

COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACHES TO INCLUSION OF MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES IN BULGARIA

RESEARCH SUMMARY

November 2017

I. INTRODUCTION

In 2017, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation commissioned a series of research projects on community-based approaches to refugee and migrant inclusion in different countries in Europe (Bulgaria, Serbia, Turkey, Ukraine, and Western Europe), the Middle East (Jordan and Lebanon), and Africa (South Africa). The purpose of the research was to identify, document, and learn from relevant experiences in supporting inclusion of migrants, refugees, asylum-seekers, and Internally Displaced People (IDPs) in communities in different parts of the world. It is envisioned that the research findings from various contexts will aid reflection, learning and strategy development among a wide range of stakeholders in the field of refugee and migrant integration around the world.

This document summarises key findings from the research in Bulgaria. The views expressed are those of the author based on research as outlined and do not necessarily represent those of the Mott Foundation or its trustees.

II. METHODOLOGY

The methods employed for conducting the research were desk research and fieldwork.

The desk research covered an overview of the relevant legislation, strategic documents, statistical data, studies, sociological surveys, relevant websites, project presentations and brochures, as well as media coverage of the refugee issues. The desk research provided valuable information on the legislative, institutional, policy, cultural, and social environment in which the processes of refugee integration and community inclusion take place. It also helped to identify and document the community-based approaches to inclusion of migrants and refugees applied so far in Bulgaria.

The fieldwork consisted of meetings and in-depth interviews with 36 representatives of the key stakeholders—employees of the Bulgarian State Agency for Refugees, including its territorial units in Harmanly and Banya, representatives of civil society organisations (CSOs), local governments and business, as well as civil activists, journalists, volunteers and researchers. It

complemented and extended the knowledge obtained in the desk research and allowed relevant conclusions to be drawn. The interviews took place in July 2017.

III. KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

Context

According to official statistics, from January 1993 to July 2017, 81,620 people requested protection in Bulgaria and 23,966 (29%) were successful. The data clearly shows that prior to the Syrian refugee crisis in 2013, only small numbers of people were seeking protection in Bulgaria, but since then the number has increased sharply, reaching 20,391 in 2015, compared to 1,387 in 2012. It is not surprising then that both the governmental and non-governmental sectors were unprepared to deal with such a scale of refugee issues, including the humanitarian aid and integration process. It needed time and a lot of joint effort to start overcoming the problems one by one, however some – such as the lack of a well-coordinated and state supported integration process – still remain.

A widely shared opinion is that most refugees perceive Bulgaria as a transit country – i.e. an unavoidable obstacle on their route to Western Europe where some want to unite with friends and family, others expect to achieve a better standard of life than in Bulgaria, and others are attracted by the generous social systems of Western Europe.

It is believed that only a small number of refugees and migrants want to make a new home in Bulgaria. Bearing in mind the country's weak social system, we suggest that those who want to stay are certainly not doing so for the social benefits and would do their best to integrate as quickly as possible.

General conclusion

A range of civil society initiatives have been undertaken in support of the refugee integration and community inclusion process in Bulgaria. Most have taken place in the capital Sofia, where the highest concentration of refugees and migrants are situated.

Among the initiatives we have identified: integration services provided to refugees; initiatives for social empowerment; mentorship programmes; social mediation; exploratory visits; educational and sports initiatives; cultural, sport, food and other community events; human libraries; green initiatives, and initiatives promoting tolerance and battling against hate speech. The types of initiatives implemented by CSOs depend to a great extent on the priorities of the funding organisations.

Most apply a combination of approaches to community inclusion, including: bringing together local residents and migrants/refugees through regular or occasional interaction; enabling local residents to benefit from interaction with migrants; and promoting the inclusion of migrants into the host community.

Government response to refugee community inclusion

The legislative framework for the integration of refugees and migrants in Bulgaria is already established, but the institutional and policy frameworks are not yet sufficiently developed. Bulgaria has a national strategy on migration, asylum and integration, but no action plans for its implementation. Furthermore, there is no state-funded integration programme and no state institution authorised or appointed responsible for the overall operative management, coordination and monitoring of the refugee integration process. Many institutions are involved in the process, albeit passively, but there is no coordination of their efforts.

In the absence of a state-funded integration programme and any institution with responsibility to coordinate and support the integration process, in practice the refugees are left to integrate on their own or with the help of CSOs, which although they do an excellent job, are unable to provide either full coverage or sustainability of services because of their dependency on external funding sources.

Civil society response to refugee community inclusion

Despite the unfavourable, sometimes even hostile, environment and the personal threats often received by human rights activists and CSOs, they continue to help people in need. In fact, it is CSOs who support refugees at every step during and after the procedure of seeking protection. They also assist refugees in their efforts to integrate into Bulgarian society and work with local people to facilitate the community inclusion process.

However, it is impossible to determine the effectiveness of civil society initiatives as their impact on migrants, the host community and the environment as a whole, has never been assessed.

Main barriers to inclusion

Although Bulgarian legislation provides plenty of rights and opportunities for the integration and social inclusion of people granted protection status, most are not yet easily exercised. The main barriers include:

- The lack of working mechanisms for effective implementation of the legislation that provides many rights and opportunities for the integration and social inclusion of refugees and migrants granted protection status.
- The lack of a systemic approach and any state-supported programme for the integration of refugees and migrants.
- The lack of an institution responsible for the integration process on behalf of the state.
- The insufficiency of flexible long-term funding, which limits sustainable impact and restrains CSOs from being innovative and creative, or experimenting with new ideas and approaches.
- And last but not least, the fear of Bulgarians, caused by:
 - the lack of unbiased general information regarding refugee issues

- insufficiency of information and poor communication of government plans and financial commitments in regard to refugees
- great distrust in the capacity of the state to deal with issues, which makes many people feel insecure and frightened
- the lack of trust that politicians and institutions will defend citizens' best interests
- associations with the failed Roma integration, which make Bulgarians fear that another marginalised group is about to appear, multiplying the existing problems with non-integrated Roma
- associations with radical Islam, which is responsible for killing and maiming people in terrorist attacks, including in Europe.

Main successes in inclusion

It is difficult to present irrefutable success stories in the absence of a systemic approach to the issues and any impact assessment. We can, however, identify initiatives with great potential to improve the refugee inclusion process if implemented systematically on a long-term basis. For example:

- Mentorship programmes (currently implemented by [Caritas Sofia](#)) in which every participating refugee has a Bulgarian mentor, who provides social assistance (help in accessing the labour market, healthcare and social systems, financial services, etc.) as well as support in learning the language. The programme is designed after the Big brother/Big sister/Big buddy programmes successfully applied in the US.
- Labour exchanges, which are an excellent, very practical initiative intermediating between employers and refugees and helping both sides to reach each other. There is no doubt that labour market integration is instrumental to the community inclusion process, since having a job provides not only income but also social contact.
- Work with children, which is essential for community inclusion in the long term. One of the most noticeable initiatives is the [Multi Kulti Collective](#) programme for children, which brings together Bulgarian and migrant and refugee children to overcome social barriers while participating in cultural, educational and sporting events. These range from creative workshops such as astronomy, robotics, composting, calligraphy and mehndi (Indian body art), cooking, chocolate crafting, etc, to playing sports in and out of doors (climbing, cricket), and from learning languages while making bread to visiting interactive museums.
- Green initiatives are another way to bring together representatives from one or different communities united by the power of nature. An interesting example from Sofia is the work of refugees and local residents in the public permaculture garden in the Vitosha region of Sofia. It brings both communities together and helps local residents to see the refugees not as a threat but as ordinary people, having families, working for their food, growing crops, etc.

- Cultural, sporting, culinary and other community events, which celebrate diversity and turn the spotlight on the human faces, stories, culture, traditions and cuisine of refugees and migrants. These events combine several approaches to community inclusion – they bring refugees and local communities together, enable a positive interaction between them, enabling opportunities for local residents to benefit from interaction with refugees and migrants, and so promoting the inclusion of migrants into the host community.

More examples can be found in the full research report.

The future of refugee inclusion in Bulgaria

Since Bulgaria is perceived as a transit route, there is no national debate on refugee integration and community inclusion. However, in a wider world context where nearly 20 people are forcibly displaced every minute as a result of conflict or persecution, and where climate change is likely to force more and more people away from home, even countries not currently attractive for migration, like Bulgaria, must learn how to cope with the forthcoming migration challenges. This means finding ways to successfully integrate newcomers while taking into account all national security aspects of that process, working out how to include them socially to avoid marginalisation and radicalisation, and how to peacefully interact and benefit from each other's knowledge, entrepreneurial initiative and labour capacity.

Now, when the number of migrants is still small and easily manageable, is the perfect time for Bulgaria to build up an effective well-coordinated integration system by testing good integration practices and social inclusion models.

IV. FUTURE RESEARCH AND LEARNING NEEDS

An impact assessment of refugee integration and community inclusion initiatives is needed. Initiatives implemented to date are not numerous nor have they been going long enough to have had a noticeable impact on migrants, the host community or the environment as a whole. However, if any systemic and long-term approach is to be applied, such assessment, including a preliminary (benchmark) survey, would be extremely useful for the strategic development and decision-making process.

V. ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yordanka Gancheva is an NGO activist and researcher with more than 20years' experience in research activities including socio-economic analyses, analyses of business environments, transaction costs, administrative barriers to business, licensing and permit regimes, etc. Her research career started in 1994 when she joined the team at the Institute for Market Economics in Sofia, Bulgaria, as a Financial Manager, then an Analyst and later a Senior Researcher. In 2004 she became one of the initiators and co-founders of the Economic Policy Research Institute in Skopje, Macedonia, where she held the position of Research Director until October 2008. Yordanka is also a founder and board member of three Bulgarian NGOs – Access to Information

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