



I-WELCOME - Reinforcing migrant women's
integration in society and the labour
market

DESKTOP RESEARCH

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**RUSE CHAMBER OF
COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY**



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1. General Introduction

Bulgaria is strategically located in the South Eastern corner of the European Union, being one of the gates into Europe along the Balkan and the East Mediterranean migration routes. Prior to 2013, the country was not a preferred entry or transit destination for migrants.¹

The 2015 migration crisis transformed Bulgaria into an important migrant transit country. The number of arrivals rose sharply, which can be seen from the figures below.²

According to the official data of the Bulgarian State Agency for Refugees the number of asylum-seekers from foreign countries in the past four years (since the beginning of the Syrian crisis) has marked a sharp increase: from 1,387 persons in 2012, 7,144 in 2013, 11,081 in 2014, and 20,391 in 2015.³ Despite the rates being low compared to those in Western countries, the graphic shows that there was a significant rise in the number of applicants for international protection in Bulgaria, but the state was not prepared to respond adequately to the situation in short period of time.

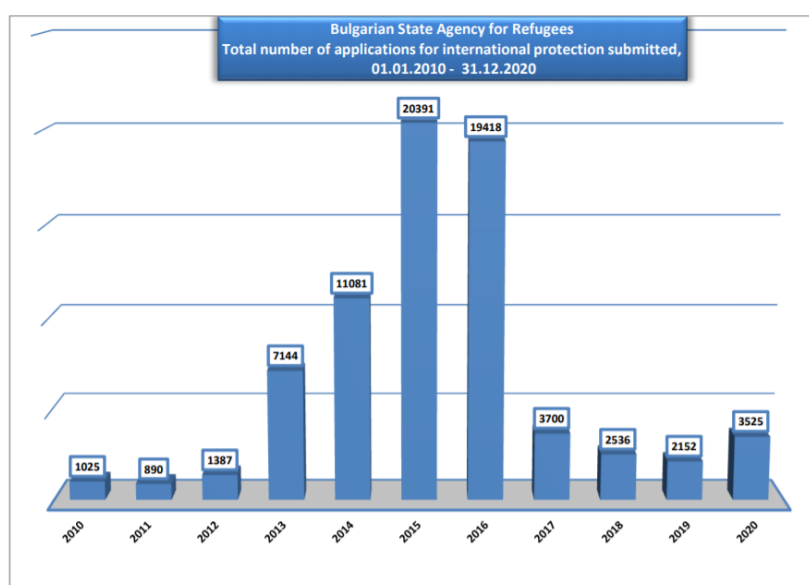


Figure 1: Number of applicants for international protection in Bulgaria – according to Bulgarian State Agency for Refugees, 2020

¹ UN International Organization for Migration. (2016). Bulgaria. Retrieved January 2021 from

<https://www.iom.int/countries/bulgaria>

² Caritas Sofia. (2019). Refugee Women and the labour market in Bulgaria. Retrieved February 2021 from

<https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/librarydoc/refugee-women-and-the-labour-market-in-bulgaria>

³ Kyuchukov, L. (2016). Impact of the Refugee Crisis on Bulgarian Society and Politics: Fears But No Hatred.

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TOP 5 COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN IN THE PERIOD 01.01.2020 – 31.12.2020 г.

AFGHANISTAN	1 736
SYRIA	1 089
IRAQ	239
MOROCCO	114
PAKISTAN	85

Figure 2: Top five countries of origin in Bulgaria – according to Bulgarian State Agency for Refugees, 2020

However, the vast majority of asylum seekers have no intention of remaining in Bulgaria. Many people simply leave without applying for asylum, others who do apply most often continue their journey before their application is processed. And even after being granted asylum, still a few refugees decide to move to Western Europe later on.⁴ Part of their decision not to stay is influenced by the strong anti-migrant sentiment in the Bulgaria.

In 2014 Bulgaria decided to respond to the growing number of refugees by building a 30-km long and 3-meters tall wall at its border with Turkey.⁵ Although the border is supposed to prevent migrants from illegally entering the European Union through Bulgaria, the government's response to the refugee crisis sent a different message to the people. It painted immigrants as criminals and negative sentiments against refugees quickly began to form.

Since the completion of the border many vigilantes' patrols have appeared. One such patrol is the Bulgarian National Movement Shipka.⁶ Its members believe that they are protecting Bulgaria and EU from illegal immigration by treating migrants violently and committing unlawful actions. What they are doing is scaring migrants away, forcing them to choose much riskier routes

⁴ Caritas Sofia. (2019). *op.cit.* Retrieved February 2021 from <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/librarydoc/refugee-women-and-the-labour-market-in-bulgaria>

⁵ The New York Times. (2015). Bulgaria Puts Up a New Wall, but This One Keeps People Out. Retrieved February 2021 from <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/06/world/europe/bulgaria-puts-up-a-new-wall-but-this-one-keeps-people-out.html>

⁶ NBC News. (2017). Bulgarian Vigilantes Patrol Turkey Border to Keep Migrants Out. Retrieved February 2021 from <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/europes-border-crisis/bulgarian-vigilantes-patrol-turkey-border-keep-migrants-out-n723481>

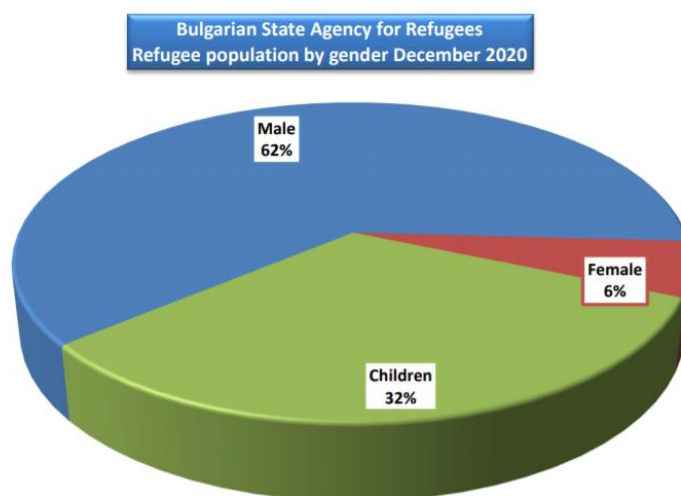


through the sea. However, there are ongoing criminal proceedings against such patrols. Many organizations have spoken against the border and the human rights, and claimed wrong such violent actions. But if the government does not change its national politics towards refugees and immigrants, setting a better example to be followed, the problem will not be easily solved.

Despite the numerous difficulties that immigrants and refugees face on their way to and in Bulgaria, the UNHCR representative in Bulgaria estimates that the refugees and humanitarian status holders who live in the country at present are approximately 1,000–2,000 in number.⁷ However, they are mostly living in the capital – Sofia or the bigger cities. There are regions in Bulgaria where refugees and immigrants do not live.

2. The presence and characteristics of migrant women

According to the Bulgarian State Agency for Refugees, as of December 2020, only 6% of asylum seekers in 2020 were women and the top countries of origin for all asylum seeking persons in Bulgaria were Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq, Morocco and Pakistan. The Bulgarian State Agency for Refugees currently does not keep gender statistics on the countries of origin, marital status or level of education of those arriving in Bulgaria.



⁷ Caritas Bulgaria. (2019). The Bulgarian Migration Paradox – Migration and Development in Bulgaria. Retrieved February 2021 from <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/librarydoc/the-bulgarian-migration-paradox-migration-and-development-in-bulgaria>

Figure 3: Refugee population by gender in Bulgaria – according to Bulgarian State Agency for Refugees, 2020

Based on the statistics on the level of education of all migrants who arrived in 2020, we see that a large part of those who arrived have a low level of education, with only 2% holding a university degree.

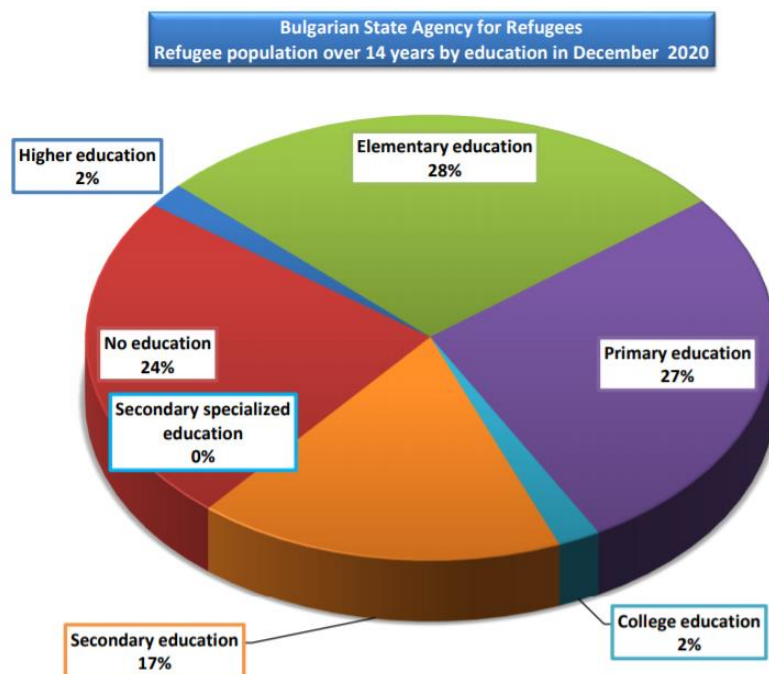


Figure 4: Refugee population by education in Bulgaria – according to Bulgarian State Agency for Refugees, 2020

However, in a study by Caritas Sofia developed under The MIND Project (Migration. Interconnectedness. Development) named The Migration Paradox⁸, we find a graphic of the emigration and immigration by age from which we can draw conclusions that the largest migration age group in Bulgaria is the one 20-59 years.

Age	0-19		20-59		60+		Total
	number	%	number	%	number	%	
Immigrants	5,256	20.5%	16,162	63.1%	4,179	16.3%	25,597
Emigrants	4,625	14.6%	24,766	78.4%	2,195	6.9%	31,586

⁸ *ibidem*

Figure 5: Emigration and immigration by age (2017) – Table drawn up by Caritas Sofia in The Migration Paradox

3. Migrant Women in the Labour Market

The obstacles to finding employment in Bulgaria for any migrant are many – not speaking Bulgarian language, lack of formal qualifications, no previous working experience, to name just a few, but they seem to be even more numerous for refugee women.⁹

For the purpose of this desk research, we have contacted and interviewed members of specialized NGOs, some of them migrant women, settled in Bulgaria years ago. According to their experience migrant women often come from Islamic countries, where if they do not have permission from their husbands, they cannot work. In her work she has observed that migrant women face many difficulties when it comes to entering the labor market in Bulgaria. First of all the work-related legislation is only in Bulgarian language, so women need a cultural mediator to help them understand what is written in their contract and what working conditions they are being offered. There are some women who lack working habits due to not having any work-related experience in the country of origin. These women have to learn about work-personal life balance and often in a more stressful way. They also have to face the fact that they are going to work in a mixed-gender environment, which for some is a cultural shock.

Refugee women seeking employment may have expectations which make finding a job more difficult, such as working in a female only environment or having a part time job.¹⁰

There is also the problem that in Bulgaria the work legislation is not that flexible when it comes to part-time work and this can be extremely difficult for migrants who have to balance many new obligations and adapt to the Bulgarian lifestyle. Sometimes migrant women do not have previous education and they have to go through professional training. Many migrant women are also mothers of many children and experience difficulties when they want to enroll their children in kindergarten. This prevents them from entering the labour market as there is no one to take care of their kids. But one of the biggest obstacles is not knowing Bulgarian language, as well as the process of overcoming of the cultural barriers.

But there is a part, mostly women who have an education, who upon their arrival in Bulgaria start looking for a job. Those who know English apply to Call Centers with Arabic or Farsi and English

⁹ Caritas Sofia. (2019). op.cit. Retrieved February 2021 from <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/librarydoc/refugee-women-and-the-labour-market-in-bulgaria>

¹⁰ *ibidem*

language. There is also a large number of women working in tailoring companies, as saleswomen or in beauty salons.

Furthermore, they are unfamiliar with formal recruitment processes and require assistance in writing CVs, cover letters and preparing for interviews. Refugees in Bulgaria, women in particular, also lack the social networks essential for finding employment.¹¹

There are organizations and NGOs such as Caritas Sofia and the Council of Refugee Women in Bulgaria that provide assistance and guidance with job searches, skills development, cultural orientation for migrant women. By doing this assure that migrant women have a better access to the labor market in Bulgaria. In the figure below we can see that Caritas Sofia has provided help to access the labour market more than 500 beneficiaries.

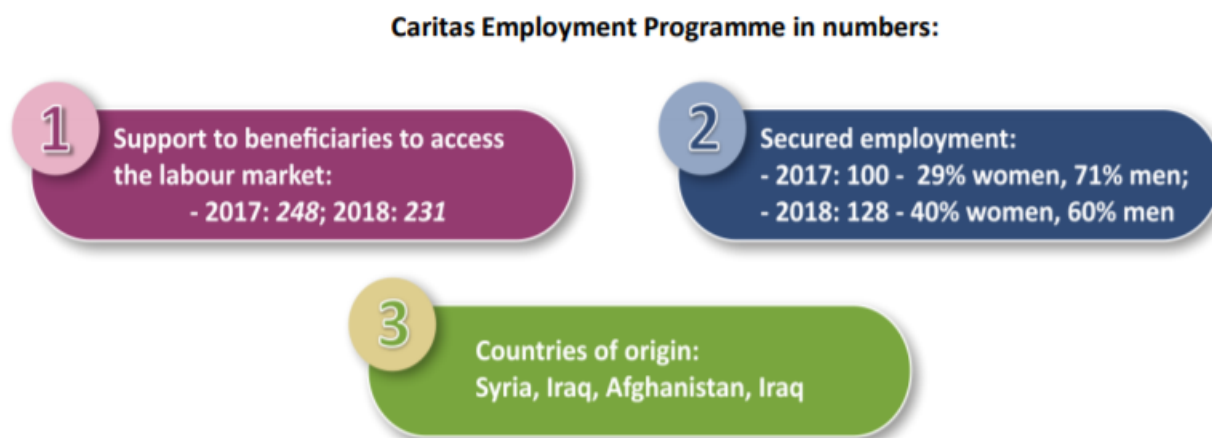


Figure 6: Caritas Employment programme in Bulgaria – Жените бежанки и пазарът на труда в България, 2019 Каритас

What is more, there are very active NGOs in the field of professional and career development of refugees – like Caritas Sofia and the Bulgarian Red Cross, who are facilitating the job matching process with employers by organizing job fairs and individual career counselling.¹²

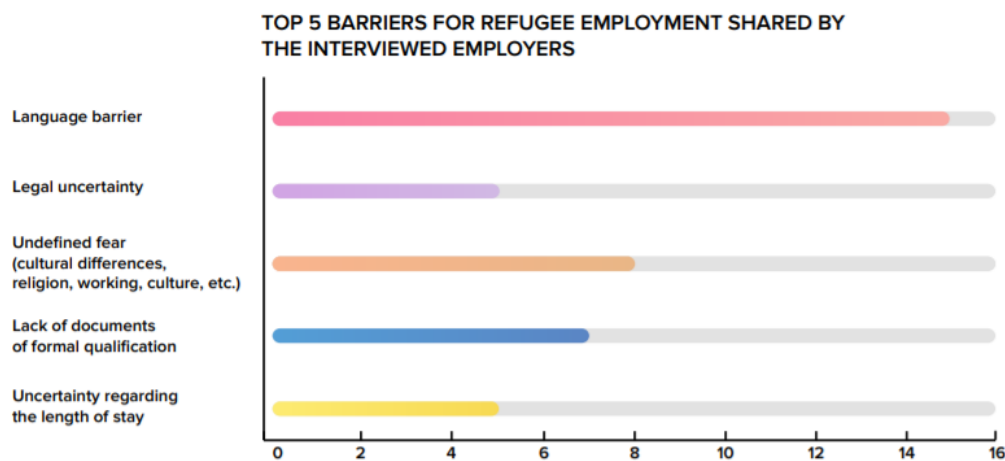
¹¹ *ibidem*

¹² Catro Bulgaria. (2018). Bulgarian Labour Market Needs As Key To Refugee Employment. Retrieved February 2021 from <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/librarydoc/bulgarian-labour-market-needs-as-key-to-refugee-employment>

Without the help of various organizations, the migrants will face way more difficulties establishing a life in Bulgaria. On a national level there are few mechanisms, such as the Bulgarian State Agency for Refugees, that provide guidance and assistance to migrants.

The role of these NGOs is crucial for the communication process between the refugees and the employers, as they provide support to the job matching process with translation and cultural mediation services. During the last 2 years (2017-2018) Caritas Sofia has organised altogether 3 job fairs where in total 219 refugees have found employment.¹³

Refugees and humanitarian status holders with registered working contracts are few. In 2015 the National Revenue Agency registered 175 men and 17 women with working contracts, adding up to 204 working contracts as some of them were holding more than one contract at a time. In 2016, the number of working contracts decreased slightly to 136 men and 26 women with working contracts. Furthermore, according to observations of Caritas Sofia, an approximate of 60% of asylum seekers and refugees work without a contract, which exposes them to great risk of exploitation.¹⁴



GRAPH 8: Top 5 barriers for refugee employment shared by the interviewed employers

Figure 7: Barriers for refugee employment - Private Sector Engagement in the Employment of Beneficiaries of International Protection <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/librarydoc/bulgaria-private-sector-engagement-in-the-employment-of-beneficiaries-of-international-protection>

¹³ *ibidem*

¹⁴ UNHCR Bulgaria, Sakkab, A. (2017). WHERE THERE IS A WILL, THERE IS A WAY: Private Sector Engagement in the Employment of Beneficiaries of International Protection. Retrieved February 2021 from <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/librarydoc/bulgaria-private-sector-engagement-in-the-employment-of-beneficiaries-of-international-protection>

4. State of Art regarding Policies/ Guidelines

Bulgaria has a historical track record of accepting refugees. The two most significant instances of humanitarian hospitality in Bulgarian history were towards the Armenians seeking to escape the genocide in Turkey, and towards the White Guard Russians fleeing the Bolshevik revolution. Those two waves of refugees date from the period between the two World Wars.¹⁵

However, when it comes to policies, legislation or guidelines Bulgaria has a significant lack of adequate tools and regulations that facilitate the integration of migrants in the country. Significant efforts to develop a strategy on migration have been put since the beginning of the refugee crisis in 2015. In this year the National Strategy on Migration, Asylum and Integration for 2015-2020 had been developed. However, this Strategy lists the security of the EU's external borders as a priority while integration takes second place. The Strategy announced an action plan to assist refugees in accessing education, Bulgarian language training, employment, recognition of professional qualifications, accommodation and integration in the “social, cultural and civic life” of Bulgaria.¹⁶

The state offers one specialized measure on employment for refugees: the National Programme for Refugee Employment and Training of the Employment Agency. It includes language classes, professional trainings and salary subsidies up to 12 months. However, in reality, only very few refugees are able to benefit from the program. In 2015 and 2016 combined, only 2 refugees have undergone the program.¹⁷ In addition to the Strategy, in 2016 Bulgaria adopted a law on Labor Migration and Labor Mobility.

Even though Bulgaria has some legislation on migration, the country is inefficient when it comes to providing housing, language courses, humanitarian aid or recognizing education or professional capacity of migrants and refugees. The process of accreditation of educational degrees is extremely long and complex, aggravated by high fees and additional costs for translation and notarization.¹⁸

Despite the lack of adequate policies on a national level, there are numerous NGOs that work with immigrants and refugees such as Refugee advisory board Bulgaria, Bulgarian Red Cross's

¹⁵ Caritas Bulgaria. (2019). *op.cit.* Retrieved February 2021 from <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/librarydoc/the-bulgarian-migration-paradox-migration-and-development-in-bulgaria>

¹⁶ Caritas Sofia. (2019). *op.cit.* Retrieved February 2021 from <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/librarydoc/refugee-women-and-the-labour-market-in-bulgaria>

¹⁷ UNHCR Bulgaria, Sakkab, A. (2017). *op.cit.* Retrieved February 2021 from <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/librarydoc/bulgaria-private-sector-engagement-in-the-employment-of-beneficiaries-of-international-protection>

¹⁸ *ibidem*

refugee-migrants service, Caritas Bulgaria, The Council of Refugee Women in Bulgaria, Bulgarian council of refugees and migrants, and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Bulgaria (UNHCR). The offers support to migrants for their integration, language training, humanitarian aid and cultural orientation.

When we look at the statistics on The Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX), which measures policies to integrate migrants in countries, is it visible that Bulgaria is doing below average.

Non-EU newcomers to Bulgaria face many obstacles to integration under Bulgaria’s slightly unfavourable policies. Bulgaria’s approach to integration is classified by MIPEX as “equality on paper” only. As in most Central and Eastern European countries, immigrants in Bulgaria enjoy basic rights and security but not equal opportunities.¹⁹

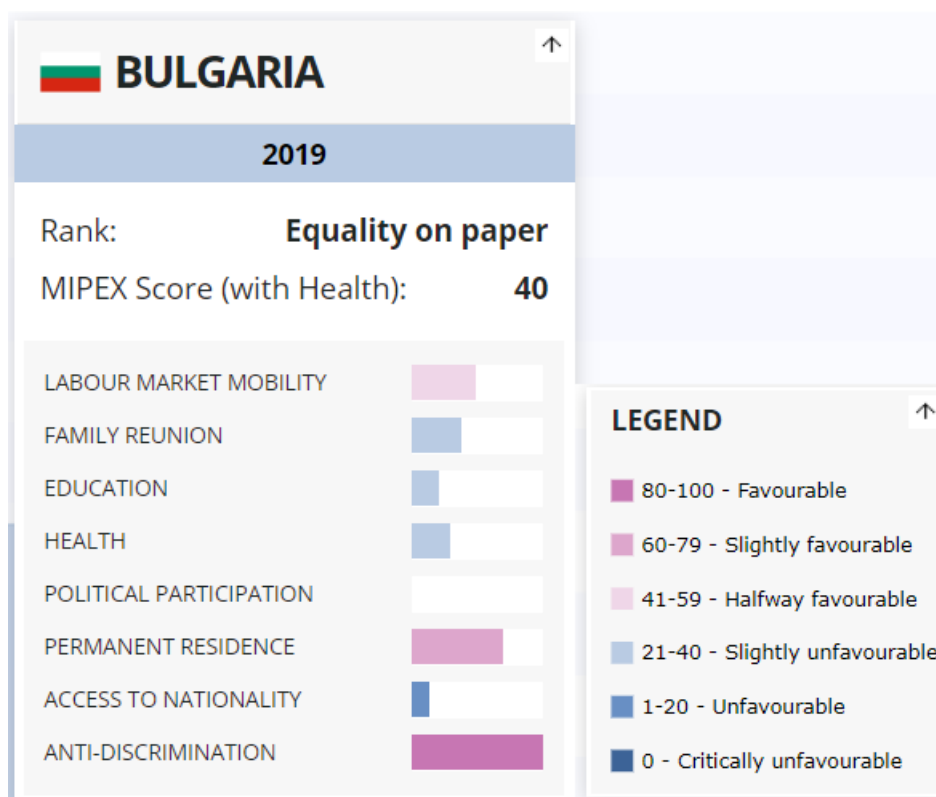


Figure 8: MIPEX score Bulgaria – Migrant Integration Policy Index 2020, Online <https://www.mipex.eu/bulgaria>

¹⁹ Online Migrant Integration Policy Index for Bulgaria, 2019. Online <https://www.mipex.eu/bulgaria>

Bulgaria's MIPEX score has improved by +3 points in the last five years. Immigrants now enjoy more support for equal opportunities, due to improvements in the labour market and education. The 2018 amendment of the Labour Migration and Labour Mobility Act established that family members have the same social rights as Bulgarian citizens. Immigrants and their children no longer face impediments to their access to compulsory education, and receive language support at school.²⁰

With regard to access to education for applicants and recipients of protection, the entry into force of the Preschool and School Education Act was the key. It allowed a change in the entire regulatory framework, with various aspects of the topic of refugee education finding their natural place in each regulation. What was happening in practice at school during this period? All children whose families had expressed a desire to continue their education were enrolled in school. They were provided with everything they needed and with the help of non-governmental organizations. Additional training was conducted in Bulgarian as a foreign language.²¹

Access to education and Bulgarian language courses are of great help to migrants. The Council of Refugee Women in Bulgaria has also developed language phrasebooks Arabic-Bulgarian Phrasebook for Refugees and Farsi/Dari-Bulgarian Phrasebook for Refugees²² which anyone can download for free.

Caritas Bulgaria and the Bulgarian Red Cross's refugee-migrants service provide training and courses in Bulgarian language. In addition to them in July 2020 the Association of Teachers of Bulgarian as a Foreign Language (ATBFL) was established in Sofia.

Despite all of these, Bulgaria needs effective legislation in the field of migration to guarantee the rights of migrants and to facilitate their integration into society, their access to basic education and the labor market. In this way Bulgaria will become a more attractive and desirable country.

²⁰ *ibidem*

²¹ UNHCR Bulgaria, Bulgarian council on refugees and migrants. (2020). Academic Bulletin "Refugees: today and tomorrow" 03/2020. Retrieved February 2021 from https://bcm-bg.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/3.2020.Academic.Bulletin_WEB.pdf

²² Council of Refugee Women in Bulgaria. Phrasebooks for Refugees. Online <https://crw-bg.org/en/phrasebooks>

Positive changes on MIPEX indicators:

- Access to social security and assistance
- Access to compulsory and non-compulsory education
- Language instruction
- Communicative/academic fluency
- Language instruction standards

Negative changes on MIPEX indicators:

- Access to self-employment

Figure 9: Changes on MIPEX indicators in Bulgaria – Migrant Integration Policy Index 2020, <https://www.mipex.eu/bulgaria>

5. Other training programmes/ initiatives

GOOD PRACTICE 1	
Name	The Council of Refugee Women in Bulgaria
Description (50-70 words)	The Council of Refugee Women in Bulgaria is an association founded in 2003 in Sofia by nine women who came from Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan. Linda Awanis is the current Chair of the Council of Refugee Women in Bulgaria. The association helps all refugees and asylum seekers in the process of their integration in Bulgarian society.
Key Stakeholders/ Provider	The Council of Refugee Women in Bulgaria
Level (Organisational, Regional, Local, National)	National / regional level
Type (Digital Skills, Professional Skills etc.)	Humanitarian aid; professional and social skills
Tools/Resources/ Services	The association provides teachings on topics such as gender equality, awareness raising,

	gender-based violence and the right of the survivors to receive help. It provides social mediation and humanitarian assistance.
Link/ Website	https://crw-bg.org/en

GOOD PRACTICE 2	
Name	Caritas Sofia's Migration and Integration Department
Description (50-70 words)	Caritas Sofia provides comprehensive services to aid effective adaptation and integration of asylum-seeking people refugees, and third country nationals
Key Stakeholders/ Provider	Caritas Sofia
Level (Organisational, Regional, Local, National)	National / regional level
Type (Digital Skills, Professional Skills etc.)	Professional and social skills; access social and health services, education and employment
Tools/Resources/ Services	Educational activities and Bulgarian language courses for foreigners
Link/ Website	https://www.caritas-sofia.org/en/groups/refugees-and-asylum-seekers

GOOD PRACTICE 3	
Name	Association of Teachers of Bulgarian as a Foreign Language (ATBFL)
Description (50-70 words)	The Association is an independent, voluntary public organization based in Sofia. It provides assistance for the professional development of teachers of Bulgarian as a foreign language as well as developing and teaching courses and training materials for migrants and refugees.
Key Stakeholders/ Provider	Association of Teachers of Bulgarian as a Foreign Language
Level (Organisational, Regional, Local, National)	National level
Type (Digital Skills, Professional Skills etc.)	Professional and social skills

Tools/Resources/ Services	Educational activities and Bulgarian language courses for foreigners
Link/ Website	http://bglanguageteachers.org/ https://www.facebook.com/bglanguageteachers/

GOOD PRACTICE 4

Name	Bulgarian Red Cross's refugee-migrants service
Description (50-70 words)	The Bulgarian Red Cross's refugee-migrants service is committed to facilitating refugee integration, to preventing the isolation of migrants, and to promoting tolerance towards both groups in the Bulgarian society.
Key Stakeholders/ Provider	Bulgarian Red Cross
Level (Organisational, Regional, Local, National)	National level
Type (Digital Skills, Professional Skills etc.)	Humanitarian aid; social skills
Tools/Resources/ Services	Assisting the most vulnerable refugees, to confront the xenophobia and to raise the public awareness and the tolerance towards the refugees in Bulgaria.
Link/ Website	https://en.redcross.bg/activities/activities8

GOOD PRACTICE 5

Name	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Bulgaria (UNHCR)
Description (50-70 words)	Provides assistance to the authorities and civil society organizations working directly or indirectly on the protection of refugees, and supports the further development of the national protection system within the constantly evolving pan-European asylum system
Key Stakeholders/ Provider	UNHCR in Bulgaria
Level (Organisational, Regional, Local, National)	National level
Type (Digital Skills, Professional Skills etc.)	Social skills
Tools/Resources/ Services	Providing legal protection; monitoring living conditions in refugee centers; promoting



	integration; offering protection for vulnerable groups and stateless persons
Link/ Website	https://www.unhcr.org/bg/

GOOD PRACTICE 6	
Name	Bulgarian council on refugees and migrants
Description (50-70 words)	Is an association of organisations acting in the field of asylum and migration in Bulgaria
Key Stakeholders/ Provider	Bulgarian council on refugees and migrants
Level (Organisational, Regional, Local, National)	National level
Type (Digital Skills, Professional Skills etc.)	Professional and social skills
Tools/Resources/ Services	Protection and integration of refugees and migrants. The association works on various project and develops materials, organizes teachings and trainings that help facilitating the process of integration of refugees
Link/ Website	https://bcm-bg.org/en/

GOOD PRACTICE 7	
Name	St Anna Integration Centre for Refugees and Migrants in Sofia
Description (50-70 words)	Civil society organization acting in the field of asylum and migration in Bulgaria
Key Stakeholders/ Provider	Caritas Sofia
Level (Organisational, Regional, Local, National)	Regional level
Type (Digital Skills, Professional Skills etc.)	Professional and social skills; humanitarian aid
Tools/Resources/ Services	Various assistance including counselling, providing information about living in Bulgaria translation and consultation, Bulgarian language trainings
Link/ Website	https://migrantlife.bg/st-anna-center-for-refugee-and-migrant-integration-cc

6. Conclusion/ Summary

When the refugee crisis in 2015 began so did the number of people seeking asylum in Bulgaria. However, their number is considerably lower compared to Western Europe countries. There are many reasons for this, one of it being the strong anti-migrant sentiment in the Bulgaria.

Even tough in the period between the two world wars Bulgaria used to accept refugees and currently the country has legislation and institutions working in order to facilitate the integration of migrants in the Bulgarian society, the actions remain mostly “on paper”. Things related to integration, humanitarian aid, language training, job assistance, cultural mediation and legal explanation and assistance are carried out almost exclusively by non-governmental organizations and the private sector, which on its own initiative organize events, seminars, provide help and assistance to third-country nationals.

When it comes to achieving social and labour inclusion of migrant women, we see that generally they face greater obstacles – not knowing Bulgarian language, lack of formal education, no previous working experience, needing more time to adapt to the working-environment, and help with balancing personal-work life.

Those who stay in Bulgaria receive support in order to access the job by several NGOs working in the field.

Despite the efforts by non-governmental organizations and the private sector regarding migrant integration and inclusion there are many issues to be solved, including stronger involvement of the state.



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