

European academic literature offers different concepts of refugee integration. These include the 'multi-dimensional two-way process' (Castles et al., 2002), by means of local integration (Crisp 2004) or processes of mutual adaptation with the host society, of which the key indicators are employment, housing, education and health (Ager & Strang 2004). On the basis of these, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) elaborated the following definition in 2005 – 'local integration in the refugee context is a dynamic and multifaceted two-way process, which requires efforts by all parties concerned, including a preparedness on the part of refugees to adapt to the host society without having to forego their own cultural identity, and a corresponding readiness on the part of host communities and public institutions to welcome refugees and to meet the needs of a diverse population' (UNHCR Executive Committee 2005); in 2007, the definition was developed in a European context – 'The integration of refugees as a durable solution is an important part of the commitments of States under the 1951 Convention. UNHCR encourages EU Member States to include refugees in general integration plans and policies, while also providing for targeted actions for refugee-specific needs. Integration can also be enhanced through reception policies for asylum-seekers which promote social inclusion, rather than isolation and separation from host communities. There are also compelling reasons to align the rights of persons granted subsidiary protection with the rights of refugees in a number of areas, including access to the labour market, integration support and family reunification. Drawing on these considerations, UNHCR encourages the EU to develop further its policies and practices on integration, to the benefit of persons in need of international protection and their host communities in Member States alike (UNHCR Note on the Integration of Refugees in the European Union, 2007). In 2013, the UNHCR designed an evaluation tool on refugee integration that includes over 200 quantitative and qualitative indicators, provisionally grouped into four strands or areas of

integration: general considerations (impact of reception conditions on integration, inclusion of refugees in common policies, etc.); legal integration (right of residence, right to family reunification, etc.); socio-economic integration (housing, employment, access to health services, etc.); socio-cultural integration (language learning, social inclusion, etc.)². In Bulgaria, the UNHCR conducts yearly surveys on these indicators, but more detailed and in-depth analysis has not been conducted yet.

National legislation and policy on international protection and refugees

In 1992–1993, the Bulgarian Parliament ratified the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (the so-called ‘Geneva Convention’) and the 1967 Protocol on the Status of Refugees (the so-called ‘New York Protocol’), which have become key points for the formulation of the national policy and legislation relevant to the reception and integration of asylum seekers. Since accession to the EU in 2007, Bulgaria has begun to follow and observe the common European asylum and refugee policy and to harmonize its national legislation with the European laws. The constant changes made to the 2002 Bulgarian Asylum and Refugees Law indicate that the national lawmakers are seeking to stay up to date with the changes in European legislation (Nakova & Erolova 2019).

Since 2013, with the increase of the refugee inflow to Europe, the Bulgarian policy on the reception and integration of refugees has been implemented in an inconsistent and contradictory way. It is committed to a common European policy of democratic values and humanity, but it is also influenced by the European and national populist discourse, which, with its anti-ethnic and anti-cultural diversity rhetoric³, has recently gained in popularity, especially in former Communist EU member states like Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, as well as in some other countries. On the one hand, the reception of foreigners who have applied for international protection in Bulgaria is guaranteed by the national law. The State Agency for Refugees with the Council of Ministers (SAR) is the authorized institution responsible for the terms and conditions of reception of asylum seekers; it should be noted that its Chairman has significant powers, such as to make decisions on applications for international protection. Regarding the adaptation of persons seeking international protection, SAR is authorized by the Law to organize the reception and temporary accommodation of foreigners who have applied for international protection, to assist in their adaptation to Bulgarian conditions in cooperation with the Bulgarian Red Cross and other non-governmental organizations, and to organize Bulgarian language courses together with the Ministry of Education and Science (Law on Asylum and Refugees, Art. 53, para. 1).

Since 2007, the successive Bulgarian governments have developed different integration programs and strategies⁴ that generally contain a simplified expres-

² UNHCR 2013.

³ See more: Krasteva 2013; Vankova et al. 2017.

⁴ Available in Bulgarian at: <http://www.strategy.bg> (accessed October 10, 2018).

sion of the UNHCR's understanding of refugee integration and reception and integration measures such as housing, employment, education, social support, health care. These are planned to create conditions for refugee inclusion in all public sectors and levels. The latest government program, adopted in 2015, indicates that the Bulgarian state shall provide to asylum seekers on its territory a fair procedure for granting refugee status, the right to social and health insurance, free access to education, conditions for retraining and labor employment, in view of better integration into society. It affirms the mechanism of a decentralized approach to refugee integration as the institutional responsibility is given to the local self-government authorities, i.e., to the municipalities, whereby the so-called 'integration agreements' to be concluded by refugees and local authorities are set as a main integration tool. A plan for implementation of this strategy was adopted as late as July 2018.

Other important decisions on the integration of refugees in the fields of employment and education are: the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy Program for Employment and Training of Refugees, which is approved annually and has been applied since 2014; the Ordinance of the Minister of Education and Science, No. 3/6 April 2017 on the conditions and order of enrolment and training of persons seeking and receiving international protection (State gazette 2017, No 32); the Decision of the Council of Ministers, No. 373/5 July 2017 on establishing a mechanism for joint work on enrollment and retention in the educational system, of children and students at compulsory pre-school and school age⁵. These government measures can be assessed as positive, but it is still too early to judge of their effectiveness.

On the other hand, it should be mentioned that, as the legislation and the government programs are based on political decisions, the political will for their implementation is influenced by the current perceptions of populist nationalism, which aims to *close* the openness of the state borders with regard to the admission of asylum seekers, resulting not only in the construction of a wire fence at the border with Turkey, but also in the drastic reduction of the number of asylum applications (from 19,418 in 2016 to 3,700 in 2017 and 2,536 in 2018⁶), as well in the SAR's decision in 2018 to withdraw already granted statuses. In addition, no initiative has come from state institutions and local authorities with regard to the integration agreements, and no such agreements had been concluded by 2018. According to the field materials obtained in the town of Harmanli, where the largest refugee camp is located, the integration of the newly recognized refugees (those who have just been granted refugee or humanitarian status) are not the subject of any discussion at the local municipal council in this respect.

To summarize briefly, as a whole, regulatory preconditions governing the admission of asylum seekers according to European and international norms do exist, but there is still no clear regulatory mechanism for the integration of foreigners

⁵ Available in Bulgarian at: <https://aref.government.bg/bg/node/186> (accessed January 10, 2019).

⁶ Information for asylum seekers and decisions taken 01. 01. 1993 – 28. 02. 2019, State Agency for Refugees with the Council of Ministers.

granted international protection. Bulgarian politics is determined more by national security considerations (Dimitrov 2018, 261–284; Ivanova 2018) than by a shared European responsibility for the redistribution of refugee flows or by the implementation of effective measures for integration of the refugees residing here.

Public attitudes towards refugees

Among the Bulgarians, who have had no direct or even visual contact with the refugees, except for residents of the regions where the refugee camps are located (the regions of Sofia, Harmanli and Nova Zagora), three different types of attitudes have been formed in the last five years: 1) of disinterest; 2) of hostility; 3) of empathy (Erolova 2017, 338–340). The reactions of hostility, which are prevalent, have been displayed in civil protests against refugees in the villages of Telish, Plevnen district (2013 and 2014), Rozovo, Kazanlak district (2014), Kalishte, Pernik district (2014), Harmanli (2015), the Ovcha Kupel quarter of Sofia (2016); by the civil patrols, organized in the Lavov Bridge area of Sofia at the end of 2013 to prevent the free movement of asylum seekers/refugees; by the initiatives of local citizens for detention and punishment of foreigners illegally crossing the Bulgarian-Turkish border. According to a number of national representative surveys (conducted by various organizations, such as Alpha Research, Institute for Economics and International Relations, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, the UNHCR, the Institute of Population and Human Studies at Bulgarian Academy of Sciences), the negative attitudes towards the settlement of refugees predominate in Bulgarian society (Nakova 2019). While national representative surveys record general trends, focus group discussions, interviews in-depth and ethnographic observations are indicative of more specific attitudes depending on the location and the possibility of contact with refugees. In the regions where there are no refugees, such as Veliko Tarnovo in North Bulgaria, the local population is mostly informed about asylum seekers/refugees by the national media. People there build stereotyped perceptions ranging from ‘economic migrants’, ‘social burdens’ and ‘bearers of great cultural differences’ to ‘threats to national security’ and ‘a threat to our culture’. Compared with them, the residents of the regions of Garmen, Nova Zagora, Harmanli, South Bulgaria, who have had direct or indirect contacts with refugees, while taking into account the various notions suggested by the media, have developed more realistic and even positive views. For example, in the village of Krushevo, Garmen, where several refugee families were temporarily settled, the locals say: ‘They made a good impression on us. Good people. We liked them’; ‘On TV, when they talk about refugees, they say that refugees are bad, but the good ones came to us’; ‘Ours [refugees] are not like those on TV’. The respondents in the town of Harmanli have positive opinions concerning the reception and integration of refugees, but set a number of conditions, specially emphasizing education and employment: ‘I see that there are families sending their children to school, making efforts to integrate into the environment. Children really fit in perfectly here, find friends’; ‘If they [refugees] obey Bulgarian laws and work honestly, let them settle’. While the interviewed Bulgarian residents in Veliko Tarnovo are inclined not to allow the settlement of refugees in their city and do not see the benefits of their potential settlement, some of the respondents in

Harmanli point out the positive socio-economic effect of the existence of the refugee camp in the town: ‘The camp has created many new jobs positions. Inside, there are probably more Bulgarian workers than refugees...’; ‘These people [refugees] spend their money in the shops in the town and this is still beneficial to the city’. Although the interviewed officials from the local municipal administration in Harmanli have a negative and suspicious attitude towards refugees, the representatives of business (the food and commerce sectors, and public services) note a positive economic impact resulting from the presence of refugees. The local population consents to the admission of refugees but with a limiting condition; up to 10% of the total population find admission acceptable.

In past surveys on public attitudes of Bulgarians towards refugees, insufficient attention has been paid to the factors influencing the formation of attitudes. The public discourse of high-ranking officials and politicians, as well as coverage by the media, has exerted the main influence on the construction of a negative public image of refugees; to a lesser extent, so have the positions taken by the religious institutions. Since 2013, a great share of Bulgarians has developed extremely negative ideas about the Middle Eastern asylum seekers in Bulgaria – ideas based on traditional fears of the ethnic and religious *others*. Moreover, in the context of the terrorist attacks taking place in the United States and Europe, people from the Middle East are often considered as carriers of a potential threat to national security. These fears are maintained by the public discourse of certain politicians and high-ranking officials, who thereby divert public attention from other topics, or seek to popularize certain parties and to mobilize their voters. It is not possible to quote all the negative public statements made against refugees, uncritically popularized by the national and regional media, but some of the most impressive ones cannot be overlooked. In 2014, Nikolay Chirpanliev, Chairman of SAR in the period 2013–2014, made a number of negative remarks, reflected in the Bulgarian and foreign media: ‘Refugees are like the Gypsies, they are segregated and do not want to learn Bulgarian ...’; ‘Rich refugees want to go to Switzerland, Germany, Sweden and other European countries, and only Kurds, who are much worse than our Gypsies, remain here’ (Dnevnik 2014). In 2017, Elena Yoncheva, MP from the Bulgarian Socialist Party, presented the documentary ‘Border’ (‘Granitsa’), criticizing the ruling party coalition for the Bulgarian-Turkish border fence construction and for illegal crossings of the state border. In response, Krasimir Karakachanov, Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Defense and leader of the party Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Bulgarian National Movement (VMRO), stated that if he had been at the border, he would have slapped the refugees in the face and would have sent them back across the border (BTV 2017).

The media coverage of the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ usually includes direct uncritical reflections on negative public speech (Dimitrov 2018, 279) by journalists, who thereby reveal their poor knowledge of European and national legislation in the field of asylum and refugees. Issues such as ‘Who are the refugees?’, ‘How many refugees reside in Bulgaria?’, ‘What European subsidies for their reception and integration have been received so far?’, ‘How many refugees need and receive social

benefits?’, ‘What are the successful integration measures applied in other European or non-European countries?’, etc., are not discussed.

Another factor, which has a limited influence on the formation of public attitudes, is the positions expressed by the main religious institutions in Bulgaria, which represent the country’s Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant Christians, and the local Muslims. While asserting the values of compassion, humanity, and charity, these official views on the ‘refugee situation’ are not categorical or quite clear. Among certain religious leaders, a positive attitude prevails, related to various more or less popular social, educational, charitable and religious activities, but the impact of these among believers is limited: the influence of the media, which maintain a negative public image of refugees, appears to be a stronger factor of the formation of public attitudes (Erolova 2018, 458–491).

The refugees’ attitudes towards long-term settlement in Bulgaria

A number of surveys have been carried out in Bulgaria regarding the public attitudes of the host society to the reception and integration of refugees; these surveys are relevant to one side of the ‘multi-dimensional two-way process’ of integration. However, there have been an insufficient number of scientific studies on the attitudes of the other side – the refugees. The results of in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and ethnographic observations, conducted among foreigners seeking and receiving international protection in Sofia and Harmanli, present the refugees’ motivation to leave or to stay in Bulgaria, and the difficulties and challenges they face. First of all, a large number of asylum seekers/refugees have the firm intention to settle in a different European destination country, such as Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, England, and not in Bulgaria. In rare cases, they simply want to reach Europe, and in the rarest case, to reach Bulgaria, mostly in order to be reunited with family members. Those who have decided to seek international protection in an EU member state leave Bulgaria after a few months stay in the country. Foreigners who have relatives and friends in Bulgaria choose to settle in the country for an indefinite period. Most of them share that when they arrived in Bulgaria, their preliminary ideas of Europe differed from the actual impressions they received here: ‘Our expectations were that it would be easier here, but it is worse than in our home country. Everything here is contrary to what we had heard about Europe – food, education, housing, everything’. If we look at refugees as a specific group of immigrants, their unjustified expectations are not a unique phenomenon, but they are typical of the adaptation period involved in any emigration or mobility.

Interviewed asylum seekers and refugees see a place for themselves in Bulgarian society, considering that they could contribute to its development in different directions: ‘I have been living and working here for three years and paying taxes. And not just me. There is a Syrian who lives in another city. He is my friend. We came here together. He has a restaurant and also pays taxes. He has hired two Bulgarians to work there. Thus, he has created jobs for Bulgarians’; ‘I definitely can play a part in the development of the country. There are famous refugees in many countries. I can be a good example, to promote their culture and at the same time to

work for the host country'. At the same time, some of the interviewees are aware of markers of their own cultural identity, such as language, religion, customs, food, clothing, by which they differ from the host society. They see themselves as preserving these traits along with their adaptation to Bulgarian society: 'We have different cultures, and it will take time to adjust and learn Bulgarian culture, behavior'.

The decision of refugees for long-term settlement in Bulgaria depends on their personal financial capacity, on access to legislation, employment, housing, health and social services, education, and cultural adaptation to the host society. The beginning of their stay in the country, usually in the closed or open accommodation centers established by the state, is an important factor of their socio-cultural orientation and adaptation and their final decision on permanent settlement. Informed access to their rights, obligations, responsibilities during the application period for international asylum and protection is an important prerequisite for their socio-economic and educational integration. Nevertheless, according to the field-work materials, asylum seekers residing in the accommodation centers are often uninformed regarding the rights, duties and responsibilities they do or do not have, and this makes it difficult for them to 're-start' their lives outside the camps. Despite the information campaigns and the information published on the Internet or in printed brochures, asylum seekers mostly rely on unofficial information disseminated by experienced people among them.

According to the respondents, the most important conditions for their adaptation in Bulgaria are housing, employment, and access to education. With regard to housing, asylum seekers and refugees consider that the state has to provide assistance after they are granted refugee or humanitarian status and must leave the state camps: 'We are in a place where there is no communication, there is no opportunity to find a job and it is difficult for our families to survive... The other problem is that, as refugees, it is very difficult for us to find an apartment for rent. I have been working in Sofia for several months and it is very difficult to find an apartment to rent. We face a kind of discrimination only because we are refugees'. In Sofia and Harmanli, the landlords avoid renting their homes to refugees, and when they do, they usually raise the monthly rents, which additionally aggravates the financial difficulties of the refugees.

Contrary to the stereotypical notion that 'refugees are a social burden', it should be noted that only a small number of refugees receive state social assistance. For example, in Harmanli, by the middle of 2018, there were only 3 known cases of provided social assistance provided, and the payments in question were for the issuing of ID cards. The reasons for the low interest in the social system's supporting mechanisms are both the lack of awareness and the lack of knowledge and skills for communication with responsible institutions. In addition, it should be said that all respondents granted refugee/humanitarian status are aware they need health insurance, but are not satisfied with the state of the national health system.

Foreigners who have applied for international protection have the right of access to the labor market after the third month of their asylum application registration. All the respondents stress that they want to work – 'If we get status, we want

to live like other citizens, to work, to visit other cities'; 'I would like to work in the construction sector in Bulgaria ... I want to travel to Sofia and Varna to look for a job'. According to the observations made in Sofia and Harmanli, this group of foreigners is successfully employed in the food, clothing, fast food, clothing sectors and private public services (mainly cosmetics, hairdressing and translations in the so-called 'call centers'). It is also a common practice for asylum seekers/refugees to be hired by various non-governmental organizations, such as IOM, Caritas, the Bulgarian Red Cross, for service in the sphere of translations and social mediation. The majority of the male international protection holders have already set up their own restaurant, food or dress trade businesses. They hire compatriots from Syria, Iraq and Iran, as well as Bulgarians. The situation with women refugees is different. Some of them (mostly Syrian and Iraqi), because of their specific traditions and beliefs, prefer not to work and instead take care of their households, while others are ready to work full or part-time.

The socio-cultural integration of asylum seekers/refugees into Bulgarian society is largely connected with their self-recognized need to adjust to a different ethno-cultural environment and to interact with the local population. Along with – and in some cases prior to – employment and housing, the respondents in Sofia consider that learning Bulgarian and getting an education are the most important conditions for their integration in Bulgaria: 'First I will study, after that I will work'. According to the observations made at the end of September 2018, refugee children also feel satisfied by the opportunity to attend a Bulgarian school and to communicate with their peers. Their parents are even proud of them, but comment that the options for Bulgarian language training are insufficient. Some non-governmental organizations such as Caritas – Sofia, for example, have attempted to organize language courses, but the results are not impressive, which confirms the finding that Bulgarian language training should be an institutional responsibility of the state. For the interviewed refugees, Bulgarian language competency is not only a requirement for labor integration, but also an essential tool for socialization: 'Once I get a status, I will be happy to live here and only the language will be a barrier. I will be happy to live among the people here...'. Some of the members of surveyed groups are also aware of the need for cultural orientation training, which is not yet an objective of state integration programs.

In summary, it should be said that the refugees' attitudes regarding long-term settlement in Bulgaria are generally variable in time and context. They depend both on the refugees' desire to integrate by overcoming the existing differences and difficulties, and on the attitudes of local authorities and society, business and government institutions, non-governmental organizations and the media.

Concluding notes

At this stage, three main problematic points can be identified in the processes of refugee integration: the lack of a state institution responsible for the integration of refugees in all social spheres and at all levels; the lack of involvement of local authorities; and the passive role of the national and regional media in the pro-

cesses of mutual interaction and understanding between Bulgarian society and refugees, and in the promotion of successful integration initiatives. Despite the existing legislation framework and relative institutional preparedness, there is lacking a clear political conception regarding refugee integration in all public spheres – a conception comprising concrete realistic measures and mechanisms for implementation and monitoring. This leads to formality of the general approach to integration. The controversial situation of ‘open European, but closed national, doors’ with regard to the reception and integration of asylum seekers is largely due to the inconsistent Bulgarian policy, conceived, on the one hand, in the spirit of the Geneva Convention and European democratic values but influenced, on the other hand, by modern nationalist populism. This situation results in a formal implementation of the existing government programs for refugee integration and in the failure to assign the responsibility of their implementation to a specific state institution. The popularity of the anti-refugee political narrative, uncritical media coverage, and the limited influence of non-governmental organizations and religious institutions, are factors variously impacting on the public’s notion of refugees, who are increasingly seen as ‘unwanted guests’ and as ‘transit migrants’ whose movement onward to other countries is encouraged. In the case of public attitudes formed through direct contact with refugees, there are indications that a small share of Bulgarians are inclined to accept cultural diversity, to show empathy and to understand the economic benefits of the potential settlement of the newcomers.

The possible long-term adaptation of the small number of refugees in Bulgaria depends on their labor, educational, social and cultural integration, which, being a complex process, should simultaneously involve the active participation of refugees and of state and local authorities, non-governmental organizations, and business. The issues of the path to refugee integration should more often be studied in different research perspectives that would bring new nuances to the public debate on refugees and would contribute to rethinking the state’s vision of refugee integration.

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