



EESC Study Group
on Immigration and Integration

Project on the role of civil society organisations in ensuring the integration of migrants and refugees



MISSION REPORT – BULGARIA
3-4 DECEMBER 2019



European Economic
and Social Committee

Mission Report – Bulgaria, 3 and 4 December 2019

Between October 2019 and March 2020, the IMI Group conducted five fact-finding missions as part of a project on the role of civil society organisations in ensuring the integration of migrants and refugees. The delegation to Bulgaria was composed of Evgeniy Ivanov (Bulgaria, Employers' Group), Raymond Coumont (Belgium, Workers' Group) and Anastasis Yiapanis (Cyprus, Diversity Europe Group), supported by Annemarie Wiersma, from the EESC secretariat.

1. Purpose of the mission

Between October 2019 and March 2020, the IMI Group conducted five fact-finding missions as part of a project on **the role of civil society organisations in ensuring the integration of migrants and refugees**. The country visits provided an in-depth picture of problems and best practices, documented in individual country reports. The five country reports are to feed into a summary report presenting the project's main findings, conclusions and recommendations.

This project is linked to a previous EESC project on migration: eleven EESC fact-finding missions on migration that were conducted in 2015-2016. These latest fact-finding missions took place in Member States that were also visited in 2015-2016, namely Greece, Malta, Sweden, Germany and Bulgaria¹.

During the missions, the delegation compared the situation in the five countries with the situation as it was three years ago, talking to organisations that we had met during the former missions to see if their projects were still ongoing, if they had matured and increased in scale, if problems identified previously had been overcome and how and what the current needs and challenges were. Where relevant, the delegations also met other organisations, paying special attention to measures addressing particular groups that may be more difficult to integrate into the labour market (e.g. women, migrants from a specific country of origin, migrants with a specific educational background and migrants with disabilities). The project tried to identify good practices to see if they could be replicated elsewhere, including those helping to positively change the narrative on migration.

2. Situation in Bulgaria

With an estimated 100 000 immigrants born outside the EU living in Bulgaria, its migrant and refugee population is rather small. Of a total population of 7 million, this is less than 2%. Although Bulgaria has granted international protection status to around 25 000 persons, the number of refugees with international protection status who have actually settled in Bulgaria is very low: between one and two thousand. This indicates that for refugees, Bulgaria is in fact a transit country. The number of migrant arrivals has been in decline since 2015 and it was very low at the time of our visit. Around 400 asylum-seekers were present in the Bulgarian reception centres in December 2019, which was an all-time low. Some asylum-seekers live in private housing (with friends or family for example) instead of a reception centre. However, it is not clear how many people exactly are concerned. Most asylum-seekers come from Syria, Afghanistan or Iraq, but precise statistics are not available on separate categories of migrants.

¹ A sixth fact-finding visit to Italy was planned, but had to be cancelled due to the COVID-19 health crisis.

Migrants in Bulgaria are mostly well (self-)integrated, while refugees often require integration support from the authorities and civil society organisations. A recent report by Caritas² identified several obstacles to refugee integration, namely non-implementation of the refugee integration programme on the part of state institutions and an increasingly negative, anti-immigrant discourse and attitude, on the part of both politicians and the general public. Bulgarians largely overestimate the presence of migrants in their country and intolerance towards migrants has been on the rise.

Civil society representatives lament the lack of political will to invest in an effective integration policy. Bulgaria has a National Strategy on Migration and Integration, in place since 2015, as well as a National Strategy for the Integration of Beneficiaries of International Protection. Both will have to be renewed in 2020. The Strategy for the Integration of Beneficiaries of International Protection is judged to be ineffective. An action plan implementing the strategy does not exist and no budget has been allocated for integration. As a result, civic education, language classes and vocational training are not offered. A position of deputy prime minister for integration exists, but has been vacant since its creation.

The 2017 Ordinance on the terms and procedure for concluding, implementing, and terminating the integration agreement for foreigners granted asylum or international protection (the Ordinance) delegated the responsibility for the integration of refugees to municipalities, which are to sign integration contracts with refugees who have decided to settle in their area. Neither local government nor the local population were prepared and there is a lack of interest among municipalities in welcoming refugees and taking advantage of the funding available for integration measures.

A very small number of refugees and other beneficiaries of international protection have a registered work contract (fewer than 200 in total in 2017). The actual number of employed refugees is higher, as an estimated 60% of asylum-seekers and refugees work without a contract, which makes them vulnerable to exploitation.

Bulgaria wants to promote circular migration and tries to attract people with Bulgarian roots from abroad by providing them easy access to citizenship (e.g. for people with Bulgarian roots coming from Ukraine or Moldova). Yet, most of them leave for Western Europe once they have obtained Bulgarian citizenship.

3. A description of the meetings

a. International Organization for Migration

In Bulgaria, the work of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) focuses on protecting migrants, building the capacity of national institutions and NGOs, and coordinating mobile teams consisting of social assistants and legal counsellors. IOM staff also works in reception centres throughout the country. Finally, the IOM has been running a safe zone for unaccompanied minors since summer 2019, and a second one was set to open in January 2020, reaching a total capacity of 230 children. Working with migrant children has been challenging, because few plan to stay in Bulgaria. Focusing not only on minors, but on newcomers in general, the IOM tries to encourage them to learn Bulgarian, but few are interested in settling and integrating in the country. Regardless, the IOM still

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<https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/?action=media.download&uuid=AAFD2826-C505-3205-3B05C16AB00BF4F6>

provides as many integration opportunities as it can, whilst explaining that elsewhere in Europe it will not be much easier to have a decent life.

As Bulgaria needs to bolster its labour force, in particular in the tourism sector and low skilled jobs, the prospect for labour market integration is quite good. Refugees could contribute to filling vacancies, but instead Bulgaria looks for workers from Vietnam and the Philippines. Progress in this area would notably require a changed attitude not only from the government, but also from the local population in general and the social partners. On the involvement of the social partners, the delegation learned that employer organisations did not have much involvement in the discussions about integrating newcomers in the labour market. Trade unions on the other hand were afraid that migrants would push the local population out of work; however, it should be noted that their attitude has been changing recently and they are now more favourable to accepting migrants in the workforce.

Besides the challenge that few migrants want to stay in Bulgaria, the local population is often rather resistant towards welcoming migrants. A few years ago, local authorities were put in charge of integration. People who have received international protection should be relocated to towns, where they should be housed, employed, etc. Many mayors are not very keen on taking on this responsibility, partly due to the attitude of locals. The positive experience in the small town of Harmanli, which has around 18 000 residents, could be promoted as a good practice to break down citizens' resistance. Harmanli hosts a big reception centre and the presence of around 4 000 (mostly Syrian) asylum-seekers in 2015 enormously boosted the local economy. Now the number of asylum-seekers has dropped considerably, and the locals are disappointed that they are gone. It would be interesting to recreate the positive effect that the newcomers there had on the economy, preferably in other small towns, where the effect is easier to see.

Settling in a smaller town has the advantage that social integration is easier because contacts are more personal and it is easier to find housing. Yet, as work opportunities are mostly found in bigger cities, newcomers are more inclined to stay there than head to smaller towns.

The decision to transfer the responsibility for newcomer integration to the municipal level has not been assessed. The current integration strategy ends in 2020 and a working group is now drawing up a new strategy, which would ideally be based on an evaluation of past activities. However, it is not clear to what extent this is the case.

The local population – often poor and unsatisfied with the social security system – was often unhappy about asylum-seekers receiving financial support from the state. This sentiment could perhaps be countered by fostering understanding between the different groups. An arena in which this works well is education. In peak-year 2015, many asylum-seeking children enrolled in schools, where they managed to quickly learn the language, as well as other subjects. It was striking that the local population accepted the families of school-going children quickly, because the children acted as a bridge between their parents and the local population.

The Bulgarian Ministry of Interior distributes funding from the European Union's Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF). The IOM has secured financing for six projects in the area of protection and integration from this fund. The projects are aimed at the integration of newcomers and include language courses and career guidance for migrants with a visa, specific integration measures targeted at

asylum-seekers and refugees such as help with administration and school enrolment, and multicultural activities fostering acceptance of migrants among the local population. It was not clear if and how funding has increased since 2016 or what the impact of the projects is (despite regular reporting obligations).

b. Multi Kulti Collective

Multi Kulti Collective (MKC) started as a grassroots initiative in 2010, before becoming an official NGO in 2012. It works on community development and the integration of migrants and refugees, operating both at grassroots and policy level.

Since 2013, MKC has been running many projects, as well as a social enterprise that empowers migrants through offering and promoting their culinary services (such as culinary team building, catering services, and cooking courses) to individuals, cultural institutes and companies. It also has vast experience in campaigning, awareness-raising, training, research, monitoring, policy analysis, and advocacy.

MKC has a strong media strategy and strives to give migrants a voice in the public space. Media campaigns such as "Diversity is tasty" celebrate diversity, by putting the (culinary) skills and richness of foreigners in the spotlight, thereby aiming to fight discrimination, xenophobia and hate speech. The project has enabled migrants to share their personal stories, while creating connections on the basis of a topic of common interest: food.

The organisation is based in Sofia, but has grown to become a social franchise in eight of Bulgaria's biggest cities. It collaborates across borders with other NGOs, international organisations, universities, and foundations.

Obtaining project funding is often difficult, as for many projects a 30% self-funding requirement exists which can be hard to meet. The Bulgarian authorities are not considered to be very supportive of NGOs that have difficulties securing the required amount of money.

c. Ministry of Labour and Social Policy

The delegation spoke to various representatives of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy. The Bulgarian government supports the proposed reforms of the Common European Asylum System, which decrease the period that asylum-seekers need to wait before they can access the labour market from nine to six months; in Bulgaria this waiting time is even as little as three months.

In 2018, 29 persons with refugee status approached the labour office looking for employment, of which 23 received assistance and started to work, nine persons also received training, and two took part in a programme that is supported by the European Social Fund (ESF). In 2019, 20 persons registered at the Public Employment Services (PES), of which nine have started to work. In the national employment plan for 2019, funding has been allocated for the labour market integration of unemployed refugees, focusing on raising their qualifications, by providing skills and language training, and subsidised employment. The programme also helps to increase the capacity of reception centres.

During the EESC's visit to Bulgaria in 2016, a need to coordinate integration efforts was identified and the EESC delegation learned that discussions were ongoing about the "creation of a commission for

integration, which would attempt to match the skills supply to labour market demand". A Council on Migration and Integration has now been created, which is co-chaired by the Ministries of Interior and Labour. The Council is to ensure implementation of the 2015 National Strategy on Migration and Integration and involves international organisations such as the IOM and the UNHCR, but not the social partners. However, the social partners are involved in smaller tripartite meetings that are chaired by the Minister for Labour and Social Policy. In other small Council configurations, there is a possibility for NGOs to participate, but until now, none have applied to participate. In late 2019, the Council's scope was extended to also cover other migration-related topics, such as border management.

The 2017 Ordinance, mentioned also in Chapter 2 above, sets out the rules for non-mandatory integration agreements between municipalities and refugees, which would allow persons granted international protection to use a "package" of services, including housing, pre-school or school enrolment for accompanying minors, Bulgarian language courses, health insurance, professional guidance and training programmes, etc. Local communities can ask refugees to settle in their area and a matching process is in place. During the procedure for granting protection, which should last three months at most, the State Agency for Refugees provides a lot of information regarding society, legislation, cultural particularities, and the possibilities for settling in the country after protection has been granted. If a consequent match is made between a municipality and a refugee (family), an integration contract is signed. The State Agency for Refugees provides transportation to the municipality and upon arrival, the mayor or local official coordinates the implementation of the integration needs. Funding comes from the relevant agencies that provide local integration services, which means that the cost is carried at the local level. Yet, in practice, according to statistics from the State Agency for Refugees, only five to nine families have asked for such integration assistance. It was not clear why so few refugees have been resettled to municipalities.

Considering the fact that Bulgaria mostly remains a transit country, which makes it hard to implement the integration policy, the delegation wanted to know if the government focuses more on managing the situation of migrants in transit, or whether they try to encourage migrants to stay in Bulgaria (with a view to increasing the labour force). We learned that the government mostly focuses on ensuring fair treatment, and determining whether they need protection or not and if they want to receive this in Bulgaria. There is no particular policy in place that tries to encourage migrants and refugees to stay.

Concerning the increase of xenophobia and negative attitudes towards migrants and refugees, this phenomenon was said to be rather marginal in Bulgaria, especially when compared to other European countries. In Bulgaria, migrants are needed and welcome, but perhaps the attitude towards refugees is more negative.

d. UNHCR

There are an estimated 1 500 to 2 000 refugees in Bulgaria, but the exact number is unknown. Most applicants for internal protection have arrived irregularly. Very few refugees have arrived via regular pathways, such as resettlement or relocation. Bulgaria has resettled around 60 persons, many of which have already left the country. Relocation is currently on hold.

Bulgaria has the potential to be attractive to newcomers, because for people with a decent job the standard of living is quite high at a cost that is lower when compared in relative terms to Germany for

example (a favourite destination for many newcomers). However, very few migrants or refugees actually stay in Bulgaria, even after having received a residence permit. In terms of their integration, we learned that only relocated or resettled refugees have concluded integration contracts with a municipality. Refugees that have entered irregularly, requested and were granted asylum have almost all left Bulgaria.

Although Mr Le Rutte writes a letter to the prime minister every year, the UNHCR feels it can make most impact at local level and has given up trying to influence the national level. The UNHCR has entered into dialogue with many municipalities trying to convince them that settling refugees has many benefits.

The UNHCR has also approached the private sector, which is interested in hiring refugees, because there is a high demand for labour. Unemployment in Bulgaria is at its lowest rate since the end of Communism and many vacancies cannot be filled.

The UNHCR has signed several memorandums of understanding with the government and the relationship between the UNHCR and the Bulgarian authorities is generally good. Yet, that does not mean that they always agree. The UNHCR is critical of the government in many areas.

On paper, status holders have almost the same rights as Bulgarian citizens. In practice, however, they experience difficulties accessing their rights in many areas. Mr Le Rutte suspected that there is a deliberate approach by the Bulgarian authorities to make staying in Bulgaria as unattractive as possible for refugees. Bulgaria is mostly a transit country, which is convenient for the Bulgarian public authorities. The authorities therefore seem to accept this reality instead of trying to change it.

There is no proper integration framework in place and the Ordinance is not operational. In many countries, the basic integration process is expected to last a certain amount of time, during which certain integration activities are offered. In Bulgaria, such expectation of a particular reasonable time does not exist. This relates to the absence of a clear integration strategy, a designated state actor or coordinating body, and a consequent integration system. In the absence of state-run actions, civil society organisations play an important role and many integration activities such as language training are provided by NGOs.

A new council was set up last month, under the auspices of the deputy minister of the interior, which mixes many types of responsibilities, but does not seem very effective. It is a consultative body, which is not new but has expanded (with more focus on borders). The municipal level is officially represented, but by the chair of an NGO representing local government. However, the views of the different municipalities are so divergent that in practice it is hard to speak with one voice in the council. The Ordinance also provided for the creation of the post of deputy prime minister for integration. However, two years later, the post is still vacant. The state agency for refugees is not involved in the integration process and the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy as well as the Ministry of Interior are also dodging their responsibility. The Ministry of Education has mostly done a great job at carrying out its limited responsibility. The EU cannot intervene much because of a lack of competence in this area.

At least part of society has a welcoming attitude towards refugees. Schools play an important role in fostering intercultural contacts, which the UNHCR is trying to capitalise on. The relationship with the Ministry of Education is good and they have been effective in enrolling refugee children in schools.

Although not really in the scope of its mandate, the UNHCR has set up a working group on integration involving various stakeholders, which is quite effective. It could be interesting to consider outsourcing integration actions to NGOs, in an official way.

Municipalities receive around EUR 10 000 of AMIF funding for the integration of a resettled refugee. In some cases, the resettled refugees left and the money was used to pay for integration activities for other recognised status holders that had entered Bulgaria via ways other than resettlement. The requirements for the authorities to demonstrate how they have spent the AMIF funds and what the impact was are limited. Obtaining funding has become a deliberate government strategy, but it does not really have any well-developed integration projects that would merit such funding.

Municipalities are not very motivated to apply for funding, while money is available. The EU cannot impose the funds and so they remain unused. If used effectively, the funds could foster contacts that change the hearts and minds of the local population. How can municipalities be encouraged to apply for available EU funding?

e. Roundtable with NGOs

Participating organisations: Bulgarian Council of Refugees and Migrants, the legal aid centre "Voice in Bulgaria", Foundation for Access to Rights, CERMES, and Bulgarian Red Cross

The state does not play a major role in fostering the integration of refugees. Instead, the estimated 2 000 recognised refugees in Bulgaria receive help from within the refugee community and from civil society organisations. There is an integration strategy, but no real programmes to implement it. In 2017, when the responsibility for integration was transferred to the municipal level, the state-run integration programme was suspended. This approach is not considered very successful.

A financial support programme for refugees does not exist, although most refugees need integration support in the first months after recognition. As long as they are still in the asylum procedure, applicants for international protection are looked after. They have access to food and shelter, some pocket money, and education. However, once they receive their status, this all stops and they are on their own. As a result, refugees' basic needs are often not met, which makes it hard to exercise their rights in the area of education and employment.

When recognised refugees decide to stay in Bulgaria, they mostly stay in Sofia. They are usually not interested in settling in other cities, because of a (perceived) lack of language courses and job opportunities. Yet, many mayors of towns and cities all over the country say there is a shortage of both skilled and unskilled labour and employers are even willing to provide housing for their workers coming from out of town or from abroad. Despite this, many refugees have difficulties finding employment because they have difficulties demonstrating their qualifications and do not always speak any of the major international languages sufficiently. To support the labour market integration of refugees, one NGO is working with the UNHCR to promote the usefulness of refugees to Bulgarian employers. They run information sessions, in cooperation with certain municipalities. Yet, nationalist forces that are promoting an anti-migrant sentiment in the country hamper the effectiveness of such campaigns.

In the light of the labour shortage, and as language skills are considered essential to obtaining a job, it was suggested that the Bulgarian government invest much more in language training. At the same time, refugees should be encouraged to take part in the language training and job placement programmes on offer from the employment agency.

Despite the fact that it seems that Bulgaria is not attractive to migrants, the authorities do need to develop a functioning integration system, because the migrants and refugees that do stay need to be able to benefit from effective assistance.

NGOs reported finding it hard to obtain funding. All funding is always project-driven. The main issue with AMIF integration funding is that it is channelled through a state body and the money does not trickle down to the local level, where integration needs to happen. In addition, EU funding comes with a 20% co-financing requirement, which is difficult to meet. The pre-financing requirement is an obstacle for many NGOs too. It is easier to obtain and use funding when it concerns resettled refugees. However, very few refugees are resettled to Bulgaria and even fewer actually stay in the country. Direct management funding is easier to obtain, but getting funding from the Bulgarian authorities is much more complicated. Sometimes NGOs have to compete with local authorities, which receive favourable treatment. One NGO mentioned social entrepreneurship as a way to sustain its activities, because they cannot survive on project funding alone.

The project-based way of working that this kind of funding encourages also has other disadvantages. Many activities are organised on an ad hoc basis, which does not foster the creation of sustainable procedures or protocols that can be used long term. It inhibits capacity-building and progress, because the experience gained is often lost when a project ends. Furthermore, project applications are based on a need that exists at that moment, but reality might have already changed by the time the project is approved. In short, because financing is so ad hoc, long-term approaches fail to come into being. Civil society finds itself firefighting instead of focusing on long-term progress. Recently, however, there has been some improvement, as projects nowadays tend to have a longer duration (from three to five years instead of just one).

4. Conclusions and recommendations

Although Bulgaria has the potential to welcome and successfully integrate a good number of newcomers into its society and labour market, the EESC delegation identified a series of obstacles and challenges to overcome, which will be mentioned in this chapter of the report. Where possible, recommendations on how to address them will also be put forward.

Very few migrants and refugees come to Bulgaria with the intention to stay. For most, Bulgaria is a transit country and only few request asylum. Of those who do, very few stay in Bulgaria once their application has been approved. From the point of view of society in general, and the labour market and employers specifically, as well as the migrants themselves, this is a missed opportunity, because there is a high demand for labour and the prospects for integration and a decent life in Bulgaria are good. The EESC would therefore recommend that the Bulgarian authorities define a strategy for convincing newcomers to settle in the country.

The peak of arrivals in 2015 had a negative impact on the reputation of refugees and migrants. Many Bulgarians were envious when applicants for international protection received social assistance, because they felt they were competing for scarce state resources. A solution to address this envy would be to design measures and funding addressed to the whole of society, so that locals and newcomers alike could benefit. As regards the willingness of the local population to welcome newcomers in their midst, the EESC notes that personal interactions can have a positive impact. Resistance or xenophobia are often the result of fear of the unknown and prejudice. For that reason, fostering encounters between refugees and locals is very useful. In addition, the authorities should help the local population to see the benefits of migration, as this may remove some of the resistance to welcoming migrants into society.

The mistrust towards newcomers also shows in other areas. It is for instance not easy to find private housing, because property owners are usually not keen to rent to migrants. More practically speaking, refugee integration is hampered by difficulties related to the recognition of skills and qualifications. The new national integration strategy needs to address such practical matters and provide a sufficient budget for investing in housing schemes, language and professional training, and the recognition of skills and qualifications. As regards the latter, the EESC recommends the involvement of the social partners.

More generally too, the EESC recommends the involvement of the social partners in the area of labour market integration. They are well positioned to play an important role in devising a job and skills matching process, and in advising on professional training, as well as on how migrant rights are best protected. Employers should use migrants already present in the country instead of recruiting from abroad. The government can actively foster this. For the mapping and recognition of skills and qualifications, the use of the EU skills profile tool³ is recommended.

In Bulgaria, a proper strategic framework guiding integration actions does not exist. As the strategy on migration and integration is currently being rewritten, the EESC recommends that it include at least the basic principles of a strategic integration framework. A key element should be that integration should start as soon as possible; in the case of applicants for international protection that means at the moment of reception and the asylum application.

Following the adoption of the 2017 Ordinance, practical implementation of integration measures moved to the local level. Municipalities were not always prepared to take on this responsibility; they were not consulted when reception centres were opened in their areas, and their diverging interests are not represented properly in the national Council on Migration and Integration. The EESC recommends that the Bulgarian authorities define and document – possibly within the new integration strategy – a system that allows for good coordination and cooperation between the national and local level. In that respect, the EESC also recommends the creation of a central body responsible for refugee integration, which would coordinate the different stakeholders responsible for implementing activities ensuring the integration of newcomers in Bulgaria. Such a body would be accountable towards stakeholders.

Organisations we met pointed to a need for a government body that is responsible for the implementation of integration support, either providing integration services directly or using NGOs to do it on their behalf. The Bulgarian authorities should consider outsourcing integration measures to NGOs, on an

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<https://ec.europa.eu/migrantskills/#/>

official basis. The idea would be to provide a full integration package, covering support in various areas, such as housing, education and training, labour market integration, and social inclusion.

In the absence of a national integration programme or other services organised by the state, civil society organisations are playing an important role in the refugee integration process. The NGOs can mostly work freely, although the attitude of the general population, as expressed via social media and fake news items, can sometimes be a nuisance. There is a need for a nationwide platform to coordinate CSO work, and exchange experiences and good practices. The biggest challenge for civil society organisations, however, is obtaining adequate funding for their work. The EESC recommends that funding from the EU go directly to NGOs (or local governments) and that the challenges related to co-financing and pre-financing are addressed in order to make it easier for small(er) organisations to obtain funding.



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