

COMMUNITY BASED APPROACHES TO INCLUSION OF MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES IN BULGARIA

“No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background, or his religion ... if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love.”
Nelson Mandela

INTRODUCTION

The present report reflects the results of a research commissioned by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation with the aim of identifying and documenting effective community-based approaches to inclusion and social cohesion within the communities where refugees are living.

The research was conducted in June-August 2017 and used desk research and field work methods for collecting the necessary data.

The report presents the country context and makes an overview of the legal and institutional environment in which the refugees' integration and community inclusion happen as well as an overview of the cultural and social norms that are guiding or frustrating the inclusion process. It pays special attention to the media coverage, the direct and indirect messages it sends to public and their impact on public opinion and attitudes towards refugees and migrants.

The report also describes the identified community inclusion initiatives implemented in Bulgaria so far and presents the main sources of funding of the community inclusion process, including some funding related problems. It reflects the professional opinion and work experience of more than 30 experts working on the refugees' integration and community inclusion issues, which were interviewed within the field work conducted in July and August 2017.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CSO	Civil Society Organization
EBRD	Economic Bank for Reconstruction and Development
EEA	European Economic Area
EU	European Union
IOM	International Organization for Migration
MP	Member of Parliament
NCMI	National Council on Migration and Integration
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
RRC	Registration and Reception Centre
SAR	State Agency for Refugees
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

COUNTRY CONTEXT

The statistics provided by the State Agency for Refugees (SAR) show that between January 1993 and July 2017 - 81,620 people had requested protection in Bulgaria, which was granted to 23,966 people (29%) - 12,917 were given refugee status and the remaining 11,049 obtained humanitarian status.

Table 1: Number of people requesting international protection in Bulgaria and the decisions taken in the period 01.01.1993 - 31.07.2017

<i>Year</i>	<i>Number of requests for protection</i>	<i>Granted refugee status</i>	<i>Granted humanitarian status</i>	<i>Request denied</i>	<i>Ceased procedure</i>	<i>Total number of decisions</i>
1993	276	0	0	0	0	0
1994	561	0	0	0	0	0
1995	451	73	14	6	28	121
1996	283	144	13	28	132	317
1997	429	145	2	28	88	263
1998	834	87	7	104	235	433
1999	1,349	180	380	198	760	1,518
2000	1,755	267	421	509	996	2,193
2001	2,428	385	1,185	633	657	2,860
2002	2,888	75	646	781	1,762	3,264
2003	1,549	19	411	1036	528	1,994
2004	1,127	17	257	335	366	975
2005	822	8	78	386	478	950
2006	639	12	83	215	284	594
2007	975	13	322	245	191	771
2008	746	27	267	381	70	745
2009	853	39	228	380	91	738
2010	1,025	20	118	386	202	726
2011	890	10	182	366	213	771
2012	1,387	18	159	445	174	796
2013	7,144	183	2,279	354	824	3,640
2014	11,081	5,162	1,838	500	2,853	10,353
2015	20,391	4,708	889	623	14,567	20,787
2016	19,418	764	587	1,732	8,932	12,015
2017	2,319	561	683	2,462	7,948	11,654
Total	81,620	12,917	11,049	12,133	42,379	78,478

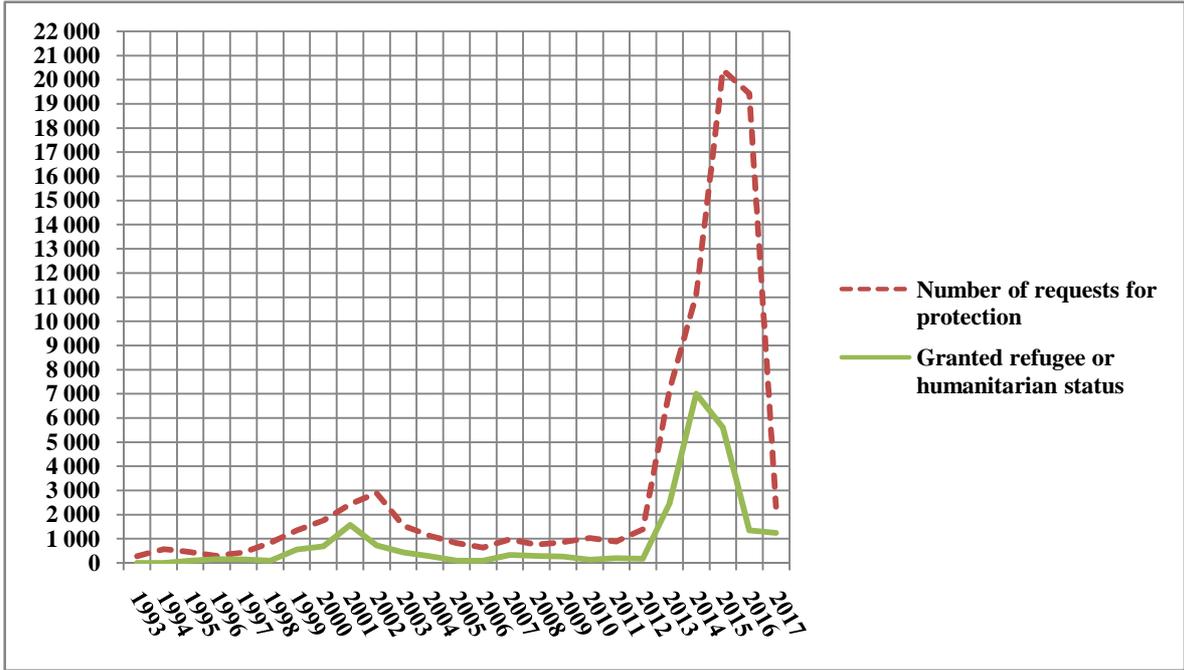
Source: [Bulgarian State Agency for Refugees](#)¹

Most of the protection seekers were from Afghanistan (25,014), followed by those from Syria (20,824) and Iraq (18,805).

The data clearly shows that before 2013 not many people were requesting and getting protection in Bulgaria.

¹ <http://www.aref.government.bg/index.php/bg/aktualna-informacia-i-spravki>

Graph 1: Number of protection requests and status granted in Bulgaria January 1993 - July 2017



Source: Bulgarian State Agency for Refugees

The situation, however, had drastically changed since 2013. The number of protection seekers increased sharply, becoming between 5 and 15 times the number in 2012. It is not surprising then that both 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 lots of joint efforts to start overcoming the problems one by one, however some of them - such as the lack of a well coordinated and state supported integration process - still exist.

The prevailing impression, shared by people working with the protection seekers, is that most of them perceive Bulgaria as a transit place - 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 some others are simply attracted by the Western European generous social systems.

There are, however, some refugees and migrants, who would like to stay in Bulgaria – to make new homes and lives here far away from the war, terror, torture, persecution, suppression, hunger, extreme poverty or whatever else they are running away from. They are not a big number yet but sooner than later the situation will change because:

- applying Dublin Regulation, Western European countries started sending refugees back to the country of first entry², meaning that many refugees might soon end up in Bulgaria again;

² Dublin Regulation establishes the criteria and mechanisms for determining the Member State responsible for examining an asylum application lodged in one of the Member States by a third-country national. The purpose of this Regulation, adopted in 2003, is to determine which State is responsible for examining an asylum application – normally the State where the asylum seeker first entered the EU – and to make sure that each claim gets a fair examination in one Member State. The “Dublin” system operates on the assumption that, as the asylum laws and practices of the EU States are based on the same common standards, they allow asylum seekers to enjoy similar

- those who had received refugee status in Bulgaria, although having the right to travel within the EU, cannot stay in other EU country more than 3 months. Sooner or later they will have to come back to Bulgaria or will become illegal immigrants;
- for one reason or another Turkey, which is currently hosting 2.9 million refugees, could suddenly decide to let them move on to Europe. Bulgaria will be directly in their path;
- the fact that the war in Syria might end soon doesn't mean that another war conflict won't appear somewhere else, on the contrary, recent human history suggests that this is exactly what we should expect to happen. According to UNHCR the world is witnessing the highest levels of displacement on record. An unprecedented **65.6 million** people around the world have been forced to leave home. Among them are nearly **22.5 million refugees**, over half of whom are under the age of 18 and about **10 million stateless people** who have been denied a nationality and access to basic rights such as education, healthcare, employment and freedom of movement.

In a world where nearly **20 people are forcibly displaced every minute** as a result of conflict or persecution, and where it is expected that climate change will start forcing 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 – i.e. how to successfully integrate newcomers but taking into account all national security aspects of that process, how to include them socially to avoid their marginalization and radicalisation, 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, it is an ideal time for Bulgaria to set up an effective, well coordinated, integration system by testing good integration practices and social inclusion models.

The aim of the present research is to study what has been done so far in this direction in terms of legislation, institutional framework and local community efforts as well as to identify and document effective community-based approaches to inclusion and social cohesion in the context of communities where refugees and migrants are living.

LEGISLATIVE AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR INTEGRATION OF MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES IN BULGARIA

The legislative and institutional framework for integration of migrants and refugees in Bulgaria is laid down by the following regulations and strategic documents:

- *Law on asylum and refugees (in force from 01.12.2002, last amended on 27.12.2016)*
- *Ordinance of Council of Ministers regarding the conditions and the procedure for conclusion, execution and termination of agreement for integration of foreigners with granted asylum or international protection (in force from 25.07.2017)*
- *Law on preschool and school education (in force from 01.08.2016)*

levels of protection in all EU Member States. In reality, however, asylum legislation and practice still vary widely from country to country, causing asylum-seekers to receive different treatment across Europe.

- *Ordinance N6 of the Ministry of Education and Science from 11.08.2016 regarding learning Bulgarian literary language (in force from 01.09.2016)*
- *Ordinance N11 of the Ministry of Education and Science from 01.09.2016 regarding rating the results of students at school (in force from 20.09.2016)*
- *Ordinance N3 of the Minister of Education from 06.04.2017 regarding the conditions and procedure for enrolment and education of people seeking and being granted international protection (in force from 21.04.2017)*
- *Ordinance regarding the state requirements for enrolment of students in universities in Republic of Bulgaria (in force from 16.05.2000, last amended on 28.07.2015)*
- *Ordinance of Council of Ministers for the state requirements for recognition of the acquired high education or completed periods of education in foreign universities (in force from 14.08.2000, last amended on 30.09.2016)*
- *Law on labour migration and labour mobility (in force from 21.05.2016, amended on 6.12.2016)*
- *Law on social support (in force from 19.05.1998, last amended on 29.01.2016)*
- *Law on Health Insurance (in force from 19.06.1998, last amended on 09.12.2016)*
- *National strategy on migration, asylum and integration 2015-2020*

The main regulation laying down the basic principles, conditions and procedure for granting protection to foreign citizens in Bulgaria is the *Law on asylum and refugees*. The law, which is in force since 2002 and had been amended 15 times since then, also specifies the rights and obligations of the counterparts in the protection seeking process as well as the rights and obligations of the people who had been granted protection, including their right to integration agreement.

The protection provided to foreigners in Bulgaria could be asylum, international protection (refugee status or humanitarian status) or temporary protection³.

Foreigners who have been granted asylum have the same rights as those who have been granted refugee status and they have the same rights and obligations as Bulgarian nationals with the exception of:

³ Asylum could be granted by the President within his/her powers in the cases under Article 27, paragraph 2 of the Bulgarian Constitution, as well as when the state interests or special circumstances require so. Temporary protection could be granted by the Council of Ministers in the event of a mass influx of people who are forced to leave their country of origin due to an armed conflict, civil war, foreign aggression, violation of human rights or indiscriminate violence on the territory of the relevant country or in a part of the country, and who for these reasons are unable to return there. International protection could be granted by the Chairperson of the State Agency for Refugees under the Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees of 28 July 1951 and the Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees of 1967 ratified by law (promulgated SG No. 36/1992; amended No. 30/1993) (SG, No. 88/1993), international human rights protection Laws, and Bulgarian law on asylum and refugees. For the last 20 years only a few people had been granted asylum and there were no cases requiring granting temporary protection in Bulgaria.

1. the right to participate in general and municipal elections, in national and regional referenda, as well as to participate in the establishment of political parties and be a member of such parties;
2. the right to hold positions for which Bulgarian citizenship is required by law;
3. the right to serve in the army.

There could be other restrictions explicitly laid down by law. For example, foreigners who have been granted refugee status have the right to acquire real estate in Bulgaria, however under the terms and procedure provided for foreigners.

Foreigners who have been granted humanitarian status have the rights and obligations of permanent residence permit holders, i.e. have a right to access the labour market without further permission needed; have a right to education in public schools and universities; have a right to gather the family together on the territory of Bulgaria; however they can't enjoy the freedom of travel across EU.

3 or 5 years after acquiring the status⁴ those foreigners who have been granted protection could apply for Bulgarian citizenship.

Bulgarian legislation provides plenty of possibilities for the integration and social inclusion of refugees and migrants who have been granted protection. They have:

- right to free preschool and school education in public schools⁵ and universities⁶;
- right of additional Bulgarian language classes when enrolled in preschool or school⁷;
- right to validation of competences for preschool and school education level when no documents for complete education level are available⁸;
- right to recognition of their university degree diploma acquired abroad under the same terms as Bulgarian citizens who have studied abroad⁹;
- right to free access to the labour market¹⁰;

⁴ 3 years for those with granted asylum and refugee status and 5 years for those with humanitarian status.

⁵ Art. 9 of the *Law on preschool and school education*; The procedure is provided by *Ordinance N3 of the Minister of Education from 06.04.2017 regarding the conditions and procedure for enrolment and education of people seeking and being granted international protection*

⁶ Art. 11 (3) of the *Ordinance regarding the state requirements for enrolment of students in universities in Republic of Bulgaria*, last amended in July 2015

⁷ Art. 17 (3) of the *Law on preschool and school education*; Art. 10 - 13 of the *Ordinance N6 of the Ministry of Education and Science from 11.08.2016 regarding learning Bulgarian literary language* provide for the options and general logistics of delivering additional Bulgarian language classes.

⁸ Art. 166 (6) of the *Law on preschool and school education*; Art. 122 of *Ordinance N11 of the Ministry of Education and Science from 01.09.2016 regarding rating the results of students at school*

⁹ Art. 2 of the *Ordinance for the state requirements for recognition of the acquired high education or completed periods of education in foreign universities*

¹⁰ Art. 9 (1) of the *Law on labour migration and labour mobility*

- right to social services and social relief payments under the same terms as Bulgarian nationals¹¹;
- right of access to medical services¹²;
- right to get involved in projects and programs that are providing integration measures under the conditions and procedure established therein¹³;
- right to be provided with financial support for housing for a period of up to 6 months as from the date the grant of international protection came into force¹⁴. This should happen under terms and procedure established by the Chairperson of the State Agency for Refugees in coordination with the Minister of Finance, which, however, are not established yet;
- right to sign an integration agreement regulating their rights and obligations within the integration process, as well as the rights and obligations of the relevant state or municipal authorities¹⁵;
- right to an individual integration plan, prepared by the mayor of the host municipality, consisting of specific integration measures and the results from their implementation¹⁶.

Although provided by law, all these rights are not easily exercised.

According to Valeria Ilareva¹⁷, an expert with more than 15 years of experience in the area of refugee and migration law in Bulgaria, among the reasons is the general tendency to reluctance of the municipalities to make civil registration of refugees.¹⁸ The *Law on asylum and refugees* obliges the refugees to appear at the municipality where they will settle within 14 days of receiving the decision to grant international protection in order to be entered in the register of population¹⁹. The Law also obliges the local government bodies and local

¹¹ Art. 2 (6) of the *Law on social support*

¹² Art. 33 – 35 of the *Law on Health Insurance*

¹³ Art. 32, (5) of the *Law on asylum and refugees*

¹⁴ Art. 32 (3) of the *Law on asylum and refugees*

¹⁵ The terms and procedure for signing, implementation and termination of the agreement is determined by the *Ordinance of Council of Ministers regarding the conditions and the procedure for conclusion, execution and termination of the agreement for integration of foreigners with granted asylum or international protection*.

¹⁶ Art. 4 (2), (3) of the *Ordinance of Council of Ministers regarding the conditions and the procedure for conclusion, execution and termination of the agreement for integration of foreigners with granted asylum or international protection*.

¹⁷ Valeria Ilareva is a practicing lawyer, providing legal aid to protection seekers from vulnerable groups in Bulgaria. She holds a PhD in ‘International Migration and Social Integration’ and ‘International Law’ from the University Complutense of Madrid and the University of Sofia. From 2002 until 2013 she has been the coordinator of the Legal Clinic for Refugees and Immigrants in Bulgaria where she has served as a trainer and a supervising lawyer in the work with students providing free legal aid to foreign nationals and stateless persons. Valeria Ilareva is a co-founder and Senior Lawyer of the [Foundation for Access to Rights – FAR](#) and the Bulgarian national expert in the academic network for law studies on immigration and asylum in Europe - [Odysseus](#).

¹⁸ Valeria Ilareva, Ph.D., *Zero Integration of the Refugees*, ikonometist.bg, 1.04.2017, available in Bulgarian language at: <http://ikonometist.bg/mnenie/item/201573-2017-04-01-08-37-16>

¹⁹ Art. 35 of the *Law on asylum and refugees*

administration to accept into their territory and to enter in the population registers those foreigners who have been granted international protection and their families as well as to provide them with an opportunity to enjoy the rights granted by the Law.²⁰

What happens in reality is that, although not allowed to refuse registration, some local governments willingly support (or in some cases are suspected of organizing) the civil protests against doing so. This was seen in Elin Pelin and Belene in February and March 2017. Address registration, however, is key to exercising any of the rights provided by law, because upon address registration the refugee can get his/her unique civil registration number (EGN). Without them people just do not exist in the bureaucratic world. Every piece of service or support is provided upon a registered address and a civil registration number. It is not by chance, says Ilareva, that the EU requires member states to issue such documents “in the shortest possible term after granting protection”²¹

The new *National strategy on migration, asylum and integration 2015-2020*²², which is the fourth one since 2008, recognises the importance and the complexity of the integration and social inclusion processes, which insist on dialogue and high levels of cooperation among central and local government bodies and institutions, social partners, academia, civil society structures, international organizations and of course the refugee community itself.

In order to ensure its own implementation and the efficiency of the integration process, the strategy stipulates the development of annual implementation plans as well as national action plans on integration, containing specific integration measures for people who had been granted international protection in Bulgaria. The preparation and supervision of the action plans’ implementation is assigned to the National Council on Migration and Integration (NCMI)²³. However, it seems such action plans haven’t been developed since 2013²⁴.

Bulgaria is not providing for a state funded integration programme²⁵ and there is no state institution authorised or appointed to be responsible for the overall operative

²⁰ Art. 37 of the *Law on asylum and refugees*

²¹ Art. 24 of Directive 2011/95/EU.

²² This is the fourth national strategy on migration, asylum and integration since 2008. The first one was covering the period 2008 – 2015; the second one was for the period 2011 – 2020; the third one - for the period 2014 -2020 - appeared as an answer to the dramatic change in the migration situation in 2013.

²³ The National Council of Migration and Integration (NCMI) was constituted in February 2015 succeeding the former National Council on Migration Policy (NCMP) which was dissolved in the previous year (17.04.2014). NCMI is the collective consultative body for formulation and coordination of state policies implementation in the areas of migration flows management and the integration of foreigners who received international protection in Bulgaria. Co-chairs of the Council are the deputy prime ministers. Its structure comprises the Deputy Ministers – of Labour and Social Policy, of the Interior, of Justice, of Foreign Affairs, of Healthcare, of Education and Science, of Finance and the chairpersons of SAR, of the State Agency for Child Protection, together with representative of the Governing Board of the National Association of Municipalities in Republic of Bulgaria, deputy chairperson of the State Agency for National Security, directors of Border Police and Migration Directorates and the secretary of the National Anti-Trafficking Commission.

²⁴ The last action plan available on the NCMI website is for 2013.

²⁵ Between 2005 and 2013, a National Programme for Integration of the Refugees was in place. The programme was managed by SAR and was ready to provide integration support to 100 refugees. Within the integration

management, coordination and monitoring of the refugee integration process. Many institutions are involved in the process, however passively and without coordination of their efforts.

For example, the first steps of the integration process start in the Registration and Reception Centre (RRC), where SAR, along with providing useful information and cultural adaptation measures, prepares an individual integration profile of each protection seeker, containing information on his/her educational level, spoken languages, professional qualification and work experience. The profiles are used to support the protection seekers' access to the labour market, while they are still in the protection seeking procedure (an average of about 6-7 companies approach SAR every month in search for workers). However, there is no institution responsible to take over the integration profile, when the person leaves the Registration and Reception Centre upon receiving international protection. In fact, there is no institution/body/department/whatever state administrative structure responsible to further guide and assist the integration process after the person receives refugee or humanitarian status. And there is no doubt that such guidance and assistance are badly needed.

In the absence of a state funded integration programme and an institution responsible for coordinating and supporting the integration process, the refugees are practically left to integrate on their own or with the help of the civil society organizations²⁶.

At first glance, it seems the new ordinance regarding the integration agreements transfers the responsibilities for refugees' integration to the local governments. A more careful reading, however, reveals that the ordinance is just giving an opportunity to local governments to take over the integration process if they wish so – they have the right to choose whether to get involved in an integration agreement or not and if they want to do so, the ordinance is giving them the tool to do it.

The research results show that in Bulgaria the refugees' integration and social inclusion processes are left entirely to the CSOs. Although doing an excellent job, CSOs are unable to provide either full coverage or sustainability of the services, due to their dependence on external funding sources²⁷.

programme the refugee was getting an individual integration plan including temporary integration measures such as financial support for housing, social support, health insurance, Bulgarian language lessons, social orientation and cultural adaptation, professional training, translation services or other help for exercising his/her basic rights. The individual integration plans had been approved by an Integration Committee consisting of SAR employees and NGO representatives. After the approval of the plan the refugee was signing a contract for its implementation with the Chairperson of SAR. This integration approach was presented as example for a good integration practice in the region. However, since the beginning of 2014 it is not practiced anymore. For more details see: *Monitoring report regarding the integration of people who had been granted international protection on Bulgaria, for 2014*, made by the Bulgarian Council of Refugees and Migrants and Multi Kulti Collective accessible in Bulgarian language at:

http://multikulti.bg/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/monitoring_integration_refugees_2014_final1.pdf

²⁶ More details could be found in chapter "Civil society initiatives aimed to support the integration and community inclusion of the refugees".

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Experts in the field share the opinion that:

1. There should be a state institution/administrative body responsible for overall operative management and coordination of the refugee integration process.
2. This institution/administrative body should be properly positioned within the executive power hierarchy, so as to be able to give recommendations and to request cooperation from the other executive power bodies.
3. Bulgaria should restore its state supported integration programme, providing a basic integration package, including integration measures such as Bulgarian language courses, support to access the labour market, training, education, social and healthcare services, etc.
4. Certain parts or the entire integration programme could be outsourced to external service providers, thus optimising costs and utilizing the expertise, built up within the non-governmental sector so far.
5. The meetings hold by CSOs with mayors suggest that the new ordinance on integration agreements²⁸ will hardly start working and is unlikely to have any impact on refugee integration without pro-active policy, further encouragement, clear implementation guidelines and explanation of the possibilities and advantages of integrating refugees. A couple of joint pilot projects would be of great help in developing and testing some working implementation mechanisms.

CULTURAL AND SOCIAL NORMS GUIDING/FRUSTRATING THE COMMUNITY INCLUSION OF REFUGEES

Every process or a policy happens in a certain institutional environment. By institutions we mean the definition given by the Nobel Prize winner Douglass North, i.e. the formal and informal rules and norms that organise social, political and economic relations (North, 1990).

While the formal rules and regulations could be easily changed and harmonized, the informal rules such as cultural and social norms tend to be persistent and change very slowly. For the success of a policy, process or practice, both formal and informal rules are of great importance, which is the reason why good practices and models can't be transferred directly from one place to another without being adapted to the local formal and informal rules and norms.

Hence, having knowledge of the informal institutional environment in which the refugees' integration and community inclusion should happen is important for the success of these processes. It will help not only to choose the most appropriate good practices, but also to transform them, so to make them applicable to the local specificity.

This is why the present report pays special attention to the informal institutional environment.

It is difficult to outline some specific cultural and social norms that are guiding or frustrating the refugees' community inclusion process in Bulgaria. Maybe we could start by saying that,

²⁸ *Ordinance of Council of Ministers regarding the conditions and the procedure for conclusion, execution and termination of the agreement for integration of foreigners with granted asylum or international protection*

by tradition, Bulgarians are ethnically and religiously tolerant people. Bulgaria is a country situated on the border between Islam and Christianity, where different ethnic groups and minorities - Bulgarians, Turks, Roma, Armenians, Jews, Greeks, Russians, Vlahos, Tatars, Karakachans, some Serbs, Albanians, Cherquez, and others - have been living peacefully for centuries²⁹. No one minds the religion of the other and an example of this we find in the centre of the capital - Sofia, where two Orthodox churches, a Catholic cathedral, a Mosque and a Synagogue coexist within an area of about 200 meters one by another, forming something recently called a “tetragon of religious tolerance”.

Refugees and political and economic migrants are not something unusual for this land. Only within the last century or so, Bulgaria has accepted thousands of Armenians fleeing from the massacres in the Ottoman Empire (1894-1922), then thousands of Russians escaping from the civil war (1918-1921) and Stalin’s terror in the Soviet Union. More recently many Arabs (from 9 different Near and Middle East countries), some Ukrainians as well as Chinese and Vietnamese have arrived.³⁰

Many Bulgarians are refugees’ descendents themselves, remembering the stories of their refugee ancestors who left home hurry away with one bag and children in hand, to escape death in White Sea Thrace, Macedonia or somewhere else.

Furthermore, about 2 million Bulgarians have left the country during the last 28 years in search of a better life. It means almost every family has a relative or a friend who is a migrant somewhere in the world.

People working with refugees and on refugees’ issues point out that until the autumn of 2013 there had never been negative attitude towards refugees. However, the huge wave of refugees from the Near and Middle East that hit EU borders, the terrorist attacks in Europe and the ISIS atrocities, often broadcasted online, changed everything. Suddenly, people became frightened and both social and public media got flooded by radical and hate speech.

There is no better example of what we are talking about than the statements Magdalena Tasheva - a journalist and MP from the nationalists’ party “Ataka” - made in October 2013 in her TV show called “In the eye of the storm”. Commenting on the increased refugee flow, in the ether, watched by thousands of people, she said without hesitation:

“The Syrian refugees, are nothing else but mass murderers ... These are the families of the murderers, who were taking pictures whilst beheading people and in the person of one of their commanders – Abu Sakar – they are even cannibals. Abu Sakar opened the chest cage of one of his victims, ripped out the heart and started eating it” ... They started to steal and fight “expect them to start raping and cutting off heads” said the MP and added that refugees are “repulsive, inferior primates, who are escaping the law in Syria”. Tasheva also shared her

²⁹ <http://www.nccedi.government.bg/page.php?category=92&id=247>

³⁰ A study conducted by the International Centre for Minority Studies and Intercultural Relations in 2003, quoted in an article of the DNEVNIK newspaper, suggests that the number of Arabs, Chinese and Vietnamese living in Bulgaria, some of them second and third generation born here, is about 200 000 people (available in Bulgarian language at: <http://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2003/11/11/60126/>).

believe that “they brought the butchers of Al Qaeda with one aim - to change our demographic pattern and religious affiliation”.³¹

As if these statements were not horrifying enough, the public fear had to continue being deliberately stoked throughout the entire second half of 2013. At one point the nationalists from Ataka threatened a civil war, which is nothing unusual - they do it now and then, when they feel they are not getting what they want, but it still makes people nervous.

The following media titles from the second half of 2013 give a pretty good idea of the picture, which media was creating regarding the refugees and the issues related to them:

- The number of refugees doubled in 6 months
- The capacity for refugee accommodation hit the limit but the government doesn't react
- 10 people arrested while illegally crossing the state border
- 20 illegal immigrants arrested on the Bulgarian-Turkish border
- Another over 30 illegal immigrants arrested on the border with Turkey
- Border Police arrested 37 illegal immigrants
- The refugee center in Pastrogor is filled to capacity
- 8 illegal immigrants arrested on Danube Bridge
- The refugee problem threateningly exceeds the capabilities of the state
- First ship with illegal immigrants was detained near Cape Kaliakra
- Ministry of Interior : 6400 illegal immigrants entered and 1200 fled from Bulgaria
- 40% of the refugees in Bulgaria are from non-combatant countries
- A Syrian refugee: “It is terrible in Bulgaria, it is not possible to live there”
- Residents of the village of Telish blocked the Sofia-Pleven road - do not want refugees
- Refugees fought at the camp in Ovcha Kupel in Sofia
- The biggest threat to us is the Syrian refugee wave
- Poverty and refugees: an explosive mixture in Bulgaria
- "Ataka" threatens civil war because of the refugees
- Refugees destroyed the tents at the camp in Harmanly
- Refugees massively buy abandoned houses in Bulgarian villages along the Turkish border
- The refugee camps in Bulgaria burst with refugees
- Dr. Dimitar Hermov - we expect epidemics caused by the refugees in Bulgaria
- Refugees are rebellious in Busmantsi
- Syrian refugees - the direct danger to Bulgaria
- Homeless Refugees in Bulgaria

³¹ *In the eye of the storm*, the Kapital newspaper, 4 October 2013, available in Bulgarian language at: http://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/imena/2013/10/04/2154395_v_okoto_na_buriata/

- Municipal Council of Varna votes against the transformation of the police school into a refugee camp
- A nationalist MP from Ataka: "We Protect Jihadists"
- The police are searching for four armed refugees
- Political party Ataka in Pleven against the refugees
- The nationalist MP, Magdalena Tasheva: 30,000 criminals are pressing into Bulgaria
- There are not enough police officers to deal with the refugees in Sofia
- Forecast: Syrian refugees may double next year
- Syrian emigrants: Xenophobia or justified fears
- Harmanly rebels against Syrian refugees
- The most dangerous are the streets between Hristo Botev and Maria Louisa Blvds³²
- The refugees in Pastrogor threw away the donations made by the office of mufti

In summary, the media, by direct or indirect messages, gradually drew the following picture – There are many more refugees than we can host and it is expected to double next year; almost half of them are not real refugees since they come from no-combatant countries; most of them are dangerous, criminals and jihadists; they start buying property on the border with Turkey, i.e. they are overtaking our land dangerously close to our Muslim neighbour; the places where refugees live are dangerous; the state has no capacity to deal with the situation; there are not enough police to deal with the refugees in Sofia; a doctor, who is not an epidemiologist but surgeon, warns us to expect epidemics caused by the refugees - the same refugees who, on top of it all, are all terrible ingrates complaining all the time, breaking everything and even ungratefully throwing away what we have given them.

Most of these didn't prove to be true, but the image of a new frightening Bogeyman was successfully and conveniently created.

Although not many, there still were some positive articles presenting the human face of the refugees – their human stories, tragedies, losses and hopes for a better and peaceful life. There were also few articles with good examples - people helped refugees or accepted such into their homes; men of the cloth declared readiness to shelter refugees in the monasteries where this is possible – an initiative officially blessed by the Metropolitan Bishop of the Vidin Bishopric; businessmen donated a bull to the camp in Pastrogor for the biggest Muslim feast - Kurban Bayram, etc.. However, the damage had been already done – most people started to feel threatened and afraid of all refugees and migrants.

During the next couple of years (between 2014 and 2017) the positive articles grew in number but the radical political speech and the permanent suggestion that the state is not able to cope with the situation continued. Besides the nationalists, other politicians also started to play the refugee Bogeyman card in desperate attempts to gain some political dividends and to improve their catastrophically low public ratings. For example, in September 2016, at a press conference in Sofia, Kornelia Ninova - chairperson of the Bulgarian Socialist Party, the

³² These are streets with high concentration of refugees and migrants in Sofia

biggest opposition party in the Bulgarian Parliament - publicly accused the Government of planning “to ethnically change Bulgaria by permanently settling refugees in the Bulgarian municipalities”. She also said that the Government had been helpless so far with regard to tackling the problem but now it already seemed to be dangerous. “Obviously the state is withdrawing and is hiding behind the municipalities, although they haven’t made such a decision. Obviously ghettos will start being created, which is a huge danger of attracting new migrants”³³. These statements were made in connection with the previous version of the ordinance on integration agreements, which was nothing more than an offer to local governments to integrate refugees if they are willing to do so and in numbers they choose. The statements got broad media coverage throughout the country and the insinuation that new ghettos will start appearing aggravated people’s fear.

Sometimes the state itself unconsciously (or not) has sent confusing messages to the public. Information gathered within a research project and shared within the field work reveals the existence of a municipal *Centre for social rehabilitation and integration of adult law offenders and people with refugee status*³⁴ (!?!) which is providing state delegated services. No doubt it is a weird choice of target groups to be united, which sends seriously wrong message to the society that refugees and law offenders are similar things.

The refugees theme was among the main topics during the pre-election campaigns in 2016 and 2017. In the absence of strong political platforms and programmes, refugees were used to strike fear, a sense of threat and distrust, with the hope of achieving higher election results³⁵.

Along with all of this, and maybe because of all of this, the frequency of hate speech against refugees increased. Research carried out by the Institute for Social Integration (ISI)³⁶ shows that the hate speech against refugees in Bulgaria is on a large scale and it is reflected by over 80% of the Bulgarian media, no matter whether national or regional. Various printed and electronic media have compared the Syria refugees to cannibals, criminals, mass murderers and Islamic fundamentalists escaping from justice.³⁷

Another research, done by the Association of European Journalists and quoted by ISI, reveals that in 8,439 online publications the key words connected to refugees are threat, disease and danger.

³³ More about the press-conference could be found in Bulgarian at:

<http://www.segabg.com/article.php?id=824056>

³⁴ <http://focus-radio.net/%D1%86%D0%B5%D0%BD%D1%82%D1%8A%D1%80%D1%8A%D1%82-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D1%81%D0%BE%D1%86%D0%B8%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D1%80%D0%B5%D1%85%D0%B0%D0%B1%D0%B8%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%8F-%D0%B8/>

³⁵ A survey of the Institute for Social Integration shows that during the pre-election campaign (within 23 days) 2,694 information units mentioned the refugees, which makes 117 times per day in average. In the days after the elections (the monitored period is 39 days) that number drops to 2,878 or 74 times per day in average.

³⁶ The research analyzed 5,572 information units from 355 national and regional printed and electronic media for the period 04.03 – 4.05.2017 as well as the shorthand records from the 43^d National Assembly covering the period 27.10.2014 г. - 26.01.2017 г.

³⁷ *The hate speech – number 1 problem of the refugees in Bulgaria*, Institute for Social Inclusion, May 2017, Sofia, available in Bulgarian language at:

<http://www.isi-bg.org/files/custom/Ezik%20Na%20Omrazata%20May%202017.pdf>

A quick online check of the comments under the positive articles shows that they are obligatory branded as “commissioned” or with the sarcastic “product positioning”.

The situation in the social media, as it could be expected, is much worse. If journalists haven’t a lot, but some, language restraints, people expressing opinions in social media have none. A research done by the Mission Salvation Foundation shows two main things – firstly, the negative and offensive comments using hate speech prevail over the positive or neutral ones; secondly, even if the article is positive or neutral it still generates a lot of negative comments and hate speech. From the analysed 1,457 comments to 46 publications in 14 different media - 843 (57%) are extremely negative even hostile as 67 of them (8%) had been deleted by the websites administrators because of inappropriate content – extremely vulgar statements, offences on racial, ethnic or religious base, including calls for violence and for taking matters into our own hands.³⁸

The picture so far looks pretty ugly, however, by way of some excuse for Bulgarians we must mention the hybrid war and the so called “Internet trolls”. There are some media and individuals who are simply paid to spread fear, distrust and hate speech in the Internet. So, we can hope that some of the Internet haters are not real xenophobes, hate is what they do for a living today, tomorrow could be something else.

After all the things Bulgarians read and hear, it would not be a surprise if the majority are frightened by, suspicious of and hostile to refugees.

Public attitudes towards refugees in Bulgaria could be successfully illustrated by the sociological surveys results since 2013.

A representative sociological survey, conducted by Alpha Research³⁹ in October 2013, suggests that people feel fear because of lack of clear well communicated information and a general mistrust in the capacity of state to deal with the problems:

- 58% of the respondents think that there is no concrete and unbiased information on refugees’ issues and **only 17% feel sufficiently informed**;
- 62% think that the institutions are not ready to deal with refugee related problems and **only 8% believe the state has the capacity to manage these problems**.

This is why the biggest concerns that the public associates with refugees are in the areas of direct state responsibility:

- 78% are afraid that the refugees will consume too much of the state budget;
- 68% are concerned that crime will rise in places where refugees live ;
- 63% believe that there is a health hazard risk for places where refugees live;
- 59% see the refugees as a threat to the national security;

³⁸ For more details see: *Research of the online space in regards to xenophobic mindsets and the language of hate*, Initial and Closing report; <http://project.missionbg.org/en/research/report-1/> ; <http://project.missionbg.org/en/research/report-2/>

³⁹ A Bulgarian agency for marketing and social research.

- 48% believe there is a risk that refugees will start making terrorist attacks;
- 45% are afraid that the refugees will take jobs and increase the unemployment level in the native population.

Despite the concerns and fears mentioned above, as many as 60% of the respondents declare their readiness to help refugees by donating money, food or clothes and the experience of the Bulgarian Donors Forum and the organizations working with refugees confirms that indeed a lot of people did it for real⁴⁰. In fact the donations and volunteers were the main resources that helped to get the humanitarian aspect of the refugee crisis under control.

Another representative sociological survey, done by Sova Harris two months later⁴¹, confirmed the Alpha Research results. According to the new data **65.2% of the people do not believe that the government is able to answer the needs of the Syrian refugees** in the country. It is not a surprise then that 62.2% of the people do not want more refugees to be hosted in Bulgaria⁴².

The national representative survey on democracy and civil participation in Bulgaria in 2015, carried out by Open Society Institute–Sofia⁴³, gives more insights on the subject.

The survey results show that Bulgarians seem afraid of big groups of refugees. Almost half of the interviewed people (39% – 45.3%) do not mind refugees coming to live in their neighbourhood or town but only if these are a few people or a few families. Only 8% to 10% would agree to accept a large group coming to live in their neighbourhood.

When asked if they would agree to the government building a shelter in their settlement for the temporary accommodation of refugees currently entering Bulgaria, 46.1% were against this and another 19.4% would agree only upon highly restricted arrangements (if it is a highly secured closed facility with no option for free movement out). Only 16.9% would not object to a refugee shelter nearby.

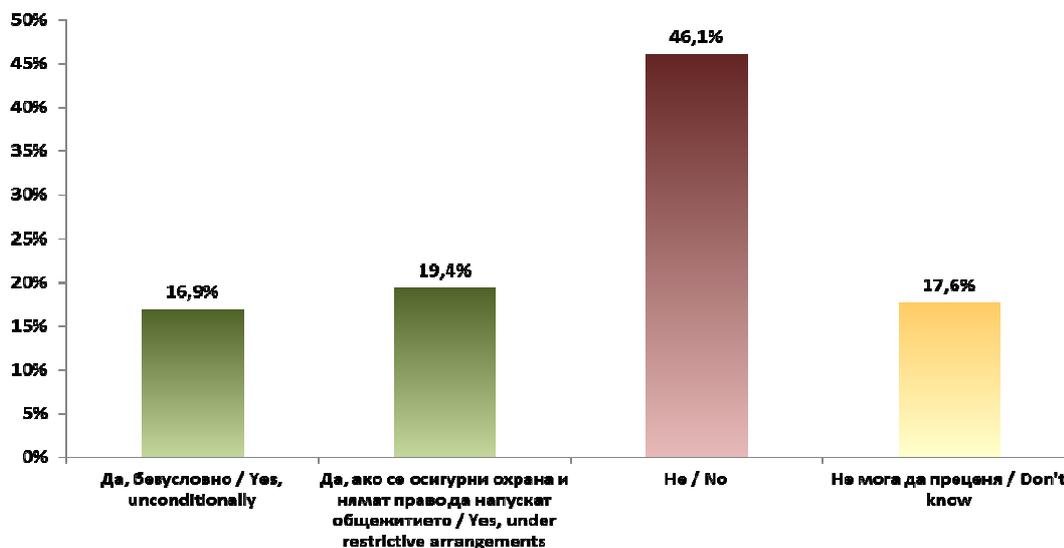
⁴⁰ The Council for women refugees in Bulgaria, for example, says that 80% of the humanitarian donations gathered by the organization come from Bulgarians.

⁴¹ Another agency for marketing and social research

⁴² The survey results were widely quoted in the media by BGNES first and then mediapool.bg (<http://www.mediapool.bg/sova-haris-dve-treti-ot-balgarite-ne-iskat-poveche-bezhantsi-u-nas-news214436.html>), SEGA (<http://www.segabg.com/article.php?id=678028>), dir.bg (<http://dnes.dir.bg/news/bezhantzi-15702629?nt=10>), webcafe.bg (http://www.webcafe.bg/id_1106139989), novinite.bg (<http://www.novinite.bg/articles/58307/Sova-Haris-622-ot-balgarite-ne-iskat-poveche-bejanci>), Blitz (https://www.blitz.bg/obshtestvo/sova-kharis-poveche-ot-polovinata-blgari-ne-iskat-bezhantsi_news237916.html) as well as Nova TV and Darik radio.

⁴³ <http://www.opendata.bg/opendata.php?q=44&s=4&c=74&i=1140&t=2&sel=27>

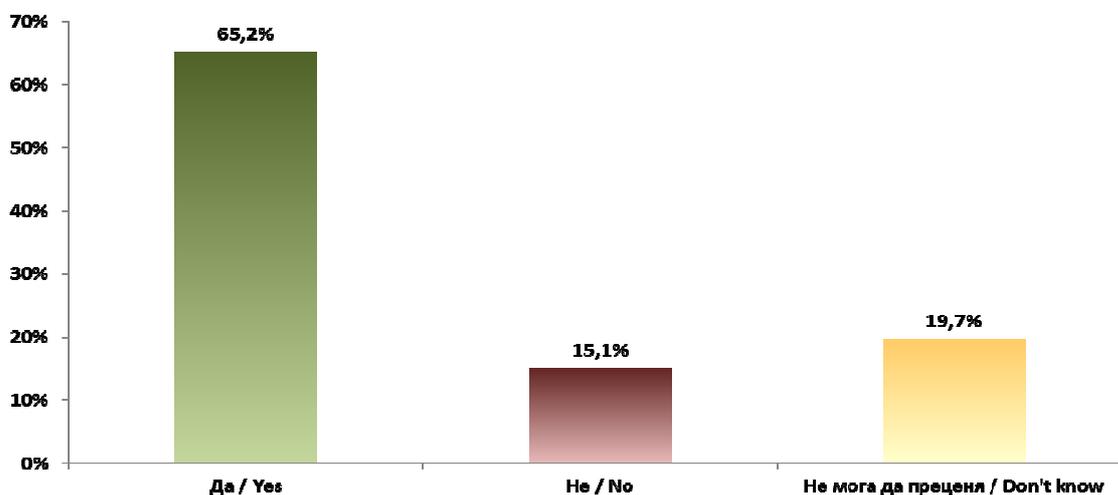
Would you agree to the government building, in your settlement, a shelter for the temporary accommodation of the refugees who currently enter Bulgaria?



Source: www.opendata.bg

At the same time as many as **65.2%** are in favour of the idea of the government building a fence along the border with Turkey, in order to stop the flow of refugees into Bulgaria.

Should the government build a fence along the border with Turkey, in order to stop the flow of refugees to Bulgaria?



Source: www.opendata.bg

The most recent sociological survey is from February 2016. It is representative of the adult population of the country and was carried out by Sova Harris⁴⁴.

The survey results show that:

⁴⁴ The Survey was commissioned by the Economics and International Relations Institute and Friedrich Ebert Foundation. It was conducted between 20-28.02.2016 and covers 1000 adult respondents.

- **47% of the respondents think that the EU shouldn't help refugees seeking asylum on its territory.**

Among the most frequent reasons why not are the following:

- Together with the refugees some terrorists enter Europe as well;
- Bulgaria is a poor country and can't spare funds for refugees;
- The refugees are dangerous and represent a threat to the national security;
- The refugees are a threat to the European economy;
- The refugees should go and seek asylum in the closest peaceful country in their region instead of coming to Europe;
- The refugees are people with a different mentality and different religion. A large proportion wouldn't be able to adopt European values and behavioural patterns, they would not be able to integrate into the European community;
- It increases the threat of spreading the religion of Islam in Europe.

- **78% of the adult population think that the refugees will be a burden for the Bulgarian economy;**

- **60% see the refugees as a threat to the national security;**

- **34% perceive the refugees as a personal threat and state that they are afraid of people with a different religion;**

- **24% perceive the refugees as a personal threat and state that they are afraid of people with a different ethnicity;**

- **5% perceive the refugees as a personal threat and state that they hate foreigners.**

Public attitudes towards integration vary but mainly in terms of the reasons why it will be difficult to implement.

The prevailing part of the people (**49%**) **thinks that the refugee integration is hardly possible because of the weakness of the state**, which hasn't the capacity to provide conditions for successful integration. Another **39%** **think that integration would be impossible because of the cultural and religious differences**, which will not allow the refugees to integrate within our society.

A bigger problem for the integration and community inclusion of the refugees would be the **51%** of the adults for whom **it is unacceptable to have a refugee neighbour or a colleague.**⁴⁵ Indeed, CSOs working on refugees' issues and assisting refugees with housing shared that in Sofia there are landlords who refuse to rent property to refugees or even to a CSOs working with refugees, because they say they fear the place will start attracting other migrants as well. This is also one of the reasons why most of the successfully integrated

⁴⁵ More data and analysis of the survey results could be found in: Lyubomir Kyuchukov, *The impact of the refugee crisis on Bulgarian society and Bulgarian politics: fears but not hatred*, Friedrich Ebert Foundation, April 2016; available in Bulgarian language at: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sofia/12571.pdf>

migrants and refugees refuse to share their success stories publicly. They say they fear it would change the attitudes of their neighbours and colleagues towards them.

The most important general conclusion from the survey is that Bulgarian society carries a lot of fears related to refugees but for most of Bulgarians (except for those 5%) those fears haven't turned into hatred towards foreigners and do not bear the ideological burden of xenophobia.⁴⁶

It seems the main obstacle to social and community inclusion of refugees is the fear, which is caused by:

- insufficiency of unbiased general information regarding refugees issues;
- insufficiency of information and poor communication of government plans and financial engagements regarding refugees;
- a great deal of distrust in the capacity of the state to deal with whatsoever, which makes most of the people to feel insecure and frightened;
- the lack of trust that politicians and institutions would defend citizens best interests;
- the absence of sufficient state presence in most of the small settlements, where people are left to survive on their own with no police to protect their lives and property and no medical services nearby;
- associations with the failed Roma integration, which causes Bulgarians to fear that another marginalized group is about to appear, multiplying the already existing problems with non-integrated Roma;
- associations with radical Islam, which is killing and maiming people in terrorist attacks all over Europe (although some of the refugees are not Muslims at all). This fear is additionally fuelled by the way that electronic media announces terrorist attacks - or incidents that might be a terrorist attack – repeating, during a background of commentary, one and the same horrifying sequences of violence, blood, screams, terrified people over and over again, thus creating the feeling of one never ending horror that happens again and again before the eyes of viewers until they start to feel directly involved and affected by the tragedy⁴⁷.

Some shades to the above picture were added by CSOs working at community level across the country, who shared their direct observations and impressions about the situation outside the big cities.

Firstly, small communities (in villages and small towns) are traditionally closed, sometimes even insular and hardly, or at least slowly, accept newcomers. Even in-laws of the same ethnicity and religion, but coming from other regions of the country, would need years to

⁴⁶ Lyubomir Kyuchukov, *The impact of the refugee crisis on Bulgarian society and Bulgarian politics: fears but not hatred*, Friedrich Ebert Foundation, April 2016; available in Bulgarian language at: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueeros/sofia/12571.pdf>

⁴⁷ More about the media and its manner of creating the feeling of a catastrophic agenda could be found in: Vyara Angelova, Zhana Popova, Mariq Neykova, *News at short range*, Association of European Journalists Bulgaria, 2017

become accepted as one of theirs. In recent years small communities have started to open up for some processes, but remain as closed as ever for others, including attitudes toward newcomers.

Furthermore, the recent disproportionate economic and regional development caused severe depopulation problems in large areas of the Bulgarian countryside, leaving behind small communities with aging or predominantly older populations. Because of the insufficient state presence in most of these small places, the local communities live in permanent fear - of being robbed, becoming ill or something worse. This causes them to gather together into defensive shells and to see in every stranger a source of possible new threats.

In an environment where people are abandoned and left alone to defend their property and lives, where the nearest medical facility is several kilometres away, there is no way the community to be willing to accept refugees who, according to the media, bring crime and disease. In such an environment the self-defence instinct of the small community inclines towards preventing such problems, because it knows that there will be little help from the state if something happens. They have been there and seen this with the unsolved problems with the non-integrated Roma population.

There are small places where civil society initiatives, having nothing to do with refugees, were rejected because of the fear that they might bring refugees in the village.

A good illustration of all above is the story shared by the mayor of Krun - Temenuzhka Lyutskanova. Krun is a small settlement with population of 3,387 people, which achieved the status of a town in 2011. The town suddenly became famous after giving shelter to three Syrian families, which were chased away from the neighbouring village of Rosovo in a manner similar to medieval witch hunting – an angry crowd led by the mayor himself, with raised Bulgarian flags and slogans in hands, tells refugees to go away because “we are an ethnically clean place ... we don’t want Syrian killers among us ... they will bring us diseases ... we will not dare to let kids play on the street .. “ and so on.

Of course the refugees, families with small children and old people, became terrified. One of the older people even had a heart attack. So they took flight and sought shelter in the neighbouring town of Krun. The Krun folk didn’t know what to think. They approached the mayor and she decided to visit the refugees and to see what these people were like. Although very traumatised by recent events, the refugees met her in a friendly fashion, offered her coffee and told her their stories. She learned what they have been doing back home – some of them were studying, others working, and what their plans were - to join their families in Denmark and Germany as soon as they got their refugee status settled. The mayor visited them again bringing foodstuff, the same was done later by other Bulgarian neighbours and this was when the story hit the national news. These meetings allowed both sides to get to know each other and to calm down. Everything continued smoothly until the day the refugees left. Nevertheless, the mayor still has her doubts regarding refugees – “I don’t know”, she says, “Maybe we just got lucky to come across some good people” ...

What we could draw as a conclusion and a positive vision for inclusion from the story above is that community inclusion, even in smaller communities could be difficult but not

impossible. Everything is a matter of successful mediation and depends on the personal involvement of the local community leaders and their attitude towards the newcomers. People fear the unknown, so when smaller communities are in question, the process of community inclusion must start with a simple introduction – who are these people, where they are from, what does their country look like, what is its culture and history, what could they offer to the community in terms of skills and knowledge - what are their professions, what have they been doing back home, what are their plans, etc. As one of the interviewed social workers said – the inclusion could happen only with speaking at a simple human level, from inside to outside. Integration could only start after the refugee gets accepted by the community as an individual – with his/her name, history and skills.

CIVIL SOCIETY INITIATIVES AIMED TO SUPPORT THE INTEGRATION AND COMMUNITY INCLUSION OF THE REFUGEES

Community inclusion - approaches applied so far

Despite the unfavourable, sometimes even hostile, environment and the personal threats that human rights activists and CSOs often receive, they continue to do a great job helping people in need. In fact, CSOs are these who support refugees in every step during and after the protection seeking procedure. CSOs are those providing translators and Bulgarian language lessons in the Registration and Reception Centres as well as legal and psychological help, preschool and school classes for the children⁴⁸, cultural adaptation activities, etc. CSOs are also the ones who assist the refugees in their efforts to integrate among Bulgarian society and who work with the Bulgarian community in order to facilitate the community inclusion process.

Community inclusion approaches are those that are:

- bringing together local residents and migrants/refugees through regular interaction;
- enabling local residents to benefit from their interaction with migrants;
- promoting the inclusion of migrants into the host community.

Since Bulgaria doesn't have a state supported integration programme and all integration measures and services are provided by the community itself through the civil sector organizations and volunteers, we could consider the integration services as first steps in the community inclusion process. Furthermore, being provided by the civil society organizations and volunteers from the community, the integration measures enable regular interaction between these community members and the refugees as well as facilitate the interaction of refugees with the rest of the society.

Therefore, within the group of approaches bringing together local residents and migrants/refugees we identify two types of initiatives in Bulgaria:

- initiatives where trained volunteers or CSO's activists interact with refugees to assist and facilitate their integration and community inclusion processes; and

⁴⁸ This is of great importance having in mind that none of the children, living in the RRC in Banya and Harmanly at the moment, are enrolled in school.

- initiatives where random local residents and refugees are brought together.

The present research identified a number of community inclusion initiatives implemented in Bulgaria so far. Most of them apply a combination of community inclusion approaches and also most of them occur in Sofia, mainly because - firstly, this is the place with highest concentration of refugees and migrants; secondly, most of the CSOs are based in Sofia; and thirdly, it seems easier to find and engage experts and volunteers in Sofia than in the other towns.

Integration services

All information and integration services in Bulgaria are provided by the CSOs through their information and integration centres. The most active integration centres are those of [Caritas Sofia](#), [Bulgarian Red Cross](#) and the [Council for Women Refugees in Bulgaria](#). In the integration centres the organizations provide a package of services, which are essential for the integration process, but unavailable for the refugees elsewhere.

For example, Caritas Sofia provides housing, including assistance in renting the premises and covering the costs of rent and utilities for 6 months, if the refugee gets engaged in a complete individual integration program including: taking Bulgarian language classes for level A1 and/or A2; job seeking; enrolling children in kindergarten, pre-school and school; participation in Caritas mentorship programme (more about the programme follows in the text further below), and so on.

It is interesting to observe that the way the housing is provided also supports the community integration process. Caritas Sofia helps to find housing and covers the costs of rent and utilities, however the contract is concluded between the refugee and the landlord, therefore the refugee is obliged to meet the landlord to pay the rent, to go to pay the utilities on its own, etc. The idea is to ensure some interaction between the refugees and the local community and indeed, there are some promising results already – landlords helping their tenants to solve logistical problems, landlords and tenants inviting each other for dinner, refugees communicating and becoming friends with their neighbours, etc. The ultimate goal of the Caritas integration programme is to give the people it is helping to the opportunity to become independent after the 6 months period of support.

The Caritas integration centre also provides social mediation and psychological support, Bulgarian language classes for children, assists refugees to access social and health services if needed, facilitates access to the labour market and bank services, etc. In 2016 the integration centre helped 45 people to find a job and assisted the enrolment of 7 children in kindergarten and 7 children in school.

The integration programme of the Bulgarian Red Cross is for 40 people per year. Besides the Bulgarian language classes for A1 and A2 level, it provides : transportation; school books; support for enrolment at kindergarten and school; mandatory health insurance payments; help with school lessons and homework for the children enrolled in school; a summer school with Bulgarian language classes for children, so they won't forget the language during the summer holiday; professional training in professions with high demand on the labour market (currently available for 5 people only) as well as support in accessing the labour market.

The integration centre of BRC doesn't provide housing but helps refugees to get at least temporary accommodation in some of the Centres for temporary accommodation of the Agency for Social Protection, in case they were not able to find a place to stay within the two weeks term they have for leaving the refugee centre after receiving their status.

Similar services are provided by the Council for Women Refugees in Bulgaria⁴⁹. They provide individual and group consultations, social mediation, art therapy, groups for new skills learning, etc., which ensures and facilitates the interaction between volunteers and refugees and supports the practising of the Bulgarian language.

Integration services are provided also by the International Organization for Migration (IOM)⁵⁰

In February 2017, Caritas Sofia, BRC, the Council for Women Refugees in Bulgaria, IOM and Cooperation for Voluntary Services (CVS) Bulgaria organized a mini labour exchange, where 100 refugees met 6 employers and HR agencies. Every refugee participant got a folder with information in their native language about his/her basic labour rights and obligations as well as an individual schedule for interviews. It is a very good initiative that intermediates between employers and refugees and helps both sides to reach each other.

The integration services provided by the CSOs in Bulgaria are of great importance for the integration and community inclusion process. They support the refugees in their first steps within Bulgarian society and are instrumental in any further inclusion processes.

Initiatives for social empowerment

A good example in this group is the [Initiative for social empowerment](#) (ISE)⁵¹ – it is an international social enterprise that aims to enable vulnerable groups of women and young people in Europe to break out of the bondage of poverty through technology, education, and entrepreneurship. The idea is to empower disadvantaged communities with the abilities to prosper so that they do not become victims of trafficking, slavery, and social dependency.



Within its pilot project in Bulgaria, ISE trains and mentors representatives of Roma community, women with mental disadvantages and refugees to start micro enterprises specializing in the full-cycle production of a range of wellness herbal products which will be distributed under the global brand name 'Saksham' (capable and empowered in Sanskrit). ISE applies the innovative Saksham methodology, developed at Purdue University, which makes entrepreneurial training available to the poor at every level of education, including the illiterate, through intuitive, culturally adapted game-based mobile curriculum

platform and through a system that ensures access to global markets and success of the micro enterprises.

⁴⁹ <http://crw-bg.org/kakvo-pravim/konsultativno-informatsionno-tsentr/>

⁵⁰ <http://www.iom.bg/>

⁵¹ <http://www.socialempowerment.org/> ; <https://www.facebook.com/initiativeforsocialempowerment/>

Currently a Roma community in Brestnitsa produces the herbs, women with disadvantages from Kyustendil and refugees living in Sofia make parts of or entire final products - luxury candles decorated with herbs, each one a piece of art, natural air refreshing bags and beautiful dolls with dry herbs. Production is supported by volunteers, artists and clothes designers and uses herbs typical of the country - lavender, mint and aromatic rose. The business model is simple – people from vulnerable groups are engaged in the production side, while ISE is responsible for the marketing and distribution of the final products. This initiative gives the refugees the opportunity to get involved in a small family business or home working, which will support their social integration and could promote the benefits of refugee integration among the accepting community. Being able to work from home is a great opportunity for the families coming from cultures where the wife is not supposed to leave the home and family for work.



Source: https://www.facebook.com/pg/initiativeforsocialempowerment/photos/?tab=album&album_id=647353765396659

🚩 Mentorship programmes

Caritas Sofia is running (for already a second year) a mentorship programme⁵² in which every refugee participant gets a Bulgarian mentor. The main role of the mentor is to speak Bulgarian with the refugee and to provide social assistance in job seeking, writing a CV, accessing the healthcare or social security systems, appointing a personal GP, sorting out the healthcare status, completing documents in Bulgarian, etc. The other idea of the mentorship is for the Bulgarian mentor, who is a volunteer, to introduce the refugee to his/her circle of friends, thus providing him/her the opportunity to make social contacts outside the closed refugee community. The mentorship programme is flexible and is evolving following the real life needs. At the beginning it had started as a simple Bulgarian language practice during meetings between a Bulgarian volunteer and a refugee. However, the programme supervisors noticed that the participants started adding some other services, for example assistance for dealing with bureaucracy, so the programme had been upgraded accordingly.

The mentorship cycle is 4 months and the idea is to meet at least once per week to maintain the contact. In the first year there were 74 pairs in the mentorship programme. This year Caritas decided to reduce the number of pairs to 15 per cycle, so to be able to provide a higher standard of preliminary mediation, contact management and supervision.

⁵² The programme is designed after the American Big brother/Big sister/Big buddy programmes successfully applied in the USA.

According to Caritas Sofia, the mentorship programme proved to be very successful and productive. The correlation of value for money and the value added for both sides, participating in the programme, is impressive. By bringing together refugees and volunteers the mentorship programme stimulates and facilitates the contacts between the refugees and the host community.

Using volunteers to build bridges between the communities

The refugee initiatives involve many volunteers. Statistics provided by Time Heroes Platform⁵³ show that since 2013 there were 67 refugee related volunteer missions, announced by 16 organizations and joined by 3,545 volunteers. The platform, which is the easiest and fastest way to reach volunteers all over the country, had been most actively used by CVS Bulgaria, Bulgarian Red Cross, Caritas Sofia, Council of the women refugees in Bulgaria, Multi Kulti Collective and Bulgarian Helsinki Committee.

The volunteers are the first representatives of the local community to meet and communicate with the refugees; they are the first advocates for refugees and also the ones who try to build bridges between both communities - help refugees to integrate and communities to understand and utilise the refugees' knowledge and skills.

Social mediators

The social mediators are the equivalent of the mentor's position but within the refugee community. They are refugees or migrants themselves, who are already well adapted or integrated, and therefore able to provide bridges between the host community and refugees and vice versa.

Integration and community inclusion should take into account the special features of the refugee communities, which makes the position of the social mediator extremely important. The "one size fits all approach" doesn't work here, because although called with one name, refugees come from different countries and cultures. There are big differences between Syrians and Iraqis, and Afghanis and Pakistanis, for example. In order to come up with effective ways to integrate them all we need to get acquainted with their mentalities and cultures, to understand what motivates them, what is most difficult for them to comprehend and accept, and so on. There is no better way to do so than using the mediation of someone from the same group who has already succeeded to adapt and started to integrate at the new place. Social mediators are the bridge that helps accepting community to reach the refugees. Any integration or community inclusion process is doomed to failure if the right approach is not applied. This is what makes social mediators so important and instrumental in the integration and inclusion processes.

Exploration visits

In order to support the cultural adaptation of the refugees and to introduce them to the Bulgarian community, CVS Bulgaria and Caritas Sofia organize so called 'exploration visits'. During the exploration visits, refugees visit natural and cultural landmarks and museums as well as participate in cultural and other local community events. Very useful are the visits to

⁵³ [Time Heroes](#) is the most popular service platform for volunteering in Bulgaria.

the French lyceum in Sofia, during the open doors days, when the refugee children have classes together with the Bulgarian students.

Similar, but occasional, exploration visits had been organized by IOM and BRC.

The exploration visits give an opportunity for random, but still some, contact between the refugees and the accepting community and help them to start getting acquainted with and used to each other.

Festivals, exhibitions and other cultural events

These initiatives combine all three approaches. They bring refugees and local communities together, enable a positive interaction between them, give opportunities for local residents to benefit from their interaction with the refugees and migrants, and in this way promote the inclusion of migrants into the host community.

The initiatives in this group celebrate diversity and turn the spotlights on the human face, stories, culture and traditions of refugees.

A good example for such initiative is the **Festival of solidarity**⁵⁴, organized in Sofia by Caritas Sofia and MultiKulti Collective in cooperation with a number of other CSOs. The event is meant to celebrate solidarity, empathy, understanding and tolerance in their broad sense with a series of events such as movie screenings, concerts, discussions, workshops, storytelling, culinary experiences and more. The programme is very carefully designed to provoke the participants to step into each other's shoes and to try to understand each other. Although not being the main focus of the festival, the refugees and migrants were a significant and noticeable part of the event this year. Within the festival there was:

- a knitting workshop, where a team of refugee women were helping people to rediscover this forgotten hobby;
- a hairdresser's, where refugee hairdressers were giving free haircuts;
- a farmers' market and degustation, where HranKoop (FoodCoop) Sofia, whose basic principle is solidarity between small farmers and consumers, and some of the favourite Multi Kulti chefs from the migrants' community provided the opportunity to taste great Bulgarian and foreign flavours and to shop for some high-quality food products;
- a photo booth with Bulgarian and foreign folk costumes where someone could not only walk in the shoes of others but also in their clothes. Traditional Bulgarian and foreign costumes helped to experience other times and lands, and a professional photographer took portraits;
- a solidarity exhibition of graphics, watercolours and more by non-professional talented artists – refugees and asylum seekers, people with disabilities and more.
- a Chinese calligraphy and Chinese knotting workshop organized by the Confucius Institute in Sofia;
- also a Calligraphy workshop with Freddy - a well-known charmer and a great MultiKulti partnering chef, who is also a talented calligrapher. Whilst living in his native Baghdad, he

⁵⁴ More information could be found on the websites of [Caritas-Sofia](#) and [Multi Kulti Collective](#).

worked as a calligrapher and sign painter. He knows the seven types of Arabic writing and was happy to reveal his secrets to the workshop participants;

- a Henna workshop, which revealed the beautiful world of mehendi – the art of painting the body with henna. Participants were able to get painted by women who brought this tradition from their home countries;
- a Jewellery workshop led by people from different countries;
- a *Theatre of Crumbs* – an event for community kneading and mixing together, organized by the Network of Bread Houses;
- a Laughing workshop, where a Laughter yoga session, helped participants not only to find a way to each other but also to laugh their hearts out;
- a Suggestopedia Laboratory in which participants discussed the language of solidarity and the suggestopedia methods through which people speaking different languages are able to communicate;
- role playing games and a game where participants should try to guess – and draw – the thoughts of the strangers they meet on their way.

The event was attended by many Bulgarians, migrants and refugees who were coming and going, enjoying the interaction as well as delicious food and the interesting Lebanese desserts provided for the event.

Another interesting example is the spring **“Heritage”** festival⁵⁵ which is a multicultural event, organized by the “Global creativity” Association for the last two years. The festival unites the music, colours, flavours, cuisines, national costumes, dances, crafts and customs of different communities and nationalities living in Bulgaria with the idea of building a cultural bridge between them. At the last event child refugees sang Arabic songs and recited Arabic poems.

Here we could also mention the **“Between the people and cultures”** festival, presenting the art and culture of local as well as refugees’ and migrants’ communities living in Sofia. A variety of discussions and presentations happened during the festival, which is focussed on the individual, his/her experience and expression in conditions of migration, isolation and movement, escaping from war in search of a better life. The festival is based on the idea that culture and art make natural and possible the meeting between the old and new inhabitants of the city, resident and migrant communities and enables the search for common grounds between them. Migration was a central theme that had collected personal stories and works of art by authors and artists from Austria, Afghanistan, Bulgaria, Germany, Italy, Congo, Lebanon, Peru, Syria, Togo and France. The festival presented a kaleidoscope of public discussions, a musical event, theatrical and dance performances, video, photographic and sound exhibitions, film screenings, literary readings, tasting food from different cultural traditions, art workshops for children, and storytelling groups.

⁵⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/events/530890493764410/>

Community kneading⁵⁶ and baking is another way to bring communities together. It is a very successful method of community interaction, applied by the Bread Houses Network (BHN). BHN has developed various innovative methods of community kneading mixed with art forms, proven to be a new way of art therapy called ‘Bread therapy’⁵⁷. BHN’s bread therapy methods are based on inspiring people to come and make, bake, and break bread together as a way to build trust and bonds between them as well as a sense of home and warmth even within a stressful surrounding environment. They allow participants to see and reflect on problems from a different perspective through the amusing but also analytical tools of theatre and storytelling. They are summarised in a game called ‘Bakers without Borders’, one of the ten global grassroots projects receiving the Intercultural Innovation Award 2016 from the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations and BMW AG. ‘Bakers without Borders’ is a manual for organising inspiring, artistic community-kneading events for intercultural dialog with migrants and refugees, school children, adults and various mixed groups, including people with various disabilities/special needs.

BHN had organized mixed community kneading within 10 different events so far in which refugee women and children kneaded and baked together with Bulgarians. The organization wants to make these events regular, so as to maximize their effect; however it is still not easy to get the Bulgarian community involved on a regular base.

Human library – the human library is called also alive library. It is an event where visitors choose the books they want to ‘read’, except that these are not books but real people with their real life stories. ‘Taking the book’ provides a library visitor with 30 minutes talk with the person, whose life is the book about. The Human Library is designed to build a positive framework for conversations that can challenge stereotypes and prejudices through dialogue. It is a place where difficult questions are expected, appreciated and answered.⁵⁸ The main idea is not to judge the book by its cover. Human libraries are usually organized indoors in public places or outdoors in parks. CVS Bulgaria had organized such human library in the House of Cinema, within the events, celebrating the day of volunteer in 2016. The organization hopes to be able to organize human libraries this year again.

Green initiatives

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 municipality. The initiative had been started by the garden creator, Natasha Marinova, who is an expert on the management of natural resources and environment and a permaculture lecturer. 100 protection seekers took part in the initiative, mostly Syrian families with children, living in the Sofia Voenna rampa refugee centre who worked in the garden together with local neighbourhood residents during the entire summer and autumn of 2016.

⁵⁶ <http://www.breadhousesnetwork.org/>

⁵⁷ In December 2016 the ‘Bread therapy’ was recognised as a good practice by the European experts from the working group on inter-cultural dialogue - http://www.bread.bg/wp-content/uploads/2017_Kultur_als_Foerderung_des_Interkulturellen_Dialogs_komplett.pdf

⁵⁸ <http://humanlibrary.org>

The refugees had undergone training for the establishment and maintenance of the garden and were supported by printed brochures with instructions and weekly online consultations.

The work in the permaculture garden brought both communities together and helped the local residents to see the refugees not as a threat but as ordinary people, having families, working for their food, growing crops, etc. The project is long-term and is expected to be resumed again next year.

Children as mediators and ambassadors for their communities

Although the existence of bureaucratic burdens (necessity to get permissions from school and parents), it is easier to bring together children from both communities and many organizations do so.

One of the most noticeable initiatives is the Multi Kulti Collective programme for children started in 2016. It brings together Bulgarian and migrant/refugee children with the aim to overcome social barriers while participating in cultural, educational and sports events. Within these events, children and youth between the age of 6 and 18 have the chance to become acquainted in a safe informal environment, to increase their knowledge and improve their skills, to have fun and create common memories and friendships. The Programme has been actively supporting the two-way integration and bridge building between different cultures thus helping children to live in a community free from prejudice, discrimination and xenophobia. Children are usually the first ones in the family to learn the language of the host society and thus serve as intermediaries of their parents. Programme events range from creative workshops (astronomy, robotics, composting, calligraphy and mehendi, cooking, chocolate crafting, etc.) to playing sports in and out of doors (climbing walls, cricket), from learning languages while making bread to visiting interactive museums.⁵⁹

A story shared by Multi Kulti Collective

Once in the school of Ivanovo village a refugee pupil and Bulgarian one got into a fight. The next day the father of the Bulgarian child came angrily and asked the school director: “Which one is *the refugee?*” ... “That one over there” answered the director. “Which one” the father asked “they are all the same” ... “Exactly” the director said “they are all the same - just children”.

Working with children is essential for community inclusion in the long term, since they are the ones who will share this country in the future.

Sport as a universal language

Sport is something else that brings people together irrespective of their colour, race or religion. There were several sports tournaments in Sofia and Harmanly where refugee and local teams met in front of mixed audiences. For example, IOM organized football tournaments for adults⁶⁰ and for children⁶¹ in Harmanly. Six teams took part in the children’s

⁵⁹ More about the programme and each of the events could be found at: <http://multikulti.bg/project/children-programme>

⁶⁰ <http://www.iom.bg/content/%D1%84%D1%83%D1%82%D0%B1%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%BD-%D1%82%D1%83%D1%80%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%80-%D0%B7%D0%B0->

tournament – from “Ivan Vazov” School, “Neofit Rilski” School, Concordia Foundation and three teams from RRC Harmanly. The event was launched by the Mayor of Harmanly, Ms. Maria Kirkova. Despite their cultural differences all participants demonstrated sportsmanship and respect towards each other.

One of the most noticeable and promising initiatives in this group is the ‘Team of hope’ project. It is a long term initiative, which started in 2011 aiming to support the social integration of youngsters brought up in institutions together with homeless youngsters through sport, namely football. In its first years the project proved to be very successful – 75% of the participants in the football training process found jobs and place to live. This had encouraged the project initiator and manager⁶² to broaden the target group to include Roma youth and refugees. The initiative uses sport to develop personal characters and qualities such as discipline, personal responsibility, accountability, good organization, team work, etc. It combines sport with suggestopedic methods⁶³ for faster learning of Bulgarian language, which is extremely useful to the refugees and Roma and certainly supports their integration process. The project promoter plans to train about 10 trainers among the refugees living in the RRCs, who someday could multiply the idea, whether in Bulgaria or somewhere else in the world. The project promoter also plans before the end of 2017 to finalize its methodology, combining physical activities with suggestopedic methods, which will enable multiplying the initiative somewhere else.

Using food as a bridge between communities

Food events were found to be the best way to approach the host community and to bring it together with migrants and refugees. These events provide an excellent opportunity for locals to benefit from their interaction with migrants and refugees and are an excellent way to promote migrant and refugee community inclusion.

The indisputable leader in these sort of activities in Bulgaria is Multi Kulti Collective. Its first initiative started in 2011, in Sofia, and is called [Multi Kulti Kitchen](#)⁶⁴.

[%D0%B2%D1%8A%D0%B7%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%81%D1%82%D0%BD%D0%B8-%E2%80%93-D1%85%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%BC%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%BB%D0%B8](#)

⁶¹ <http://www.iom.bg/content/%D1%84%D1%83%D1%82%D0%B1%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%BD-%D1%82%D1%83%D1%80%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%80-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D0%B4%D0%B5%D1%86%D0%B0-%D0%B2-%D1%85%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%BC%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%BB%D0%B8>

⁶² Viktor Kirkov, Sports Management Bulgaria Ltd.

⁶³ Suggestopedia is a teaching method developed by the Bulgarian psychotherapist Georgi Lozanov. It is a science for developing different non-manipulative and non-hypnotic methods for teaching/learning of foreign languages and other subjects for every age-group on the level of reserve (potential, unused) capacities of the brain/mind. That means: at least three to five times faster, easier and deeper learning; inner freedom; increasing the motivation for learning; joyful learning and psycho-physiological well-being. The effectiveness as well as the benefits of the genuine method have been confirmed by the most prestigious international commissions and scientists. Lozanov's theory and practice triggered an accelerated learning movement in the West, where various techniques not originally included in the Lozanov's theory were introduced. Some research suggests that the method improves physical health and brings substantial benefits in personality and motivation. It can also effect radical changes in the way people approach creative thinking, problems and conflicts.

⁶⁴ <http://multikulti.bg/project/kitchen>

Multi Kulti Kitchen is a platform providing opportunities for joint cooking, tasting of foreign cuisines, and cultural exchange for Bulgarians and foreigners in Bulgaria. It aims to support the integration of foreigners within Bulgarian society and to teach tolerance towards the different immigrant and refugee cultures.

Multi Kulti Kitchen is a typical example of a community event where the migrants are empowered to be the hosts presenting their cuisines and cultures, which mobilises the entire community – someone will be cooking, another will be singing, a third will be dancing or conducting a workshop, etc. In these events refugees and migrants from Asia, Europe, North and South America and Africa, let guests from the local community to take a look at the lives they left behind and to enjoy the recipes they brought with them.

The events are planned in cooperation with the Multi Kulti team, however the migrant community has ownership of them, having input in all aspects from the posters to the presentation and menu. They cook traditional national dishes, talk about their country and culture, display traditional clothes and jewellery in front of a Bulgarian audience. The hosts of the event, as well as all the organisers, helpers and participants are all volunteers. The recipes, presentations and photos from the events are shared on the Multi Kulti Kitchen website (both in Bulgarian and English) and via its Facebook group thus reaching a broader audience.

Many friendships and partnerships have started at the relaxed, friendly and informal Multi Kulti Kitchen events. During these events people find out about each other, overcome stereotypes by having the opportunity for open and direct discussions with each other, and Bulgarians develop an understanding of the integration challenges the migrants face as well as a readiness to support them.

Multi Kulti Kitchen events offer a unique opportunity for fans of gourmet cooking to sample different cuisines, spices and drinks. They also support the economic integration of migrants, by providing them with an opportunity to showcase the restaurants and food outlets that they run.

In 2015, Multi Kulti Kitchen expanded as a social franchise and NGOs from the seven biggest Bulgarian cities were selected, trained, funded and mentored to start transferring the model into their own local communities.

In 2017, Multi Kulti Kitchen was selected for support by the European Cultural Foundation as one of the 25 ideas chosen out of 600 applications from the EU and MENA.

As a natural extension of their work in bringing together Bulgarians, migrants and refugees – around the table and beyond, in 2013 Multi Kulti Collective launched in Sofia the [Multi Kulti Map](http://multikulti.bg/map/).⁶⁵ The idea behind the map is to promote the restaurants and food outlets of the Multi Kulti Kitchen hosts and to give the local community the opportunity to taste the delicious food they cook at a suitable date and time. The Multi Kulti Map presents authentic restaurants and food stores, owned by Bulgarians, refugees, foreigners from the EU and third countries migrants and refugees from more than 20 countries. The owners share a piece of their personal story, tell the audience about their favourite childhood dish, what they like

⁶⁵ <http://multikulti.bg/map/>

about Bulgaria and what they miss from their home country. The Map encourages people to visit different places, owned by foreigners, offering a game with delicious prizes.

In 2015, the Multi Kulti Map grew as a social franchise too and NGOs from the seven biggest Bulgarian cities were selected, trained, funded and mentored to start transferring the model into their own local communities.

Another Multi Kulti Collective food related initiative is the national media campaign called [Diversity is tasty](http://multikulti.bg/tasty/)⁶⁶. It spotlights the culinary added-value of foreigners (EU citizens and third country nationals, including refugees) in Bulgarian culture and aims to fight discrimination, xenophobia and hate speech, by celebrating diversity. Diversity is Tasty invited more and more locals to try and cook new, interesting and tasty foreign dishes while giving the floor to migrants and refugees living in Bulgaria to share the best of their cuisines and cultures. Their personal stories and recipes were shared across the country with the help of more than ten media partners. 30 000 post cards⁶⁷ with recipes were also distributed to twelve Bulgarian cities.

The campaign was launched with a series of special events such as a media lunch and two cooking classes hosted by migrants for culinary bloggers. During the campaign Bulgarians were invited to participate in a culinary game and send photos of foreign dishes they have prepared at home.

Alongside the media campaign, in collaboration with Sofia University, Multi Kulti Collective organized training for media professionals with speakers from UNHCR, the Association of European Journalists, and the Council of Refugee Women in Bulgaria.

The initiative ended with a big photo exhibition⁶⁸ with photos showing the faces of the campaign – more than 30 migrants and refugees – and their national dishes. The launch of the photo exhibition, which was combined with a tasting of authentic food, had attracted more than 500 people and huge positive media interest.

The Multi Kulti Collective events are a successful model of how to draw Bulgarian and refugees and migrants' communities closer together. These informal friendly meetings change the attitudes of Bulgarians towards migrants but also of migrants towards Bulgarians.

Multi Kulti Kitchen, Multi Kulti Map and Diversity is tasty had been recognized and presented as best practices and social innovations throughout the EU, including by the European Commission⁶⁹.

Initiatives fighting hate speech and promoting tolerance

It is clear that local residents benefit from the presence of refugees in many ways. Refugees contribute to the local community not only in financial terms by paying rents and buying services and goods but also by bringing their knowledge and skills.

⁶⁶ <http://multikulti.bg/tasty/>

⁶⁷ <http://multikulti.bg/tasty/news/106-30-000-cards.html>

⁶⁸ <http://multikulti.bg/tasty/news/108-photo-exhibition-prizes.html>

⁶⁹ <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/intpract/diversity-is-tasty-a-culinary-media-campaign-in-bulgaria>

However, in an environment where 78% of the adult population think that the refugees will be a burden for the economy, 60% see refugees as a threat to the national security, 58% perceive them as a personal threat, because of their religion or ethnicity and 51% think it is unacceptable to have a refugee neighbour or a colleague it is not easy to promote inclusion directly. This is why CSOs start with initiatives that fight against hate speech and promote tolerance in order to prepare the environment for promoting the community inclusion of refugees and migrants into the host community.

These initiatives include tolerance workshops and classes at schools and universities, where issues such as what migration is, when are people forced to migrate, what is it like to be a migrant, etc. are discussed. There are also several guidelines and manuals how to introduce tolerance at school.

One interesting way to battle hate speech and to promote tolerance among children and young people had been applied by the project ComiX4 = Comics for equality⁷⁰. The project was aimed at fostering intercultural dialogue in order to combat racism, xenophobia and discrimination in Europe, with a particular focus on Italy, Bulgaria, Estonia, Romania and Latvia. In order to achieve its aim, the project invited migrants and second-generation immigrants – often the subjects of discrimination – to take part in the creation of comic strips. Then the project organized a competition to award the best unpublished comics by authors with migrant backgrounds, created a catalogue containing the best comics submitted within the award scheme and an interactive website where all the comics could be seen - www.comix4equality.eu. The project also developed a “Comics Handbook” that helps conducting informal creative workshops and organized a travelling exhibition of the comics and comic strip workshops across Europe.

The comics created by children and young people subject to discrimination are a powerful tool to show to children and young people from the host community how the words and deeds of discrimination, racism and xenophobia affect people, how it feels to be discriminated against, how it hurts, how unfair it is. The comics also remind them in a very clear and positive way that refugees and migrants are people like us – who have dreams, who love, who face the same obstacles on their way growing up.

Social integration and community inclusion through labour market integration

There is no doubt that without labour market integration it is unlikely that any integration and community inclusion will be achieved. Having a job provides not only incomes but also social contacts that are of crucial importance for the community inclusion process.

In the past few years the Bulgarian economy has been facing a noticeable and deepening shortage of both a highly qualified and a low qualified labour force. Experience shows that although 51% of people think that it is unacceptable to have a refugee colleague, there are businesses contacting SAR and the CSOs seeking workers from among the refugees. Some of them are owned by well integrated representatives of the migrants’ community – like Aladin foods, others utilise skills in rare foreign languages – like TELLUS International or fill their labour force gaps like Convoy-World.

⁷⁰ <http://www.comix4equality.eu/>

‘Aladin foods’ is a fast food chain with 32 restaurants all over the country and a production facility in Plovdiv district. The company, which has 870 employees, supports a variety of public causes within its Corporate Social Responsibility Programme. Its owners and managers - Aladin and Haled Harfan – are of Syrian origin and believe they have a special duty in regard to the present refugee crisis. In the first days of the crisis, when SAR was still building refugee centres, Aladin and Haled Harfan rearranged one of their buildings in the countryside and gave shelter to 250 refugees.

Mr. Harfan believes that refugees should be divided into small groups, which will help them to adapt and integrate more easily and more quickly. In the last few years the company had employed a lot of refugees (seeking or having received protection). At present, there are 30 refugees working for the company.

All team members support the refugee colleagues’ integration process and try to help them to deal with the logistical issues they face. The company provides housing, food vouchers and transportation for the late shifts in the rural areas. In the past it was also providing Bulgarian language lessons for its foreign employees, but nowadays the investment is no longer needed, since the service is provided by many CSOs. The company employees speak in Bulgarian to each other, thus helping the refugee colleagues to practice and further perfection the language.

‘Aladin foods’ keeps in touch and successfully partners with the CSOs working on refugee issues.

Source: Interview with Aladin foods HR and PR employees

SAR and CSOs play the roles of important intermediaries in this process. The employers that want to hire refugees send their inquiries to SAR and CSOs, which make the information available to the refugees and migrants. SAR reports the reception of about 6-7 labour inquiries per month in average.

‘Convoy-World’ is a leading manufacturer and distributor of a wide range of consumer goods, including various types of cleaning sponges and consumables. The company produces products for many of the own label brands of the leading retail chains in Bulgaria as well as in EU and non-EU countries. Production takes place in Novi Iskar, a town near Sofia.

The company management has established excellent communications with SAR and the CSOs promoting job vacancies through their social workers. It offers support to its refugee employees, including providing housing at reduced rent, covering transportation costs, helping to enroll children in the local school, etc.

The company had hired 20 refugees so far. Most of them left to join their relatives in Western Europe. However, one woman and two men still work there.

Source: Stana Iliev, If there is will, there is a way, UNHCR, Sofia, 2017

CSOs providing integration services don't stay passive, relying on employers to approach them, but also approach employers directly. Besides the occasional labour exchanges that they organize, they also help refugees and migrants to find jobs case by case. For example, on the website of Caritas Sofia, we see that the integration centre of the organization helped 45 people to find job.

'TELUS International Europe' is a premium multilingual contact center, BPO (business process outsourcing) and ITO (information technology outsourcing) provider, delivering high quality services since 2004. The company has 3,500 team members across seven delivery centers located in: Sofia and Plovdiv (Bulgaria); Bucharest and Craiova (Romania), as well as offices in Manchester and Cannock (England). TELUS International Europe offers contact center solutions, ITO and innovative customer service support for global customers in over 35 languages.

At present the company employs 100 employees holding refugee and humanitarian status, who enjoy the good corporate culture created by TELUS International Europe that celebrates the diversity within its team. Along with the wide range of social services that company offers to its employees, it also organizes cultural, social and sports events and offers active career development support.

At present the company has an open call for project proposals from NGOs with a deadline of 6 October 2017. The projects must be with health, ecological or educational purposes and should be focused on the integration and the adequate presence of young people within the society.

Source: TELUS International Europe website and Stana Iliev, If there is will, there is a way, UNHCR, Sofia, 2017

The interviews with other employers, however, suggest that labour integration in regions with problems such as depopulation and non-integrated Roma population would not help the community integration process. On the contrary, moving refugees into such regions would create conditions for their segregation and marginalization.

Approaches with potential to support community inclusion

One of the problems with refugee integration seen all over the country is the reluctance and sometimes even resistance of the local communities to accept refugees. This type of behaviour is based mainly on the lack of reliable information regarding refugee issues as a whole and regarding the refugees coming into the community in particular.

The experience of the CSOs working at a community level suggests that communities must be carefully prepared for the coming of newcomers. They need to know who these people are, what jobs they were doing at home, how they will make a living in the community, etc. But before that some myths about the refugees as a whole must be broken.

This job could be done using the methods of the group mediation, applied by EBRD and the World Bank all over the world in places where their projects have created conflicts with or within the local communities.

In such cases they send in the so called Ombudsman, whose role is to contact the local groups and to start a negotiation process. His/her first task is to identify who are the people leading the conflict and what are their reasons, fears, arguments or whatever they have against the project. Once the problem gets identified, the Ombudsman meets all parties involved in the conflict and starts discussions in search for a mutually acceptable solution⁷¹.

A unit with similar functions might be created within the institution that will finally get appointed as responsible for refugees integration at a state level. The knowledge about group mediation and the other dispute mediation methods is available in the civil sector in Bulgaria, which could provide all necessary trainings and ongoing support.⁷²

SOURCE OF FUNDING OF THE REFUGEES' INTEGRATION AND COMMUNITY INCLUSION EFFORTS

The integration and community inclusion initiatives implemented in Bulgaria so far were funded by EU sources, international organizations like UNHCR, EEA grant schemes, some embassies as well as various private donors – private foundations, companies, personal donations, etc.

EU funds managed by the Bulgarian government are traditionally a bureaucratic nightmare, in which the burden often exceeds the benefits. When we add to this the long periods of waiting for reimbursement and the almost impossibility of renegotiating activities, it is no wonder that many organizations reported their reluctance to apply for locally managed EU funding.

Most of the initiatives are funded on short term project base – meaning annually with activities negotiated and fixed in the previous year with minimal chances for renegotiation.

This inflexible short term project based funding is generally harmful for the CSOs. At first place it is unlikely for anything sustainable to be achieved with one project within one year. Second, being committed to specific indicators of implementation and success restrains CSOs from being creative, from experimentation and innovation. Project based funding makes them cling to simple projects with easily measurable results and to avoid experimenting with new ideas and approaches.

The problem with the inflexible funding is especially valid for the CSOs working with refugees, where the environment changes very quickly and the number and type of refugees this month or this year has nothing to do with the number and type of refugees that could come next month or next year⁷³. Negotiating projects with particular indicators of success in one environment and implementing them in a completely different one often puts successful implementation at risk. This is the case with the Bulgarian language classes and the psychological support presently provided by almost all CSOs working with refugees. These services were planned in a time when there were thousands of refugees in Bulgaria who

⁷¹ A key aspect of mediation is that the mediator does not 'sort things out' or make any decisions for the parties involved. Instead, he or she helps the parties involved work together to develop their own agreement.

⁷² More about the mediation could be found in Bulgarian language on the website of the Centre for resolving disputes - <http://www.bgmediation.com>

⁷³ The refugees from Syria differ substantially in terms of needs and motivation from those from Afghanistan and Pakistan for example.

needed them. Now, when the number of refugees has decreased, the organizations with flexible funding have reallocated the funds for other services. Those with inflexible funding will continue to oversupply them in a struggle to meet their indicators for success.

Furthermore, the community inclusion process is slow and complex. It needs lots of efforts and time - to change attitudes, to overcome the myths and to draw the communities closer. This is why the community inclusion initiatives need long term flexible funding which allows CSOs to experiment, gives them the final goal and the freedom to choose how to get there.

Experience so far shows that most of the best community inclusion initiatives like Multi Kulti Kitchen, Team of hope, Initiative for social empowerment, Caritas mentorship programme, etc. were created with the support of a flexible funding.

MEASURING THE IMPACT

Apart from the official project reports (with the usual indicators in numbers – number of participants, number of certificates, etc.) and the internal progress assessments and target groups feedbacks aimed at improving the services, there were no attempts to measure the impact of the initiatives on migrants, the host community or the environment as a whole. Such assessment requires lots of efforts, specific knowledge and expertise and last, but definitely not least, free financial resources which CSOs working with refugees in Bulgaria do not have.

SUSTAINABILITY OF THE EFFORTS

None of the initiatives implemented so far are self sustainable yet. They continue to need further coordination, encouragement, mediation, training of volunteers, etc. made by the CSOs. The public attitudes towards refugees and migrants are not yet friendly enough to support and sustain some community driven efforts.

Much work and effort is required to change the environment so to make it possible for initiatives started by the CSOs to continue being carried forward by the local communities.

SHARING OF EXPERIENCE

None of the interviewed organizations reports activities providing regular sharing of experience within the country, except some occasional seminars or round tables and the meetings conducted in SAR and UNHCR with coordination purposes, i.e. to share who is doing what and what is planned for the near future.

Most of the organizations, though, do share good practices and experience within the international networks they are participating in. They are ready to share their experience within the country as well, but haven't enough resources, both financial and human, to prepare reports, papers or presentations or to organize workshops for the exchange of experience and good practices. Most of them have insufficient resources to even keep their websites updated.

The research identified only one attempt to scale up good practice and it is the social franchise of the Multi Kulti Collective initiatives, where NGOs from the 7 biggest Bulgarian cities were selected, trained, funded and mentored to start transferring the model into their own local communities. The effort was funded by the NGO Programme under the Financial Mechanism of the European Economic Area

Sharing of experience and scaling up of practises depends to a great extent on the priorities of funding organizations. Even if CSOs want to scale up or multiply a practice they still have to find a donor to fund the efforts.

GENERAL RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS

The information gathered within the research enables us to draw the following general conclusions regarding the social integration and community inclusion processes in Bulgaria:

1. During the last 25 years 81,620 people had requested protection in Bulgaria and it was granted to 23,966 people (29%) - 12,917 of them were given refugee status and the remaining 11,049 obtained humanitarian status.
2. Most of the protection seekers were from Afghanistan (25,014), followed by those from Syria (20,824) and Iraq (18,805).
3. A widely shared opinion is that most of the refugees perceive Bulgaria as a transit country - an unavoidable obstacle on their route to Western Europe where some want to unite with friends and family, others expect to achieve a better living standard than in Bulgaria and some others are simply attracted by the Western European generous social systems.
4. 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 could say that those who want to stay are certainly not doing so for the social benefits and would do their best to integrate.
5. In a world where nearly 20 people are forcibly displaced every minute as a result of conflict or persecution, and where it is expected that climate change will start forcing 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 – i.e. how to successfully integrate newcomers but taking into account all national security aspects of that process, how to include them socially to avoid their marginalization and radicalisation, how to peacefully interact and benefit from each other's knowledge, entrepreneurial initiative and labour capacity.
6. Now, when the number of migrants is still small and easily manageable, it is the perfect time for Bulgaria to build up an effective well coordinated integration system by testing good integration practices and social inclusion models.
7. The legislative framework for successful integration of refugees and migrants is already established. Foreigners who have been granted asylum have the same rights as those who have been granted refugee status and they have the same rights and obligations as Bulgarian nationals with several exceptions (to participate in elections, referenda and the establishment of political parties, to be a member of a political party, to hold positions for which Bulgarian citizenship is required by law, to serve in the army, to acquire real estate in Bulgaria (they can do it but under the terms and procedure provided for foreigners)). The humanitarian status holders have the rights and obligations of a permanent residence permit holders in Bulgaria, i.e. have a right to: access the labour market without further permission needed; education in public schools and universities; gather the family together on the territory of Bulgaria; however can't enjoy the freedom of travel across the EU.

8. Bulgarian legislation provides plenty of rights and possibilities for integration and social inclusion of refugees and migrants with granted protection status; however most of these rights and possibilities are not yet easily exercised.
9. As reasons we could point out - the lack of working mechanisms for effective implementation; the lack of an institution responsible for the integration process on behalf of the state; and the lack of a systemic approach and any state supported programme for the integration of refugees and migrants. These are also the main limitations and challenges to refugee inclusion process.
10. In the absence of a state funded integration programme and any institution with responsibility to coordinate and support the integration process, the refugees are practically left to integrate on their own or with the help of the civil society organizations, which although doing an excellent job, are not able to provide either full coverage or sustainability of the services, because of their dependency on external funding sources.
11. Experts in the field, both within the Government and the civil sector, share the opinion that:
 - There should be a state institution/administrative body responsible for overall operative management and coordination of the refugee integration process.
 - This institution/administrative body should be properly positioned within the executive power hierarchy, so to be able to give recommendations and to request cooperation from the rest of the executive power bodies.
 - Bulgaria should restore its state supported integration programme, providing a basic integration package, including integration measures such as Bulgarian language courses, support to gain access to the labour market, training, education, social and healthcare services, etc.
 - Certain parts, or the entire integration programme, could be outsourced to external service providers, thus optimising the costs and utilizing the expertise, built up within the civil society sector so far.
 - Without pro-active policy, further encouragement, clear implementation guidelines and explanation of the possibilities and advantages of integrating refugees, the ordinance on integration agreements, regulating the integration process on municipal level, will hardly start working and is unlikely to have any impact on the integration of refugees. CSOs are ready to help municipalities to develop and test a working implementation mechanism.
12. Despite the traditional ethnic and religious tolerance of Bulgarian people, the integration and community inclusion processes occur in a rather unfriendly sometimes even hostile environment.
13. Politicians and the media play a rather negative role by promoting and multiplying fear and hate speech.
14. A research carried out by the Institute for Social Integration (ISI) shows that the hate speech against refugees in Bulgaria is on a large scale and it is reflected by over 80% of the

Bulgarian national and regional media. Some printed and electronic media have compared the refugees from Syria to cannibals, criminals, mass murderers and Islamic fundamentalists running to escape justice.

15. Using direct and indirect messages, the media gradually but successfully and conveniently created the image of a new scary Bogeyman who is associated with threat, disease and danger.
16. In absence of strong political platforms and programmes, politicians from across the political spectrum use the refugee issues to spread a sense of fear, threat and distrust in a desperate attempt to gain political dividends and improving their catastrophically low public ratings.
17. After all the things Bulgarians read and hear, it is not a surprise that the majority of them are scared, suspicious and hostile to refugees. Sociological surveys show high levels of distrust in the capacity of the state to deal with the refugee issues, which raises a whole range of fears - that the refugees will be a burden to the national economy and will consume too much of the national budget; that they will take jobs and thus increase unemployment levels amongst the native population; that in the places where refugees live crime will rise and health risks will appear; that refugees are a threat to national security and there is a risk that some will start to make terrorist attacks; etc. Those are the reasons why more than half the population doesn't want more refugees to be hosted in the country.
18. Sociological data shows that Bulgarians seem afraid of big groups of refugees. Almost half of the people interviewed do not mind refugees coming to live in their neighbourhood or town but only if these are just a few people or families. Half the people don't agree that the government should build a shelter for temporary accommodation of refugees in their settlement and more than half are in favour of the idea for building a fence along the border with Turkey, in order to stop the flow of refugees to Bulgaria.
19. Public attitudes towards refugee integration vary but mainly in terms of the reasons why it is not likely to happen. The majority think that refugee integration is hardly possible because of the weakness of the state, which is incapable of providing conditions for successful integration. Another big part thinks integration would be impossible because of the cultural and religious differences, which will not allow the refugees to integrate within Bulgarian society. However, a bigger problem for the integration and the community inclusion of the refugees would be that half of the adults for whom it is unacceptable to have a refugee neighbour or colleague.
20. The good news is that although there is a great amount of fear the sociological polls do not detect signs of raising xenophobia.
21. It seems the main obstacle to social and community inclusion of refugees is the fear, which is caused by:
 - insufficiency of unbiased general information regarding refugee issues;
 - insufficiency of information and poor communication of the government plans and financial engagements in regard to refugees;

- great deal of distrust in the capacity of the state to deal with whatsoever, which makes most of the people feel insecure and frightened;
 - the lack of trust that politicians and institutions would defend citizens best interests;
 - the absence of state presence in most of the small settlements, where people are left to survive on their own with no police to protect their lives and property and no medical services nearby;
 - associations with the failed Roma integration, which make Bulgarians fear that another marginalized group is about to appear, multiplying the problems with non-integrated Roma already at place;
 - associations with radical Islam, which is killing people in terrorist attacks all over Europe. This fear is additionally fuelled by the way the electronic media announces terrorist attacks or incidents that might be a terrorist attack – repeating, against a background of commentary, the same horrifying frames of violence, blood, screams, terrified people over and over again, thus creating the feeling of one never ending horror happening again and again in front of viewers’ eyes until they start to feel directly involved and affected by the tragedy.
22. Since the country is perceived as a transit route for the refugee flows, there is no national debate on the issues of refugee integration and community inclusion. There are merely attempts to use the refugee integration theme for political attacks against the Government and to strike fear with the hope of gaining political dividends.
23. The field work information suggests that community inclusion, even in small communities (known as being traditionally closed and hardly accepting newcomers), would be difficult but not impossible to happen. Everything is a matter of successful mediation and depends on the personal involvement of the local community leaders and their attitude towards the refugees and migrants. People fear the unknown, therefore the process of community inclusion must start with a simple introduction – who are the new people, where they are from, what does their country look like, what is its culture and history, what could they offer to the community in terms of skills and knowledge - what are their professions, what have they been doing back home, what are their plans, etc. Any integration would be possible to start only after the refugees get accepted by the community as individuals – with their names, history and skills.
24. Despite the unfavourable, sometimes even hostile, environment and the personal threats that human rights activists and CSOs often receive, they continue to do a great job helping people in need. In fact, CSOs are those who support refugees in every step during and after the protection seeking procedure. They are those providing translators and Bulgarian language lessons in the Registration and Reception Centres as well as legal and psychological help, preschool and school classes for the children, cultural adaptation activities, etc. CSOs are also the ones who assist the refugees in their efforts to integrate among Bulgarian society and who work with the Bulgarian community in order to facilitate the community inclusion process.

25. There are a range of civil society initiatives that have been applied so far in support of the refugee integration and community inclusion process. Most of them had happened in Sofia, mainly because - this is the place with the highest concentration of refugees and migrants; most of the CSOs are based in Sofia; and, last but not least, it seems easier to find and engage experts and volunteers in Sofia than in other towns.
26. Among the initiatives implemented so far we recognise: integration services provided to refugees; initiatives for social empowerment; mentorship programmes; social mediation; exploration visits; educational and sport 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 that CSOs implement depend to a great extent on the priorities of the funding organizations.
27. The initiatives related to refugees involve many volunteers. They are the first representatives of the local community to meet and communicate with the refugees; they are the first advocates for refugees and also the ones who try to build bridges between both communities - helping refugees to integrate and communities to understand and utilise the refugees' knowledge and skills.
28. Although there are 51% of the people who think that it is unacceptable to have a refugee colleague, there still are businesses contacting SAR and the CSOs seeking workers. Some of them are owned by well integrated representatives of the migrants' community, others utilise the knowledge of rare foreign languages or fill in the shortage in the labour force.
29. The integration and community inclusion initiatives implemented in Bulgaria so far were funded by EU sources, international organizations like UNHCR, EEA grant schemes, some embassies as well as various private donors – private foundations, companies, personal donations, etc.
30. EU funds managed by the Bulgarian government are traditionally a bureaucratic nightmare, in which the burden often exceeds the benefits. When we add to this the long periods of waiting for reimbursement and the almost impossibility of renegotiating activities, it is unsurprising that many organizations reported their reluctance to apply for locally managed EU funding.
31. The funding had been predominantly inflexible short term and project based, which is generally harmful for the CSOs. In the first place it is unlikely that anything sustainable can be achieved with one project within one year. Secondly, being committed to specific indicators of implementation and success restrains CSOs from being creative, from experimenting and innovating. Project based funding makes them adhere to simple projects with easily measurable results and to avoid experimenting with new ideas and approaches.
32. Since the community inclusion process is slow and complex, i.e. needs lots of time and effort - to change the attitudes, to overcome the myths and to bring the communities closer, the community inclusion initiatives need long term flexible funding, i.e. a funding bonded to a goal but giving freedom of choice how to achieve it. The practice so far shows that the best community inclusion initiatives like Multi Kulti Kitchen, Team of hope,

Initiative for social empowerment, Caritas mentorship programme, etc. were created with the support of a flexible funding.

33. Apart from the official project reports (with the usual indicators in numbers – number of participants, number of certificates, number of meetings, etc.) and the internal progress assessments aimed at improving the services, there were no attempts to measure the impact of initiatives on migrants, the host community or the environment as a whole. Such assessment requires a lot of effort, specific knowledge and expertise and last but definitely not least free financial resources, which CSOs working with refugees in Bulgaria do not have.
34. None of the initiatives implemented so far are self sustainable yet. They still need further coordination, encouragement, mediation, training of volunteers, etc. made by the CSOs. Public attitudes towards refugees and migrants are still not friendly enough to support and sustain some community driven efforts. A lot of work and effort is needed to change the environment so to make it possible for initiatives started by the CSOs to continue being carried forward by the local communities.
35. Most of the organizations share good practices and experience within the international networks in which they participate. They are ready and willing to share their experience within the country as well, but don't have sufficient resources, both financial and human, to prepare reports, papers or presentations or to organize workshops for exchange of experience and good practices. Most of them don't even have the resources to keep their websites updated.
36. Most of the initiatives could be easily multiplied and scaled up, however this depends on the funding priorities of the donor organizations. The research identified only one example for scaling up of good practices - the social franchise of the Multi Kulti Collective initiatives, where NGOs from the 7 biggest Bulgarian cities were selected, trained, funded and mentored to start transferring the model into their own local communities. The effort was funded by the NGO Programme under the Financial Mechanism of the European Economic Area.
37. One of the biggest challenges to refugee integration and community inclusion seen all over the country is the reluctance and sometimes even resistance of the local governments and communities to accept refugees. This sort of behaviour is based mainly on the lack of reliable information regarding refugee issues as a whole and about the refugees coming in the community in particular. The present research identified the methods of the group mediation as a possible answer to this challenge.
38. Another challenge that remains and needs further experimentation and innovation is how to reach the neutral audience – that which is apart from the group of volunteers and the section of the host community that is already positively disposed.
39. Experts do not expect any major changes at a national level in the near future, but hope very much for some positive developments on local level.

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The author is extremely thankful to each one of the people in the list of interviewees who gave valuable insights on the subject.

LIST OF INTERVIEWEES		
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Yanita Manolova, Director of SAA	State Agency for Refugees	www.aref.government.bg
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Emilia Bratanova-van Harten	UNHCR	www.unhcr.org
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Stana Iliev, Researcher and civil rights activist	Research on the labour integration issues	www.unhcr.org/bg/wp-content/uploads/sites/18/2016/12/Employment-for-Refugees-FINAL-BG.pdf
Yavor Siderov, Civil activist and former Adviser on refugees issues of the Minister of Internal Affairs		
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