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REFUGEE PROCESSES: SOCIO-ECONOMIC DIMENSIONS IN THE CONTEMPORARY SECURITY ENVIRONMENT



Academic Publishing UNWE



UNIVERSITY OF NATIONAL AND WORLD ECONOMY

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Academic Publishing UNWE
Sofia, 2026



BULGARIAN
SCIENCE
FUND

The current monograph contains result from a project KII-06-M85/1 “Refugee Processes: Socio-Economic Dimensions in the Contemporary Security Environment”, funded by the Bulgarian National Science Fund at the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Bulgaria, coordinated by Dr. Vasil Pavlov.

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ISBN 978-619-06-0021-3

ISBN 978-619-06-0022-0 (pdf)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS	3
ABOUT THE AUTHORS	6
LIST OF TABLES	8
LIST OF FIGURES	9
PREAMBLE	11
CHAPTER I	
SOCIO-ECONOMIC DIMENSIONS OF THE REFUGEE PROCESSES: NATURE, CHARACTERISTICS, AND KEY CHALLENGES.....	
	13
<i>Dr. Vasil Pavlov</i>	
1.1. Global Drivers and Contemporary Trends of Human Migration	13
1.2. Strategic and Socio-Economic Dimensions of Migration in Bulgaria	15
1.3. Key Concepts, Legal Definitions, and Policy Context of Migration.....	16
CHAPTER II	
ASYLUM SEEKERS IN THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA: A CONTEMPORARY SITUATION ANALYSIS	
	22
<i>Svetla Alkesandrova, Boyan Kirov, Dr. Vasil Pavlov</i>	
2.1. Methodology	22
2.2. General overview of the forcibly displaced people who sought asylum in Bulgaria	23
2.3. Demographic characteristics of the asylum seekers	26
2.4. Aspects of the State Capacity in Managing Mixed Migration	31
CHAPTER III	
ROLES, RESPONSIBILITIES, AND INTERACTIONS OF KEY INSTITUTIONS IN THE MANAGEMENT OF PEOPLE SEEKING OR RECEIVING PROTECTION IN BULGARIA	
	36
<i>Dr. Vasil Pavlov, Dr. Goran Angelov</i>	
3.1. Introduction	36
3.2. Methodology	37

3.3. Overview of the Authorities Responsible for Asylum Issues in Bulgaria.....	37
3.4. Role of International Organizations and Non-Governmental Sector	43

CHAPTER IV

LEGAL DIMENSION OF ASYLUM: BULGARIAN LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND GOOD PRACTICES ACROSS THE EU	48
--	----

Dr. Vasil Pavlov, Dr. Raquel Cardoso

4.1. Methodology	48
4.2. Bulgaria's Legal Approach to Asylum and Refugees Since 1989	49
4.3. Benchmarking Asylum and Refugee Laws: Insights from the EU (and Member States).....	54

CHAPTER V

A COMMON EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK FOR ASYLUM: FUTURE PERSPECTIVES	67
--	----

Dr. Raquel Cardoso

5.1. Introduction	67
5.2. Methodology	69
5.3. The New Pact on Asylum – the Core Amendments	69
5.4. The New Pact on Asylum – the Main Challenges	73

CHAPTER VI

PERCEPTIONS FROM WITHIN: INSIGHTS FROM IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS WITH ASYLUM SEEKERS	82
---	----

Dr. Vasil Pavlov

6.1. Introduction and Literature review	82
6.2. Methodology	84
6.3. Demographic Profile of the Participants	85
6.4. Perceptions regarding access to specific socio-economic services	87

CHAPTER VII

SOCIO-ECONOMIC INTEGRATION OF ASYLUM SEEKERS IN BULGARIA: EXPERT INSIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	98
---	----

Dr. Vasil Pavlov

7.1. Introduction and Literature Review.....	98
7.2. Methodology	100
7.3. Expert Assessment of the Access to Specific Socio-Economic Services.....	100

CONCLUSION REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS115

APPENDIX I
QUESTIONNAIRE FOR CONDUCTING THE IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS
OF THE VULNERABLE GROUP117

APPENDIX II
QUESTIONNAIRE FOR EXPERT STUDY OF THE ACCESS OF ASYLUM
SEEKERS AND THOSE GRANTED HUMANITARIAN, REFUGEE STATUS,
OR TEMPORARY PROTECTION TO VARIOUS SOCIOECONOMIC
SERVICES ON THE TERRITORY OF THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA.....119

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LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1. Number of first-time applicants for international protection
in the Republic of Bulgaria and the EU (2015–2024).....24

Table 4.1. Main regulatory documents affecting people seeking
or receiving international protection in the Republic of Bulgaria,
adopted in the period 1989–202554

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1. Number of individuals who submitted an application for international protection for the first time in the EU during the period 2015–2024 on an annual basis	24
Figure 2.2. Number of individuals who submitted an application for international protection for the first time in the Republic of Bulgaria during the period 2015–2024 on an annual basis	25
Figure 2.3. Number of persons seeking protection in the Republic of Bulgaria by nationality during the period 2015–2024.....	26
Figure 2.4. Number of decisions granting temporary protection to Ukrainian nationals in Bulgaria between March 2022–December 2025.....	27
Figure 2.5. First-time applicants for international protection in Bulgaria by gender, 2015–2024	28
Figure 2.6. Gender structure of Ukrainian nationals registered for temporary protection in the Republic of Bulgaria as of January 2025	29
Figure 2.7. Age distribution of first-time asylum seekers in the Republic of Bulgaria for the period 2015–2024.....	30
Figure 2.8. Age structure of Ukrainian nationals benefiting from temporary protection in the Republic of Bulgaria as of December 2025	31
Figure 2.9. Number of decisions taken by type in the period 2015–2024	32
Figure 2.10. Capacity and number of accommodated persons in RRCs for the period 2015–2024	33
Figure 3.1. Types of protection and responsible persons and institutions for their granting	39
Figure 3.2. Organizational chart of SAR with the CoM.....	41
Figure 6.1. Education degree of asylum seekers over the age of 14 in the Republic of Bulgaria	87

Figure 6.2. Information on the number of children receiving temporary protection enrolled in preschool education in kindergartens and schools in the country between 2022–2024.....88

Figure 7.1. How would you specifically characterize your attitude towards the vulnerable group?101

Figure 7.2. Which of the following educational and/or training services is most important for the successful integration of newcomers?102

Figure 7.3. Which of the listed services offered to the vulnerable group in the Republic of Bulgaria has the most noticeable lack of funding?105

Figure 7.4. Capacity of RRCs at the SAR with the CoM as of December of each year between 2015 and 2024.....105

Figure 7.5. Do you think that you know the conditions for establishing the asylum sought or receiving a certain type of protection on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria are appropriate?.....108

Figure 7.6. Do you think that there is sufficient awareness among the local population on issues related to asylum seekers or those who have received a certain type of protection on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria?.....111

PREAMBLE

Migration has emerged as one of the most complex and multidimensional policy challenges of the 21st century. The European migration crisis of 2014–2016, subsequent reforms of the Common European Asylum System, and the large-scale displacement caused by the war in Ukraine have significantly reshaped both European and national migration perspectives. In this context, the Republic of Bulgaria occupies a strategically important position as an external border state of the European Union (EU), a transit corridor, and a country responsible for the implementation of EU asylum and migration policies.

This monograph has been developed within the framework of the project KII-06-M85/1 “Refugee Processes: Socio-Economic Dimensions in the Contemporary Security Environment”, funded by the Bulgarian National Science Fund at the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Bulgaria. The monograph provides a comprehensive legal, institutional, and empirical analysis of migration processes in Bulgaria within the broader European framework for the period 2015–2025. By combining doctrinal legal analysis with statistical evaluation and policy assessment, the study aims to examine the dynamics of asylum flows, the effectiveness of protection mechanisms, and the capacity of state institutions to respond to mixed migration pressures.

The monograph is structured into seven chapters, each addressing a distinct yet interrelated dimension of migration governance.

Chapter One “Socio-Economic Dimensions of the Refugee Processes: Nature, Characteristics, and Key Challenges” outlines the theoretical foundations of migration studies. It clarifies key concepts and typologies of migration, differentiates between voluntary and forced movement, and introduces the principal legal categories such as refugee status, subsidiary (humanitarian) protection, and temporary protection.

Chapter Two “Asylum Seekers in the Republic of Bulgaria: a Contemporary Situation Analysis” presents a detailed statistical analysis of migration and asylum trends in Bulgaria for the period 2015–2025. It evaluates first-time asylum applications, demographic characteristics, nationality structures, recognition rates, and temporary protection mechanisms, situating national data within broader EU developments. It also examines reception conditions, processing procedures, as well as overall accommodation infrastructure capacity.

Chapter Three “Roles, Responsibilities, and Interactions of Key Institutions in the Management of People Seeking or Receiving Protection in Bulgaria” examines the core competences of the leading state authorities, including the Council of Ministers, the State Agency for Refugees, the Ministry of Interior and its specialized structures, the Parliament, as well as the role of the President in the procedure for granting protection to asylum seekers in Bulgaria. In addition, the role of other relevant

organizations such as international institutions, NGOs, judiciary, educational bodies, and local institutions in addressing migration processes is also outlined.

Chapter Four “Legal Dimension of Asylum: Bulgarian Frameworks and Good Practices Across the EU” examines the development of the international and European legal framework governing asylum and migration. It analyses the evolution of international refugee law, the formation of the Common European Asylum System, and the harmonization of national legislation with EU standards.

Chapter Five “A Common European Framework for Asylum: Future Perspectives” examines the key and potentially problematic changes to EU asylum policy introduced by the new Pact, which is to be implemented by mid-2026. Through a legislative analysis, it identifies major amendments affecting asylum seekers’ rights and previously established best practices. While not exhaustive, the chapter outlines the core elements of the Pact, discusses the main anticipated challenges, and concludes by questioning its compatibility with the international legal framework and its future implications.

Chapter Six “Perceptions from Within: Insights from In-depth Interviews with Asylum Seekers” is focused on the results of in-depth interviews, conducted among 11 people who are still in procedure of seeking protection in Bulgaria or already have received such (refugee status, humanitarian status, or temporary protection) in the country. The interviews were based on pre-developed semi-structured questionnaire which included 25 questions, divided into 5 different sections, closely related to the socio-economic dimensions examined in the current monograph – namely the access to: education and training services, financial support, accommodation, and local people attitude towards the very vulnerable group.

Chapter Seven “Socio-Economic Integration of Asylum Seekers in Bulgaria: Expert Insights and Recommendations” is based on an expert survey, conducted between 28 May and 4 June 2025 among 53 experts, directly or indirectly engaged in the management of mixed migration flows in the Republic of Bulgaria. Among the specialists, who took part in the survey are representing state institutions among which the State Agency for Refugees with the Council of Ministers (SAR with the CoM), the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, as well as non-governmental organizations, academic institutions, and international organizations. As a result, this chapter synthesizes the findings and formulates policy-oriented conclusions. It evaluates Bulgaria’s evolving role within the European migration architecture and outlines recommendations aimed at strengthening legal safeguards, administrative efficiency, and sustainable integration mechanisms.

Through this structured approach, the monograph seeks to contribute to the academic and policy debate on migration governance by offering a multidimensional assessment of legal norms, statistical realities, and institutional performance in the Bulgarian and European context.

CHAPTER I

SOCIO-ECONOMIC DIMENSIONS OF THE REFUGEE PROCESSES: NATURE, CHARACTERISTICS, AND KEY CHALLENGES

Dr. Vasil Pavlov

Abstract

This chapter examines the phenomenon of mixed migration and its implications for Europe, with a particular focus on Bulgaria as an external European Union (EU) border. The chapter situates immigration processes to Bulgaria within the broader context of global political, social, environmental, economic, and security instability – factors that have collectively intensified human mobility to unprecedented levels. Drawing on recent official data, it highlights the rapid growth of displaced populations worldwide and identifies the key international crises of the past decade.

Particular attention is devoted to Bulgaria's role as both a transit and destination country. Positioned along two of the EU's main migratory routes, Bulgaria is in a position that it has to balance between humanitarian obligations and protection of the Union's external borders. The chapter critically assesses the socio-economic challenges of managing mixed migration flows, including the limited capacity and deteriorating conditions of RRCs, insufficient access to education for asylum seekers, limited social inclusion and insufficient financial resources.

The analysis integrates theoretical perspectives on social and economic policy. It also clarifies key migration-related terms and legal definitions, such as migrant, refugee, asylum seeker, and temporary protection, under international and national law, providing the conceptual foundation for subsequent empirical and policy-oriented analysis. Overall, the chapter underscores the strategic importance and enduring relevance of migration management in Bulgaria and Europe, framing it as a complex socio-economic challenge requiring coordinated, evidence-based policy responses at both national and regional levels.

Keywords: Mixed Migration, Socio-Economic Challenges, Migration Management.

1.1. Global Drivers and Contemporary Trends of Human Migration

The contemporary environment, which is characterized by political and economic instability, military confrontation, and social contradictions in certain countries and regions around the globe, combined with the process of globalization, technological advancement, and growing travel possibilities, has led to unprecedented levels of human migration. This statement is proved by data from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) of the United Nations (UN), according to which the number of

people living outside their country of origin reached 281 million in 2020, representing 3.6% of the world's population, which represents 128 million more than in 1990 and over three times the estimated number in 1970 (IOM, 2025).

In turn, this growing rights to and rapid growth in the number of people living out of their territories makes the surrounding environment increasingly unpredictable, complex, and dynamic, placing the burden on governments and policy-makers to make difficult decisions that have to address multiple challenges of different nature. One of the most pressing issues they face is mass migration, which has shown a growing trend in Europe, particularly in the last decade (2015–2024). The increase in this activity is driven by a variety of factors that classify migrants into different categories. Among the most frequently mentioned motivations for international migration are climate change and the related shortage of basic natural resources such as drinking water and food, armed conflicts and low levels of security in some regions around of the world, poor socio-economic conditions, as well as political instability and persecution of opponents of established authority and order.

According to a 2024 publication by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), a significant portion of international migrants are forcibly displaced persons. According to the information shared, “at the end of 2024, the total number of forcibly displaced people was 123.2 million, while the total population that UNHCR protects and/or assists stood at 129.9 million people” (UNHCR, 2024). Among the key international events that contributed to this and have a significant impact on it over the past decade are: the early 2010s Arab Spring and the subsequent civil war in Syria and other Arab states, which was the basis for the European refugee crisis that arose a few years later between 2014 and 2016; the withdrawal of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces from Afghanistan and the subsequent return of the Taliban to power; as well as the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The combination of these conflicts has caused unprecedented inflows of asylum seekers to Europe, totaling more than 13 million people for the 10-year period between 2015 and 2024 (nearly 8 million asylum seekers from Asian and African countries according to Eurostat (2025) data and over 5 million Ukrainians as of October 2025 according to UNHCR (2025).

Europe, symbolically located at the center of the world and in close proximity to Asia and Africa – regions from which large numbers of people emigrate due to one or complexity of the aforementioned factors – remains one of the most desired final destinations. The European Union (EU) member states, with their comparatively better socio-economic conditions, favorable climate, and various mechanisms for assisting asylum seekers, attract immigrants who are searching better opportunities and overall greater security.

1.2. Strategic and Socio-Economic Dimensions of Migration in Bulgaria

Bulgaria, as an external EU border, is located on two of the main migration routes to the Union, namely: the Eastern Mediterranean Route, which encompasses movements towards Cyprus, the Greek sea borders and towards the Greek and Bulgarian land borders with Türkiye, on which around 69 400 detections were reported in 2024; and the Western Balkan route that includes Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and Croatia at the land borders with countries from the Western Balkan region on which a sharp 78% fall to 21 520 of detections followed strong efforts by regional countries to stem the flow was recorded in 2024, according to the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex, 2024).

Despite Bulgaria being in such a strategic position and having to deal with migration flows directed towards its territory, the country must also keep the EU borders safe, however, the country is facing a number of socio-economic challenges in managing mixed migration. For instance, the capacity of the Registration and Reception Centers (RRCs) that are part of the State Agency for Refugees with the Council of Ministers (SAR with the CoM) in the country has gradually decreased, reaching only 3 225 available places as of the end September 2025, according to migration statistics from the Ministry of the Interior (Ministry of Interior, 2025). Apart from the fact that there are not enough places in view of all the immigrants, the latest 2024 Asylum Information Database (AIDA) Country Report on Bulgaria mentions that “reception conditions in Bulgaria have been gradually deteriorating for over 10 years due to a lack of funding”, which in 2024 results in a total fail in provision of “essential services such as access to adequate food, hot water and clean functioning sanitation facilities, protection from vermin infestations and subsequent health issues, etc. in many cases” (European Council on Refugees and Exiles [ECRE], 2025).

On the other hand, even though Article 26 of the Asylum and Refugees Act (2002) states that asylum seekers have the right to education, the same AIDA report (ECRE, 2025) indicates that there are practical issues for young refugees such as grade placement, detention-related barriers, and missing educational resources, while adult asylum seekers face difficulties accessing higher education due to documentation and institutional autonomy challenges. All this indicates poor management of available state resources, which in turn fuels negative public attitudes toward newcomers and erodes trust in institutions.

These shortcomings are also reflected in the assessment of the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX), which measures migrant integration policies using eight indicators such as access to education and discrimination. According to this index, Bulgaria’s overall score for 2023 in this area is rather unfavorable – the school system creates barriers to access for certain categories of immigrant students, largely neglects their specific needs and benefits, and some policies portray immigrants as a threat, fostering prejudice among locals (MIPEX, 2024).

All these issues are occurring in the context of a periodically increasing number of asylum seekers. According to Eurostat data, between 2015 and 2024, 98 190 people submitted asylum application in Bulgaria for the first time, and as of August 2025, another 73 880 Ukrainian citizens are receiving temporary protection. It should be also mentioned that the deteriorating security environment, influenced by multiple negative factors, highlights the strategic nature of the problem as nearly 67% of those who sought asylum in Bulgaria between 2015 and 2024 did so in the period 2021–2024, which is several times higher than the levels of 2015–2016, period that is often labeled as “migration crisis” in Europe. Ongoing conflicts around the world suggest that these processes will persist.

Although some do not remain in the country, slow document processing procedures for the first group, combined with the ongoing war in Ukraine, imply that a certain number of people will stay, benefiting from significant but quite limited public resources. In addition, the poor migration management further affects Bulgaria in negative connotation. A specific example of strategic significance is the prolonged obstruction of Bulgaria’s European integration by certain EU member states, including Austria and the Netherlands, which blocked the country’s accession to the Schengen Area and the Eurozone – one of the reasons being poor management of migration processes and, in particular, deficiencies in protecting the EU’s external borders. A partial solution was achieved with the Council of the EU’s decision of 30 December 2023, granting Bulgaria and Romania entry into the air and maritime Schengen zones in exchange for meeting specific conditions, including the “readmission of all asylum seekers for whom Bulgaria and Romania are responsible under the Dublin Regulation,” with particular emphasis on Syrians and Afghans (Council of the European Union, 2023a, 2023b). In such situations, the sovereign (the people) empowers political actors with the expectation that they will change the political discourse by positively influencing policies, improving state governance, and implementing more effective political practices (Ivanov, 2023), thereby offering long-term solutions to emerging problems. The fact that these problems have long-term implications confirms that the topic is not only relevant but also significant on both national and regional levels.

1.3. Key Concepts, Legal Definitions, and Policy Context of Migration

However, as already mentioned, the system for managing mixed refugee flows that Bulgaria has faced over the last decade (2015–2024) faces many socio-economic challenges, examining all of which is too ambitious a task for a single monographic work. Attention should therefore be given to certain aspects in which weaknesses and problem areas can be identified and subsequently addressed through specific recommendations for policy-makers, who therefore have the power to make an improvement. Reflecting on the essence of these aspects, attention is again directed toward researchers working in the field. According to Professor Lucinda Platt from the

London School of Economics and Political Science, for instance, “social policy is concerned with the ways in which societies across the world meet human needs for security, education, work, health, and well-being” (London School of Economics and Political Science, 2023). A team of researchers from the University of Oxford presents social policy as encompassing the state’s capacity to provide welfare, address social needs and inequalities, and ensure access to education, healthcare, employment, housing, and alternative accommodation, as well as child care and protection (Baldock et al., 2011).

However, examining all these social shortcomings in the Bulgarian refugee management system is still too ambitious. Therefore, current monograph limits its diminutions to the access to education, the capacity and living conditions in RRCs in the country, and the acceptance of these vulnerable groups by the local population.

Just like the social aspects, the economic aspects are equally complex. Viewed through the prism of European legislation – and more specifically the definition it provides for the term “economic policy” – it can be said that it encompasses a wide range of measures that governments use to manage their economies. These measures usually include monetary policy (money supply and demand), taxation, budgeting, job creation, and others (EUR-Lex, 2023).

Given that economic policy deals with the collection of funds in the form of taxes, which largely shape the state budget, it should also be said that, albeit indirectly, this type of policy concerns the allocation and management of those funds. The classification of public expenditure occurs according to a principle of priority, with resources distributed based on current challenges that compete with each other across different sectors.

One of these sectors is the expenditure related to activities for citizens of third countries seeking asylum in the country. It is important to note, however, that state resources are often limited. In such cases, the authorities may resort to spending more than the available funds, which leads to external indebtedness and budget deficits. Competing with other challenges deemed more significant in a given fiscal year, these activities often remain insufficiently funded, resulting in difficulties in the functioning of the policy itself.

The definitions of the concepts discussed so far clarify only part of the research topic, which is why it is necessary to give an explanation to the others. These include the terms “migrant”, “asylum seeker”, and the statuses they may receive – namely refugee, humanitarian, and temporary protection – as well as the key differences between them. It is important to mention that significant progress on these issues has been observed in the years following the two world wars, as the circumstances at the time led to some of the largest migratory movements in human history. For this reason, the focus is directed toward documents and organizations established and active during that period.

According to the United Nations Agency for Migration, founded on 6 December 1951 – currently known as IOM – a “migrant” is defined as “any person who is moving

or has moved across an international border or within a State away from his/her habitual place of residence, regardless of the person's legal status; whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; what the causes for the movement are; or what the length of the stay is" (United Nations, 2021).

Migration itself is not inherently negative; on the contrary, it can stimulate the economy, especially in societies experiencing deep demographic crises where mortality surpasses birth rates and population aging is observed – as is the case in the Republic of Bulgaria. Looking back historically, migratory processes are the phenomenon through which the Bulgarian people were formed and settled permanently in the territories of modern-day Bulgaria following the so-called Great Migration of Peoples of the Eurasian tribes during the 4th–7th centuries CE – an example of the favorable impact of migration.

However, it is important to note that migration becomes problematic when influenced by certain environmental factors. Today, the world is increasingly unpredictable, and the 21st century is often described as an era marked by rising levels of terrorism, religious radicalization, climate change, deteriorating health conditions, shortages of essential resources, poor social conditions, scarcity of raw materials in certain parts of the world, worsening security environments, and armed conflicts – all factors that drive human migration. The motive for such relocation is clear: an attempt to find a place with a higher level of safety in all its dimensions.

The term “migrant” is, however, perhaps the broadest concept describing people who move from one place to another. When the various reasons for migration are classified, it becomes evident that there are different types of individuals who change their place of residence or country of origin for economic, political, or financial reasons, due to low security, adverse climatic conditions, armed conflicts, a well-founded fear of persecution, and so on. From this synthesis arises the concept of the “asylum seeker.”

In this regard, both the UNHCR and the European Commission (EC) agree that an asylum seeker is “a person seeking protection from persecution or serious harm in a country other than their own and waiting for a decision on their application for refugee status under relevant international and national instruments.” In Bulgaria, according to Article 1 of the Asylum and Refugees Act, this definition corresponds to a “person seeking protection.” The same article further specifies that “the Republic of Bulgaria grants foreigner's asylum, international protection, or temporary protection.” Furthermore, Article 1a states that “persons granted international protection receive refugee status and humanitarian status under the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol” (UNHCR, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c) – strategic documents that form the basis of all subsequent international and national acts concerning asylum seekers, though they were ratified in Bulgaria only in 1993.

The UNHCR defines refugees as “people who flee war, violence, conflict or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country” (UNHCR, 2021d). A similar definition is cited by the State Agency for Refugees under the Council of Ministers, which, based on the LAR, states that “refugee status is granted

to a foreigner who, owing to a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group, is outside their country of origin and, for these reasons, cannot or does not wish to avail themselves of the protection of that country or to return there” (State Agency for Refugees, 2021).

Under Article 9 of the LAR, humanitarian status is granted to “a foreigner who does not meet the requirements for refugee status and who cannot or does not wish to receive protection from their country of origin, as they may be exposed to a real risk of serious harm such as the death penalty or execution, torture, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, or serious threats to the life or person of a civilian due to indiscriminate violence in situations of international or internal armed conflict.”

Again, according to the LAR, temporary protection is provided “in cases of mass influx of foreigners who are forced to leave their country of origin due to armed conflict, civil war, foreign aggression, human rights violations, or large-scale violence in the territory of that country or a particular region thereof and who, for these reasons, cannot return.”

Depending on whether people are entering or leaving a country, two further important terms for this study can be synthesized – immigrant and emigrant. The European Commission defines immigrants as persons who are not citizens of a given country (foreigners) arriving on its territory with the intention of staying for a period exceeding one year. Conversely, an emigrant is a citizen of a given country who leaves it with the intention of staying abroad for a period exceeding one year.

The terminology review presented here is by no means sufficient for a study of such importance. To understand the essence of the issue, it is necessary to analyze the system itself, which encompasses legal and sub-legal acts, organizations, and institutions that implement the respective policy, as well as the interactions and relationships among them. What is more, it is also urgently needed to examine the attitudes of the vulnerable group itself, as well as some expert overview of the quality of migration management system through their personal point of view. All these aspects are further analyzed in the subsequent chapters of the monograph.

Conclusion

The analysis of the socio-economic dimensions of refugee processes reveals that migration is a complex and multidirectional phenomenon shaped by global instability, conflict, and inequality. Bulgaria’s geographic position as an external EU border places it at the forefront of Europe’s migration dynamics, exposing both its structural weaknesses and strategic importance. Despite the country’s efforts to align with European standards, persistent challenges such as limited reception capacity, deteriorating living conditions, and restricted access to education hinder effective migration management and social integration. These deficiencies not only strain national resources but also influence public attitudes and impede Bulgaria’s full

European integration. Addressing them requires a coordinated approach that combines improved governance, sustainable funding, and inclusive social policies. Ultimately, migration should be viewed not solely as a security concern but as a multidimensional issue whose proper management can foster social stability, economic resilience, and human development.

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CHAPTER II

ASYLUM SEEKERS IN THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA: A CONTEMPORARY SITUATION ANALYSIS

Svetla Alkesandrova
Boyan Kirov
Dr. Vasil Pavlov

Abstract

This chapter provides a contemporary analysis of secondary data related to asylum seeker situation in Bulgaria between 2015–2024, following its full Schengen integration and the adoption of the new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum. The study evaluates shifting statistical trends, noting a stabilization of arrivals from Syria and Afghanistan alongside the ongoing management of Ukrainian refugees under extended protection. It further examines the alignment of national law with EU mandates, specifically regarding accelerated border procedures and Dublin IV “take-back” challenges, while identifying persistent socio-economic barriers such as language gaps, limited healthcare access, and risks of labor exploitation. Ultimately, the findings suggest that despite improved administrative capacity, systemic gaps in human rights monitoring necessitate a transition from emergency response toward a sustainable, rights-based integration model.

Keywords: Asylum seekers, Contemporary Situation, State Capacity.

2.1. Methodology

This chapter employs a quantitative, descriptive, and comparative research design to examine migration and asylum dynamics in the Republic of Bulgaria within the broader European context for the period 2015–2024. The analysis is based primarily on secondary statistical data extracted from official sources, including Eurostat, the State Agency for Refugees at the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria, the Ministry of Interior, and relevant EU legal databases (EUR-Lex).

The methodological approach combines longitudinal and cross-sectional analysis. A longitudinal perspective is applied to identify temporal trends in first-time asylum applications, temporary protection decisions, status determinations, and reception capacity over a ten-year period. Cross-sectional comparisons are conducted between Bulgaria and the EU-27 aggregate in order to assess Bulgaria’s relative share and position within overall European migration dynamics. Descriptive statistical techniques such as absolute values, cumulative totals, percentage shares, and proportional

comparisons are used to interpret variations across years, nationality groups, gender, and age categories.

For better visualization, the data is presented in tables and figures as a tool to highlight peak periods, structural shifts, and demographic tendencies. Particular attention is given to distinguishing between asylum procedures under the Asylum and Refugees Act and the temporary protection regime introduced at EU level through Council Implementing Decision 2022/382, ensuring conceptual and statistical clarity between different forms of international protection.

The study is limited to officially reported data and does not include qualitative field research or primary survey methods. Consequently, the findings reflect institutional records and may be influenced by administrative, legal, or methodological changes in data collection and reporting practices. Nonetheless, the use of harmonized European statistics ensures comparability and enhances the reliability of the analysis.

2.2. General overview of the forcibly displaced people who sought asylum in Bulgaria

Migration processes acquired heightened significance across both national and European levels in the mid-2010s, largely precipitated by the socio-political upheavals against centralized regimes throughout much of the Arab world. This pervasive political, social, and economic instability culminated in the European migration crisis of 2014–2016. By the close of 2016, approximately 5.2 million refugees and migrants had reached European territory, having undertaken perilous journeys from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and other regions afflicted by protracted warfare and systemic persecution (EBSCO, 2025). Trends in first-time asylum applications are documented and illustrated through the comprehensive datasets and visual analytics provided in Table 2.1. and Figures 2.1. and Figure 2.2.

The data presented in Table 2.1 indicate that, over the 10-year period from 2015 to 2024, substantial inflows of first-time asylum applicants were recorded across the EU and in Bulgaria. At EU level, the cumulative number of first-time asylum applications reached 8 720 835, while Bulgaria registered 117 875 first-time applications. In proportional terms, Bulgaria accounted for 1.35% of the EU total. This suggests that Bulgaria has remained a comparatively lower-intensity destination despite its position on the EU's external border and its proximity to Türkiye, one of the world's largest host countries for displaced populations (UNHCR, 2025).

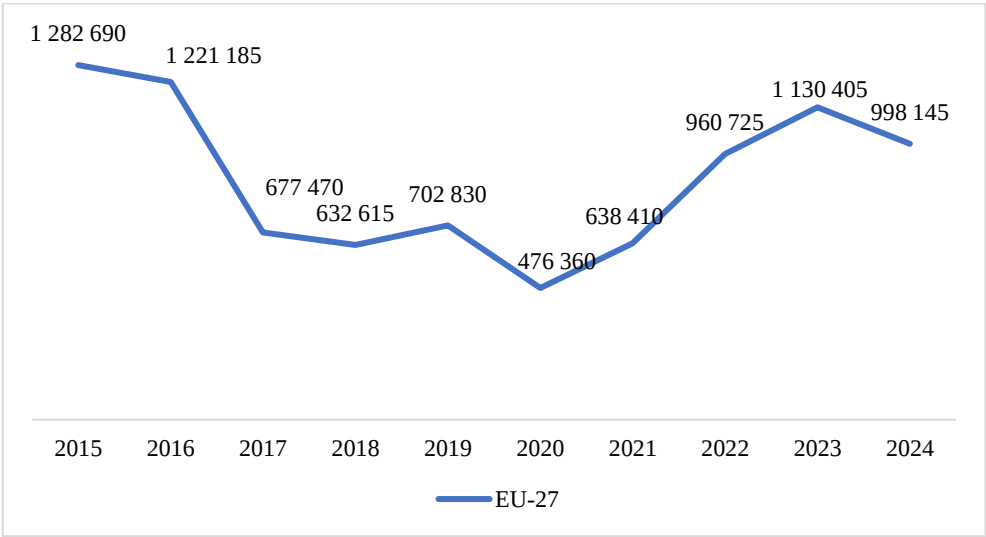
Table 2.1. Number of first-time applicants for international protection in the Republic of Bulgaria and the EU (2015–2024)

Year	Number of persons	
	Bulgaria	EU-27
2015	20 390	1 282 690
2016	19 420	1 221 185
2017	3 695	677 470
2018	2 535	632 615
2019	2 150	702 830
2020	3 525	476 360
2021	11 000	638 410
2022	20 390	960 725
2023	22 510	1 130 405
2024	12 260	998 145
Total	117 875	8 720 835

Source: Eurostat, 2026

To highlight peak periods in these dynamics, the annual data from Table 2.1 are visualized in Figure 2.1. and Figure 2.2.

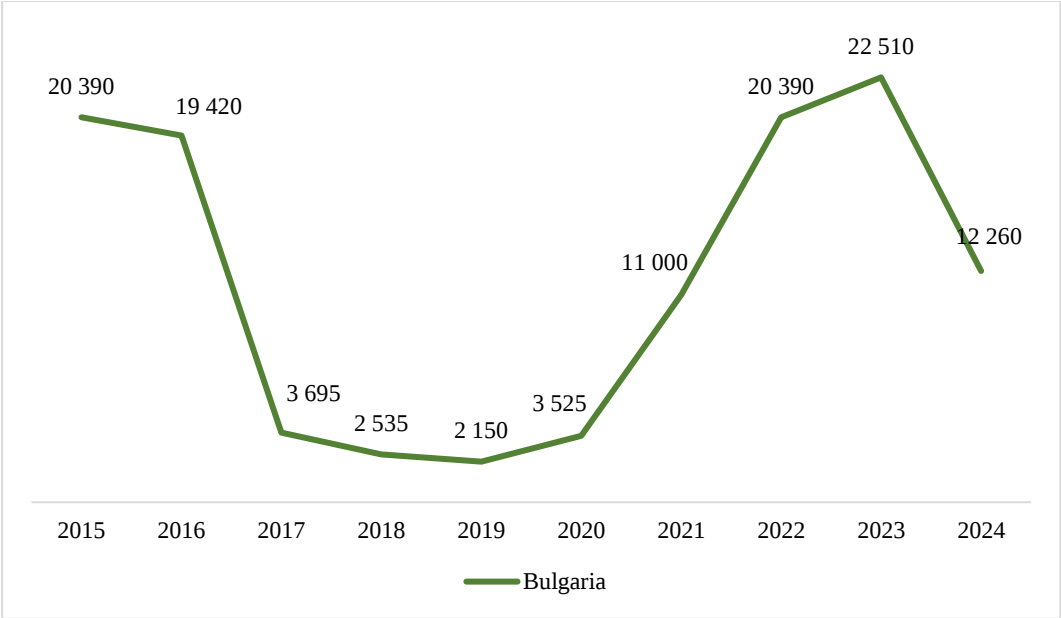
Figure 2.1. Number of individuals who submitted an application for international protection for the first time in the EU during the period 2015–2024 on an annual basis



Source: Eurostat, 2026

In order to compare the trends on both – European and national level, the same data is extracted and presented for Bulgaria in Figure 2.2.

Figure 2.2. Number of individuals who submitted an application for international protection for the first time in the Republic of Bulgaria during the period 2015–2024 on an annual basis



Source: Eurostat, 2026

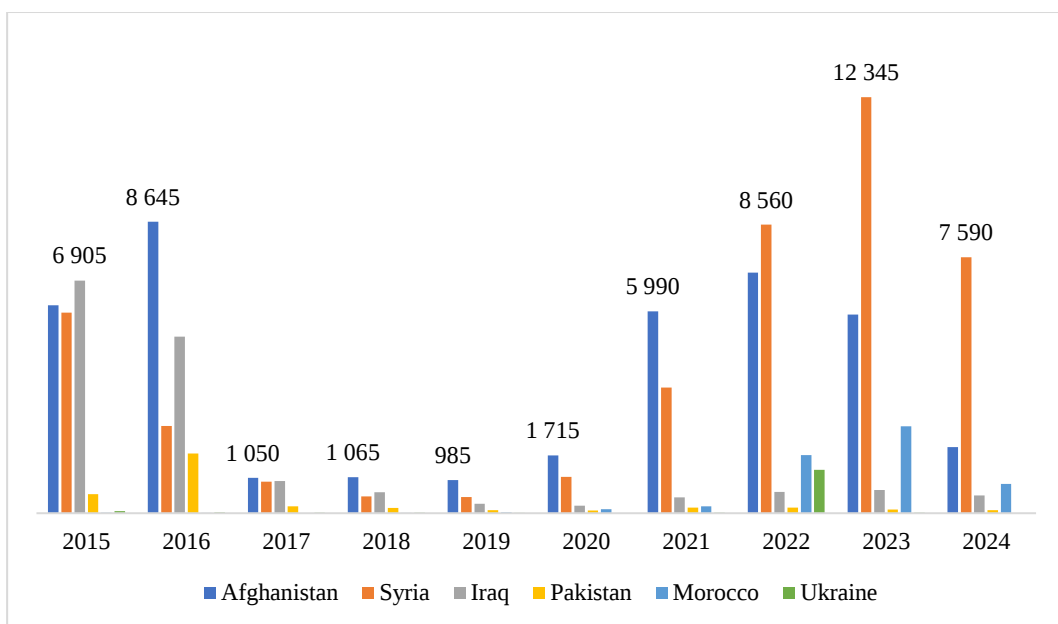
A comparative analysis of the data indicates that asylum-application dynamics in Bulgaria and the EU follow broadly similar patterns. At both national and EU level, two pronounced increases are observed: the first in 2014–2016 and the second in 2021–2023. While the earlier surge had a larger impact at EU level in absolute terms, the 2021–2023 period appears more pronounced in Bulgaria relative to its baseline levels. By contrast, the 2025 data point to a sharp decrease in applications in Bulgaria (3 295 through October). This decline may reflect a combination of factors, including changes in EU and national migration governance, strengthened border management measures, and shifts in regional routes and destination preferences.

However, discussing the number of the submitted applications for asylum in Bulgaria and the EU as whole just briefly presents the contemporary situation. In order to further clarify the existing gaps, an analysis of main demographic characteristics of the vulnerable group is also needed.

2.3. Demographic characteristics of the asylum seekers

Decisions to leave countries of origin are commonly associated with a range of adverse conditions, including economic insecurity, social and political instability, and environmental stress. In addition, persecution, armed conflict, and civil unrest remain key drivers of forced displacement and protection needs. These drivers help distinguish between groups such as refugees, asylum seekers, and other migrants. To further interpret the observed Bulgarian trends and relate the surges to specific developments, Figure 2.3. presents the nationality composition of arrivals.

Figure 2.3. Number of persons seeking protection in the Republic of Bulgaria by nationality during the period 2015–2024



Source: Eurostat, 2026

From the data presented in Figure 2.3., it can be stated that among the main nationalities of individuals who applied for international protection in the Republic of Bulgaria during the period 2015–2024, Syrian and Afghan nationals predominate. In certain years, other groups also stand out, including nationals such as Iraq, Pakistan, Morocco.

In cumulative terms, Syrian nationals account for the highest number of applications, with clear peaks in 2015 and particularly in 2022–2023, when 2023 recorded the highest annual figure for the entire period under review. Afghan nationals also represent a leading group, predominating in several years – especially in 2016 and 2021, when their number was comparatively the highest. Iraqi nationals are most

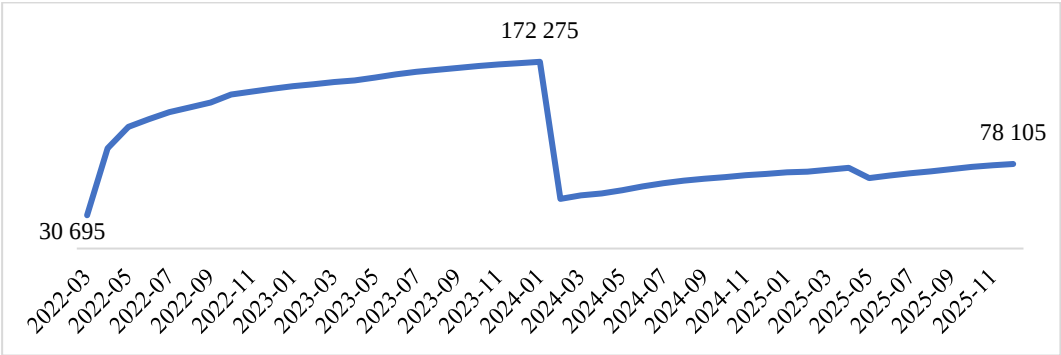
prominent in 2015, which corresponds to the overall escalation of migratory processes during the already mentioned European migration crisis.

The data also indicate an increasing presence of applicants from Morocco and Pakistan in the later years, particularly after 2021, which may be interpreted as an indication of a diversification of migration flows to Bulgaria and a shift in the main countries of origin. If the data in Figure 2.3. should be summarized it can be mentioned that the most common citizenship of asylum applicants in Bulgaria is the Syrian as the total number of such applicants for the period between 2015 and 2024 is 43 750. The total number rest of the rest of the nationalities presented in the figure above is as follows: Afghans – 40 618, Iraqis – 16 545, Pakistanis – 3 415, and Moroccans – 5 530.

On contrary to initial expectations of a substantial number of asylum applications from Ukrainian nationals (1 425 in total) following the start of Russia’s full-scale invasion in February 2022, the number of first-time asylum applications submitted by Ukrainians in Bulgaria remains comparatively low. This is explained by the fact that Ukrainian citizens have predominantly been granted temporary protection, rather than pretending being asylums, and are therefore not captured in statistics on first-time asylum applicants. This right to temporary protection was clarified on the EU level by Council Implementing Decision 2022/382 of 4 March 2022 (EUR-Lex, 2022) establishing the existence of a mass influx of displaced persons from Ukraine within the meaning of Article 5 of Directive 2001/55/EC (EUR-Lex, 2001), and having the effect of introducing temporary protection.

The temporary protection regime in the Republic of Bulgaria was introduced by Council of Ministers Decision No. 144 of 10 March 2022 (Council of Ministers, 2022), adopted in line with the European approach to the issue, and has subsequently been extended on several occasions. Figure 2.4. presents the monthly number of decisions granting temporary protection to Ukrainian nationals in Bulgaria for the period March 2022–December 2025.

Figure 2.4. Number of decisions granting temporary protection to Ukrainian nationals in Bulgaria between March 2022–December 2025



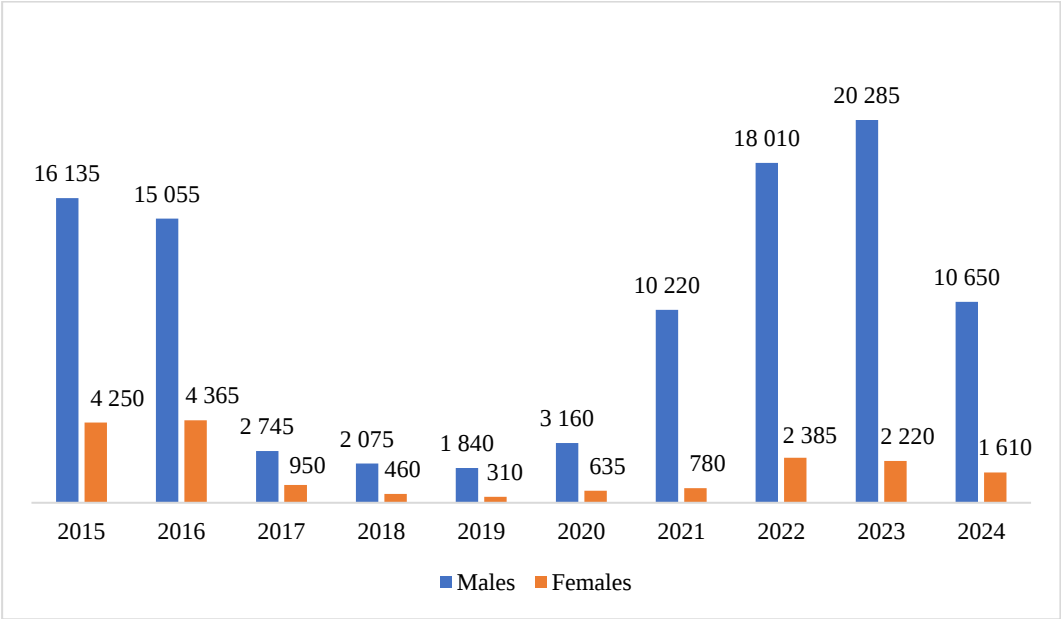
Source: Eurostat, 2026a

Figure 2.4. shows a rapid increase in the number of decisions during 2022, followed by continued growth throughout 2023, reaching a peak in January 2024 (172 275 decisions). After this point, a sharp decline in the reported values is observed, which is most likely related to administrative and/or methodological changes in the reporting of the indicator and should therefore be interpreted with caution. In the subsequent period, the data indicate a gradual upward trend, with the number of decisions reaching 78 105 in December 2025.

Overall, the analysis confirms that the relatively low number of asylum applications submitted by Ukrainian nationals does not reflect the actual scale of displacement from Ukraine, but rather the application of a distinct legal protection mechanism, which places Ukrainian citizens outside the standard asylum procedure and into a separate statistical and legal category.

Another important characteristic that provides insight into the current migration situation in the country is the gender structure of individuals applying for international protection for the first time. Data in this regard are presented in Figure 2.5.

Figure 2.5. First-time applicants for international protection in Bulgaria by gender, 2015–2024



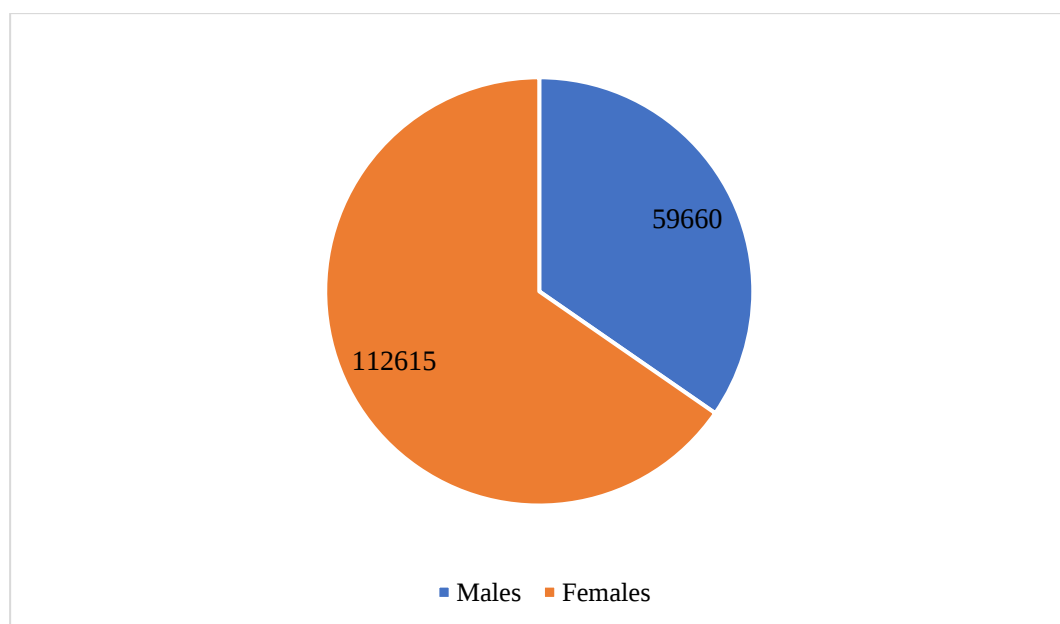
Source: Eurostat, 2026

Figure 2.5. illustrates the gender distribution of first-time applicants for international protection in the Republic of Bulgaria during the period 2015–2024. The data clearly show that men constitute the predominant share of asylum seekers throughout the entire period under review. The most pronounced gender disparity is observed in 2021, when

women accounted for only 7.63% of all registered applicants. The highest share of female applicants is recorded in the early years of the period, particularly from 2015 to 2018, as well as in 2020, when their share exceeded 20% of total applications. This dynamic confirms forcibly displaced persons are predominantly males as the journey hides potential risks such as this of using the services of smugglers that might put their life in danger.

As noted earlier, Ukrainian nationals fall under a different form of protection in the Republic of Bulgaria and are therefore not included in the category of asylum seekers. For this reason, their gender structure for the peak month (January 2024) is presented separately in Figure 2.6.

Figure 2.6. Gender structure of Ukrainian nationals registered for temporary protection in the Republic of Bulgaria as of January 2025



Source: Eurostat, 2026a

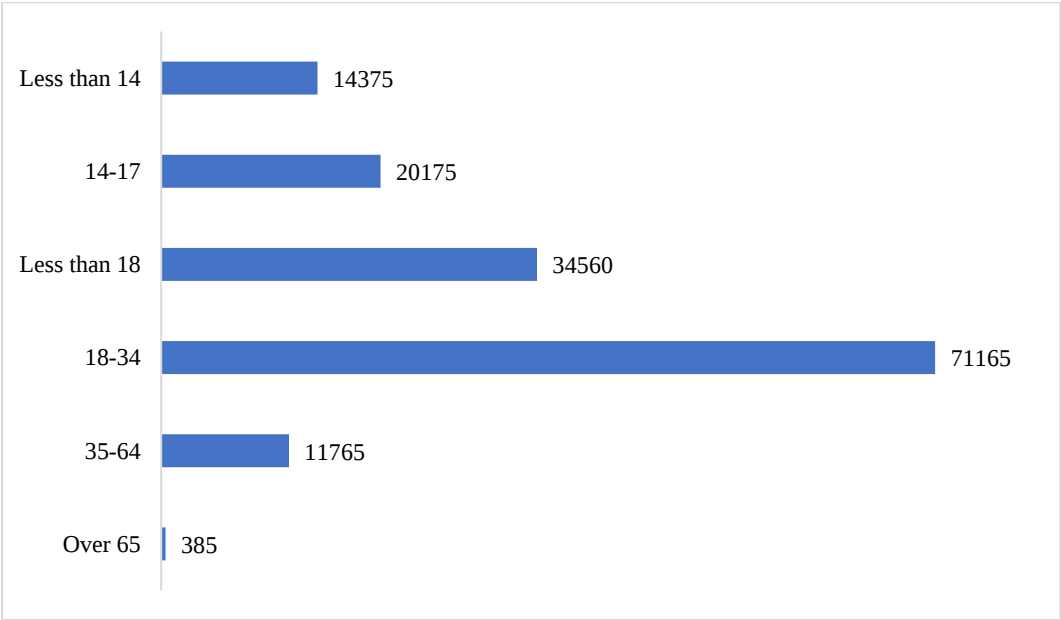
Figure 2.6. presents the gender structure of Ukrainian nationals registered for temporary protection in the Republic of Bulgaria as of January 2025. In contrast to migration flows originating from the Middle East and North Africa, arrivals from Ukraine are predominantly female, as clearly illustrated in the Figure 2.6. In percentage terms, women account for approximately 65.37% of all registered persons under temporary protection, while men represent about 34.63%.

This pronounced gender imbalance can be explained by the general mobilization of Ukrainian men, introduced by Presidential Decree No. 65 of 24 February 2022 by

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy (Ukrainian Presidency, 2022), which restricts the departure of men of working age from the country.

To further clarify the current situation in the country related to migration processes, in addition to the number of asylum applications submitted and the nationality and gender structure of newly arrived individuals, their age structure can also be taken into account. The analysis of age distribution provides important insights into the demographic profile of migrants and allows for a more comprehensive assessment of their potential social, economic, and integration needs. Understanding age-specific characteristics is particularly relevant for planning policies in the fields of education, employment, healthcare, and social services. Data on the age structure are presented in Figure 2.7.

Figure 2.7. Age distribution of first-time asylum seekers in the Republic of Bulgaria for the period 2015–2024

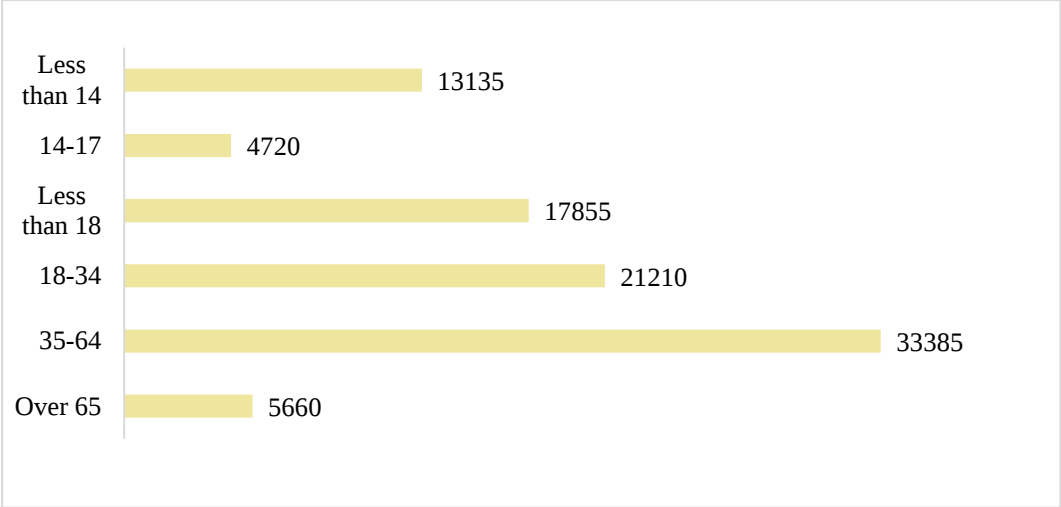


Source: Eurostat, 2026

The data in Figure 2.7. indicates that for the entire 10-year period from 2015 to 2024, the 18–34 age group was the most numerous, followed by those under 18 years of age. This in itself is a positive development for the country, as the implementation of appropriate integration measures and policies for newcomers would allow them to be incorporated into Bulgaria's active socio-economic life. Furthermore, the prevalence of young people among arrivals is favorable, as they are generally easier to integrate.

However, it is important to indicate once again that this data includes only a small fraction of the Ukrainian citizens who arrived in the country, as they are granted temporary protection in accordance with the European policies in this regard, as well as the decisions of the Bulgarian Council of Ministers mentioned above. Due to this fact, data, related to the age structure of those benefiting temporary protection with Ukrainian citizenship is presented in Figure 2.8.

Figure 2.8. Age structure of Ukrainian nationals benefiting from temporary protection in the Republic of Bulgaria as of December 2025



Source: Eurostat, 2026a

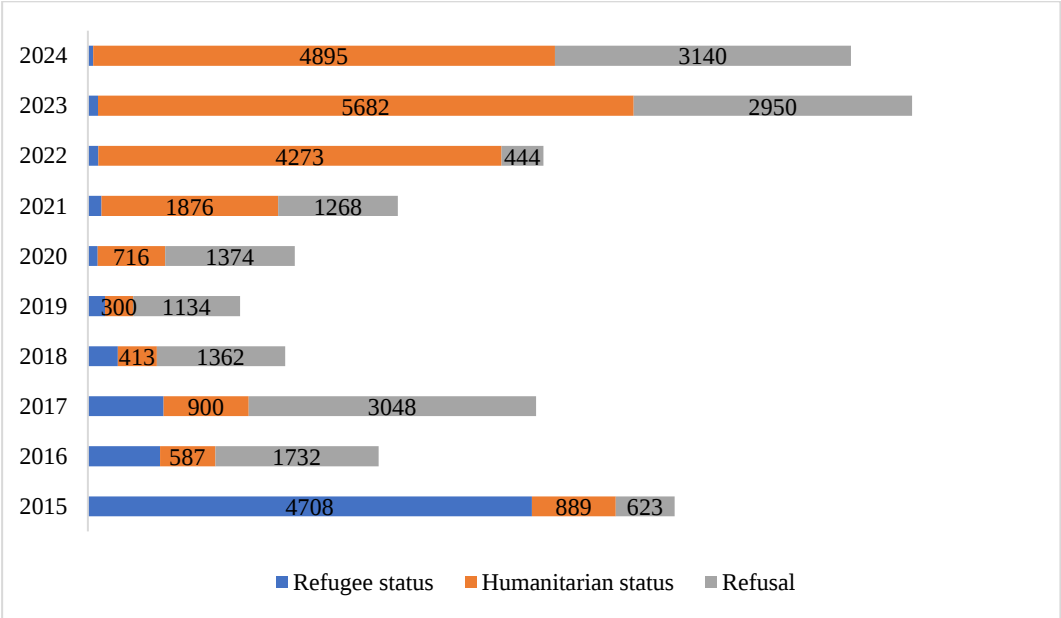
Unlike those coming from the Middle East and North Africa, where the majority are between 18 and 34 years of age, among Ukrainian arrivals the most numerous age group is the next one – 35 to 64 years. The presence of a relatively larger number of older Ukrainians should not be a cause for concern, as they receive temporary protection, and it is expected that most of them will return once the conflict in their home country is resolved.

2.4. Aspects of the State Capacity in Managing Mixed Migration

A further foundational dimension of integration, preceding labor market participation, concerns the regularization of legal residence. Unlike Ukrainian nationals, who benefit from temporary protection, asylum seekers originating from other countries must apply for one of the two forms of international protection defined in the 2002 Asylum and Refugees Act: refugee status or humanitarian status. Clarifying the number of statuses granted by type is key, as it also speaks to the state's capacity to

process asylum applications. In this regard, data on the distribution of granted statuses are presented in Figure 2.9.

Figure 2.9. Number of decisions taken by type in the period 2015–2024

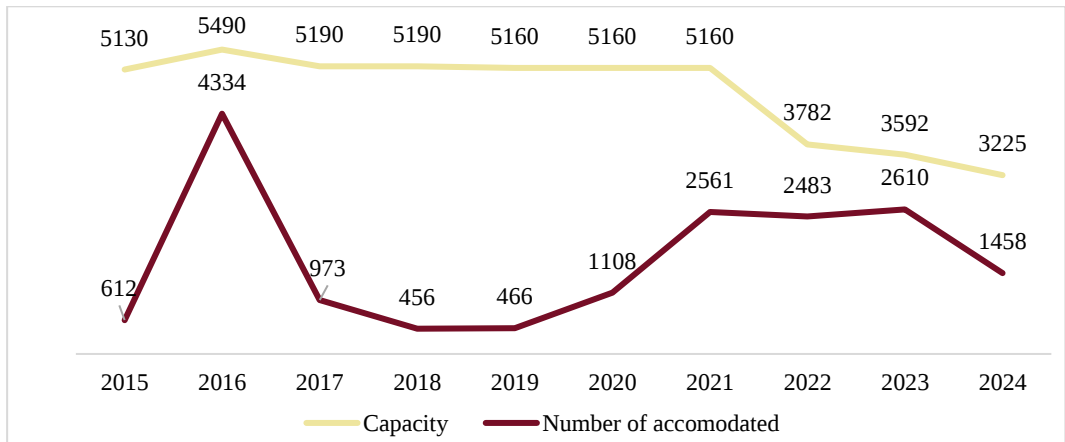


Source: State Agency for Refugees, 2026

From the data presented in Figure 2.9., it becomes evident that the number of humanitarian statuses granted exceeds the number of refugee statuses. According to the Asylum and Refugees Act, “Refugee status in the Republic of Bulgaria is granted to a foreign national who, owing to a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership of a particular social group, is outside their country of origin and, for these reasons, is unable or unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of that country or to return to it.” On the other hand, humanitarian status “is granted to a foreign national who does not meet the requirements for refugee status and who is unable or unwilling to receive protection from their country of origin because they may face a real risk of serious harm.”

A potential reason for the withdrawal of applications for international protection may be the poor living and social conditions provided in the country. An indicator of this is the capacity of the Registration and Reception Centers (RRCs), which fall under the jurisdiction of the State Agency for Refugees. Information on their capacity, as well as the number of accommodated persons from 2015 to 2024, is illustrated in Figure 2.10.

Figure 2.10. Capacity and number of accommodated persons in RRCs for the period 2015–2024



Source: Ministry of Interior, 2026

The data presented in Figure 2.10. indicate that the capacity of RRCs has gradually decreased from 2016 to the end of the examined period. In 2016, the available accommodation places amounted to 5 490, whereas by 2024 they had fallen to only 3 225, representing a decline of 41.3 %. It is important to note that this reduction in capacity occurred against the backdrop of increasing migratory pressure between 2021 and 2023 (Figure 2.2.). As mentioned earlier, the number of asylum applications submitted during this period even exceeded those recorded between 2014 and 2016, when Europe faced the so-called migration crisis.

Another noteworthy observation is that, despite the fact that the number of available places in the RRCs is significantly lower than the number of newly arriving individuals – suggesting that these facilities should be operating at full capacity – they remain only partially occupied throughout the ten-year period illustrated in Figure 2.10. The most pronounced discrepancy between available capacity and actual occupancy is observed in 2018, when only 465 out of 5 190 places were filled. Conversely, the RRCs were most heavily utilized in 2016, when nearly 80% of their capacity was occupied.

A likely explanation for the gradual reduction in RRCs capacity is precisely this persistently low occupancy rate. Another factor contributing to the reluctance of newly arrived individuals to use these facilities is the poor living conditions reported within them, an issue also highlighted by the European Council on Refugees and Exiles.

Conclusion

The contemporary analysis of asylum seekers in the Republic of Bulgaria demonstrates that, despite the country's strategic position at the external border of the EU and its full integration into the Schengen area, it continues to function primarily as

a transit rather than a primary destination state. Statistical trends for the period 2015–2024 confirm that Bulgaria accounts for a relatively modest share of total EU asylum applications, even during peak periods associated with the 2014–2016 European migration crisis and the renewed increase in 2021–2023. The stabilization of arrivals in 2025 suggests that recent regulatory and operational adjustments at both national and EU levels are reshaping migratory dynamics.

The demographic profile of applicants reveals a predominance of Syrian and Afghan nationals, with increasing diversification in recent years. The prevailing gender and age structures – characterized by a majority of young adult males – reflect broader regional migration patterns and the inherent risks associated with irregular routes. In contrast, the displacement from Ukraine, managed under the temporary protection regime established by Directive 2001/55/EC and implemented nationally following Council Implementing Decision 2022/382, illustrates the differentiated legal treatment of mass influx situations. The Ukrainian case highlights both the flexibility of the EU protection framework and the methodological limitations of asylum statistics in fully capturing contemporary displacement realities.

From an institutional perspective, the data on status determination and reception capacity suggest a mixed assessment of state capacity. While the State Agency for Refugees has demonstrated an ability to process applications and grant protection – predominantly humanitarian status – the declining capacity and suboptimal utilization of Registration and Reception Centers reveal structural inefficiencies and possible deficiencies in living conditions. These factors, coupled with socio-economic barriers such as limited access to language training, healthcare services, and secure employment, continue to undermine prospects for durable integration and may contribute to onward movement.

In light of the new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum and Bulgaria's enhanced responsibilities following Schengen accession, the country stands at a critical juncture. The transition from crisis-driven management to a predictable, rights-based, and integration-oriented system is no longer optional but necessary. Strengthening independent human rights monitoring, improving reception standards, expanding access to social services, and aligning accelerated procedures with due process guarantees are essential steps toward consolidating administrative gains. Ultimately, the sustainability of Bulgaria's migration governance will depend not solely on border control effectiveness, but on its capacity to ensure protection, dignity, and meaningful socio-economic inclusion for those seeking refuge within its territory.

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CHAPTER III

ROLES, RESPONSIBILITIES, AND INTERACTIONS OF KEY INSTITUTIONS IN THE MANAGEMENT OF PEOPLE SEEKING OR RECEIVING PROTECTION IN BULGARIA

Dr. Vasil Pavlov
Dr. Goran Angelov

Abstract

This chapter examines the institutional framework governing asylum and international protection in the Republic of Bulgaria, viewing asylum policy as both a legal and governance mechanism linked to national security and public administration. It analyses the roles of key state authorities and highlights the contribution of international and non-governmental organizations. While Bulgaria has established a structured system for granting protection, the chapter identifies significant gaps in long-term integration policy and proposes measures to strengthen coordination, institutional responsibility, and sustainable state leadership.

Keywords: Institutional System, Responsible Authorities, International and Non-Governmental Organisations.

3.1. Introduction

This chapter examines migration processes that have become a permanent factor in recent decades, relevant to national security, public governance and social protection systems in the European member states. In this regard, asylum and international protection policies cannot be viewed solely as legal regimes, but as a governance mechanism that includes strategic planning, administrative procedures, coordination between institutions and guarantees for the fundamental rights of the people concerned. Bulgaria, as an external border of the EU, has an important strategic role in this issue.

The fact that the issue related to asylum seeking is of strategic importance is also evidenced by the fact that they are classified among the main risks to the security environment and are added alongside other key challenges such as the risk of terrorist attacks, marginalization, inequality, growing poverty, risks to environmental security, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in the Updated National Security Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria which is in force since 14 March 2018 (Council of Ministers, 2018). According to the Strategy, “migration is becoming a long-term and deepening problem with a risk, if not managed, of becoming a strategic threat to

democratic societies and economies in transit and host countries”. The same Article 30 of the Strategy provides that “...the geographical position of the Republic of Bulgaria provides for a constant flow of illegal migrants to our borders. The development of these processes outlines a number of risks for national security in economic, health, social and political terms. our territory, as well as for the radicalization of groups and individuals, and especially those in a marginalized socio-economic situation.”

Along with the recognition of the importance of managing migration flows in one of the most important strategic documents in Bulgaria, an additional argument supporting the relevance of the topic is the increasing number of applications for protection submitted in the years after 2021 which exceeds even the levels of the often-defining crisis period of 2014-2016. In this regard, the country must maintain a well-established institutional system with clearly defined roles and responsibilities of the individual stakeholders related to the management of mixed migration flows.

The purpose of this chapter of the monograph is to critically review the main state institutions and authorities, non-governmental and international organizations, responsible for working with those seeking or receiving protection on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria. As a result of the analysis, gaps and deficiencies in the work of these organizations have been outlined, and specific recommendations have been proposed for the identified obstacles.

3.2. Methodology

This chapter applies a qualitative analytical approach based primarily on a review of normative, strategic, and institutional documents related to asylum, migration, and integration policy in the Republic of Bulgaria. The research relies on the analysis of national legislation (including the Constitution, the Asylum and Refugees Act, and the Ministry of Interior Act), strategic policy documents such as the National Security Strategy, governmental decrees, and publicly available institutional reports.

In addition to the examination of formal legal frameworks, the chapter includes an institutional analysis of the mandates, competences, and coordination mechanisms of the main state authorities, as well as of relevant international organizations and non-governmental actors operating in the field. A comparative and critical perspective is applied in order to identify structural gaps, overlaps of responsibility, and deficiencies in policy implementation, particularly in the area of integration.

3.3. Overview of the Authorities Responsible for Asylum Issues in Bulgaria

Forced migration is becoming a global phenomenon, which, in addition to countries experiencing armed conflicts, political persecution, instability and low levels of security, also affects relatively more developed countries such as EU member states,

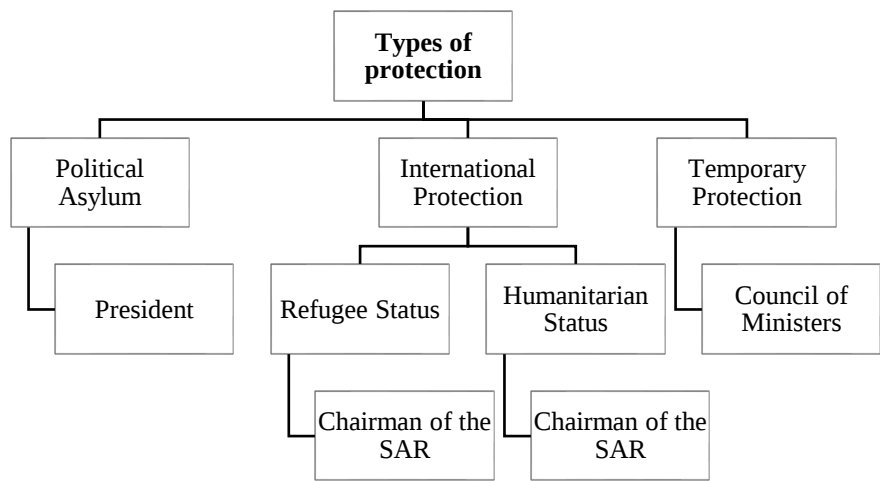
which, according to international law, must accept asylum seekers and protect them by granting them a certain type of status. In this regard, the issue is of strategic importance for Bulgaria, as mentioned in the very introduction to this chapter. Being strategic, it is important to note that the main body involved in the development and implementation of strategies in the field of asylum, migration and integration in Bulgaria is the National Council for Migration, Borders, Asylum and Integration, established by Decree No. 226 of 10 September 2019 of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria (Council of Ministers, 2025). According to the regulations for the activities of this body, it: “1. Develops, updates and proposes to the CoM strategic documents in the field of migration, borders, asylum and integration. 2. Proposes to the CoM annual plans for the implementation of the strategic documents, reports on their implementation, as well as measures to increase the efficiency of the management of migration, borders, asylum and integration. 3. Provides guidelines for the implementation of policies in the field of migration, borders, asylum and integration at the national, regional and European levels. 4. Coordinates the activities of state bodies, local government bodies and local administration, non-governmental and international organizations on the territory of the country in defining and implementing the policy in the field of migration, borders, asylum and integration and in implementing the relevant strategic documents. 5. Makes proposals for amendments to regulatory acts in order to more effectively implement policies in the field of migration, borders, asylum and integration. 6. Examines and discusses programs and initiatives to strengthen the administrative capacity of officials working in the field of migration, borders, asylum and integration” (Council of Ministers, 2023)

In terms of legislation, the state institution that in the Republic of Bulgaria is directly involved and responsible for the drafting, adoption and approval of laws is the Parliament (National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2025). In addition to the Asylum and Refugees Act (main legislative document, related to asylum policy in Bulgaria), other acts that are directly related to the topic are the Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria Act, the Personal Data Protection Act, the Bulgarian Citizenship Act, the Bulgarian Personal Documents Act, as well as various regulations for their implementation. It is worth mentioning that, as an EU member state, Bulgaria is obliged to harmonize its legislation with that of the EU and this principle should be strictly followed by the Parliament. In addition to adopting, amending, supplementing or repealing legislative acts, according to Article 84 of the Constitution, the Parliament is also tasked with “adopting the state budget and the report on its implementation.” As a problem, which solving requires the allocation of financial resources, it should be noted that the role of Parliament is key also in this regard.

However, the Parliament is not the only institution that plays an important role in working with these individuals. Other institutions and individuals of utmost importance in the field are the Council of Ministers, the President of the Republic of Bulgaria, as well as the Chairman of the SAR with the CoM. Among the key functions for which they are responsible are decisions on the granting of the main types of protection in the

country. For instance, President provides asylum. Temporary protection is granted on the basis of a decision of the Council of Ministers, and humanitarian or refugee status is granted by the Chairman of the SAR with the CoM. For the purpose of better visualization of the above, these main functions and responsibilities are presented in the form of a hierarchical diagram, depicted in Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1. Types of protection and responsible persons and institutions for their granting



Source: SAR with the CoM, 2025

In addition to presenting the functions of the President, the Council of Ministers, and the Chairman of SAR with the CoM, it may be stated that, pursuant to Article 24, paragraph 2 of the Constitution, “The Republic of Bulgaria grants asylum to foreigners persecuted for their beliefs or activities in defense of internationally recognized rights and freedoms” (National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2026). The Constitution itself assigns the responsibility for granting asylum to the President, as seen in Figure 3.1. This obligation is described in Article 98, item 10. This concerns political asylum, which differs from refugee status as it is granted by decree of the President, and such decree is not subject to judicial review. It should be noted that the President does not participate in decisions regarding temporary protection, according to the Art. 80 of the Asylum and Refugees Act is a responsibility of the Council of Ministers, which: “1. makes a request to the European Commission for the introduction of temporary protection; 2. informs the European Commission about the possibilities of the Republic of Bulgaria to receive foreigners in need of temporary protection; 3. designates a national contact point and notifies the other Member States of the European Union and the European Commission; 4. adopts an action plan for temporary protection in the Republic of Bulgaria; 5. makes a request to the European Commission for the termination of temporary protection or for the extension of the term and; 6. takes

measures to facilitate the voluntary return of foreigners enjoying temporary protection or for whom temporary protection has been terminated” (Lex BG, 2002).

On the other hand, the Chairman of SAR with the CoM is an executive authority with special competence. In addition to granting, refusing, withdrawing, and terminating protection in the Republic of Bulgaria, pursuant to the Asylum and Refugees Act, the Chairperson: “terminates proceedings for granting international protection; makes decisions on applications for family reunification; decides on other applications submitted by foreigners for whom proceedings for international protection have been initiated or who have been granted such protection in the Republic of Bulgaria; informs the Council of Ministers of the need to introduce temporary protection on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria; informs about the need to extend the duration of temporary protection; manages and allocates budget funds and oversees their targeted expenditure; in coordination with the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Labor and Social Policy, determines the expenditure standards for assistance as part of the material reception conditions for foreigners seeking international protection accommodated in the territorial units of the SAR with the CoM; and, at the request of the President of the Republic of Bulgaria, provides an opinion on a submitted asylum application.”

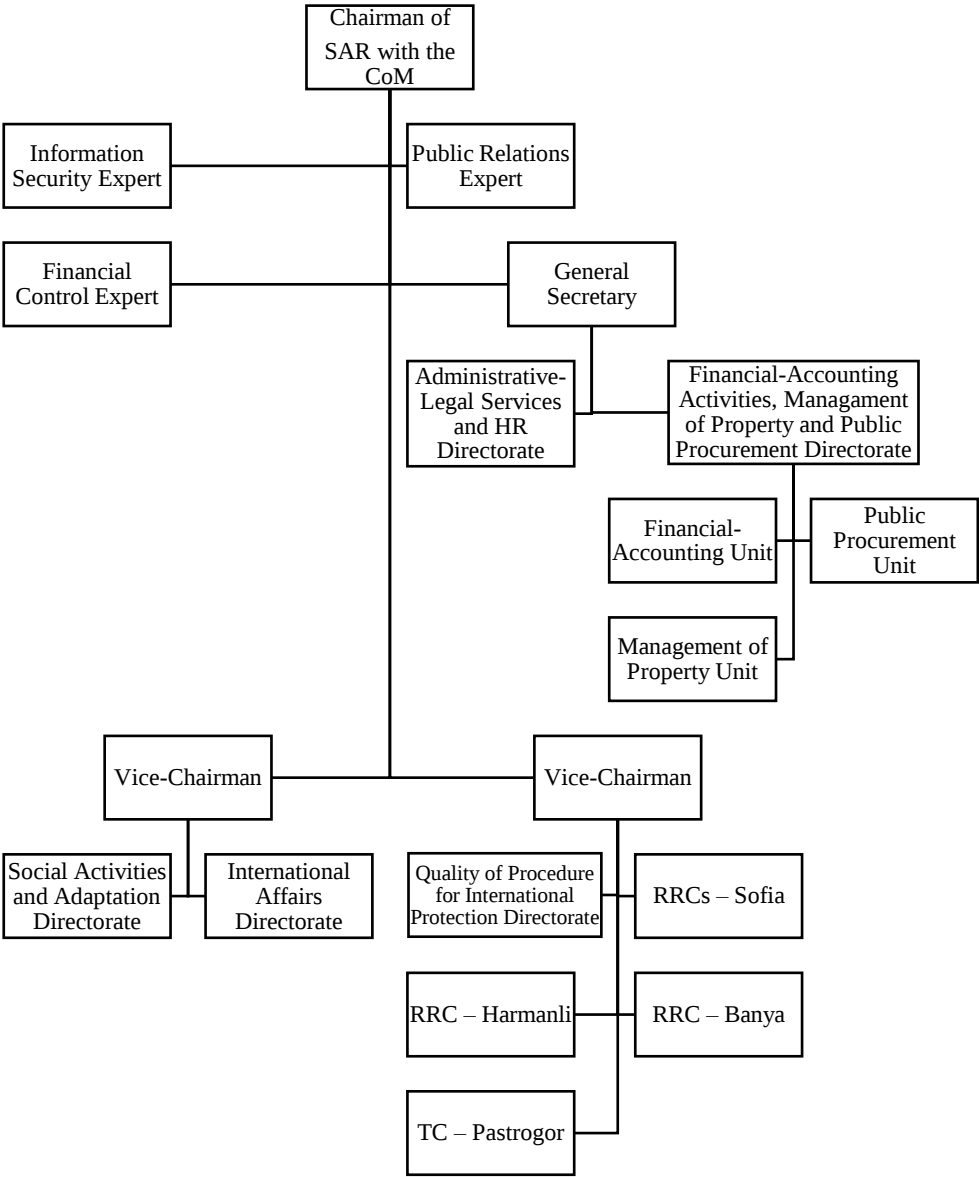
The Council of Ministers also has functions primarily related to so-called temporary protection as visible from Figure 3.1. According to Article 80 of the Asylum and Refugees Act, the Council of Ministers: “submits a request to the European Commission (EC) for the introduction of temporary protection; informs the EC of the Republic of Bulgaria’s capacity to receive foreigners in need of temporary protection; designates a national contact point and notifies the other EU Member States and the EC; adopts an action plan for temporary protection in the Republic of Bulgaria; submits a request to the EC for the termination or extension of temporary protection; and undertakes measures to facilitate the voluntary return of foreigners benefiting from temporary protection or whose temporary protection has been terminated.”

The activity of the Council of Ministers in this area is supported by the SAR under the Council of Ministers, which is an institution with special competence in implementing the state policy for granting protection in the Republic of Bulgaria. The Agency applies reception and accommodation standards and conducts procedures for granting status to third-country nationals seeking asylum, in accordance with international refugee law instruments and national legislation. With regard to third-country nationals undergoing protection procedures, a combination of measures for cultural and social adaptation is also implemented. Tools are used to ensure an effective and individualized approach to the specific needs of asylum seekers, especially vulnerable persons, within the framework of reception and the procedure. The SAR under the Council of Ministers actively participates in the work of national authorities competent in migration and security matters.

Regarding the structure of the SAR with the CoM, the Agency includes territorial units, including RRCs in the towns of Harmanli, Banya, and three centers in the capital

city of Sofia, as well as a Transit Center (TC) in the village of Pastrogor (State Agency for Refugees, 2026), whose main purpose is to provide accommodation and registration for refugees. It also comprises directorates with purely administrative functions, directorates focused on social assistance, and three expert positions. The hierarchical structure of the SAR with the CoM is illustrated in Figure 3.2.

Figure 3.2. Organizational chart of SAR with the CoM



Source: SAR with the CoM, 2026a

An institution not directly engaged in the social aspects of working with asylum seekers, but nevertheless connected to the topic, is the Ministry of Interior. According to the Ministry of Interior Act (Ministry of Interior, 2026), one of its main functions is ensuring security, in particular the protection of state borders. Through these borders, in addition to prohibited substances and objects, irregular migrants may also pass, including potentially radicalized individuals, which poses risks to national security. A more specific link between the researched topic and the Ministry of Interior is found in Chapter Three of the Ministry of Interior Act, “Governance and Organization,” which states that the Minister of Interior is directly engaged in “border control and the regulation of migration processes.”

It is important to note that the Ministry of Interior has various structures, some of which specialize in migration processes. Examples of such structures include the General Directorate Border Police and the Migration Directorate. According to Art. 39 of the Ministry of Interior Act, the General Directorate Border Police is a “specialized structure for carrying out operational search activities, security, crime investigation, control, prevention, and intelligence gathering in the border area, at border crossing points, international airports and ports, in internal maritime waters, the territorial sea, the contiguous zone, the continental shelf, the Bulgarian section of the Danube River, and other border rivers and bodies of water.”

Pursuant to Article 43a, paragraph 2 of the Ministry of Interior Act, the Migration Directorate is “a structure of the Ministry of Interior responsible for regulating migration processes and exercising administrative control over the stay of foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria, and for counteracting illegal migration on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria.” A more detailed review of its functions shows that it is also responsible for “issuing permits for short-term, extended, long-term, or permanent residence; conducting procedures for granting or refusing stateless status, as well as for withdrawing such status; collecting, systematizing, and analyzing information on the state and dynamics of migration processes; and participating in counteracting illegal migration,” while cooperating with other units and structures in carrying out these activities.

However, it should be emphasized that the overview presented above of the state institutions and public officials responsible for shaping and implementing the Republic of Bulgaria’s policy in the field of asylum does not claim to be exhaustive or fully comprehensive. Rather, the analysis has focused on the key institutional structures and actors that exercise primary competence and bear core responsibility in this domain. While additional administrative bodies, coordination mechanisms, and subsidiary authorities also contribute to the governance framework, the discussion has concentrated on those central components that are most directly engaged in decision-making, implementation, and oversight within the national asylum system.

3.4. Role of International Organizations and Non-Governmental Sector

Along with the various state institutions and structures that are involved in the formation and implementation of the policy regarding asylum seekers in the country, an important role is also played by the non-governmental sector, which in many cases is even more active in working with vulnerable groups, such as refugees, people granted humanitarian status, temporary protection and asylum seekers in general. Among the leading international and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) whose activities are related to these groups of people are the offices of IOM and UNHCR in Bulgaria, Caritas, Bulgarian Council for Refugees and Migrants, Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, Council of Refugee Women in Bulgaria, Bulgarian Red Cross (BRC), CVS Bulgaria, Multi Kulti Kolektiv. All of them support these vulnerable groups residing in the country in various aspects such as providing information, advocating for access to rights, referral to services, legal aid, education, inclusion in cultural and social events, etc.

The Office of UNHCR in Bulgaria has operated since 1993, cooperating with state institutions and civil society to protect refugees and asylum seekers while promoting public awareness and tolerance. Its work is both consultative and operational, supporting the development of an effective national protection system through legal aid, psychological support, education, and socio-economic inclusion, particularly for vulnerable groups. Following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022, UNHCR expanded its activities to respond to the large influx of refugees, leading the regional inter-agency response in coordination with UN bodies, NGOs, and national authorities to ensure access to protection and humanitarian assistance in line with international standards. The Agency increased its presence in several cities and, with partners such as UNICEF and the Bulgarian Red Cross, established support points and community-based “Compass” protection and inclusion centers to promote integration and social cohesion. UNHCR also provides essential assistance, including basic necessities and financial support, complementing state efforts (UNHCR, 2026).

On the other hand, IOM has a representative body in Bulgaria since 1999, and its Mission in the country was established in 2000 following the entry into force of a Cooperation Agreement granting it the privileges and immunities of UN specialized agencies. IOM Bulgaria works closely with national authorities, including the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Mission operates from its head office in Sofia, with a regional Migrant Information Center in Burgas and a field office in Harmanli. Its main objective is to support the Bulgarian government in developing and implementing balanced migration policies that uphold freedom of movement, address irregular migration, and protect migrants’ human rights. IOM Bulgaria focuses on assisted voluntary return and reintegration, legal and psychosocial support, combating trafficking in human beings (including victim protection and prevention), strengthening national administrative capacity

through training and policy support, promoting the integration of legally residing third-country nationals through language courses and social orientation, and providing direct assistance such as vulnerability assessments, interpretation, material aid, and community activities. Its target groups include third-country nationals, applicants for and beneficiaries of international protection, victims of trafficking, unaccompanied children, economic migrants, and returning migrants (IOM, 2026).

NGOs also play a key role in supporting refugees in Bulgaria by complementing state institutions with direct humanitarian, legal, and social assistance. They provide legal aid during asylum procedures, psychosocial support, language training, employment guidance, and material assistance such as food, clothing, and shelter. NGOs further promote integration and social inclusion through community programs, advocacy, and awareness-raising initiatives, while paying special attention to vulnerable groups such as unaccompanied children, victims of violence, and persons with special needs.

An example of an achievements of this regard in Bulgaria is the initiative of three of the aforementioned organizations, namely Multi Kulti Collective, the Bulgarian Council for Refugees and Migrants and the UNHCR Bulgaria, which on November 30, 2021, began the joint creation of the country's first Manifesto for Refugee Integration in Bulgaria (Multi Kulti Collective, 2022), which was launched at the National Forum for Refugee Integration held in Sofia. The Manifesto was published in 2022, and its main focuses are the institutional structure and the adaptation and initial integration of these people in the Republic of Bulgaria. This achievement of the non-governmental sector undoubtedly supports state institutions in the country, but despite good practice, some of the functions of the state should not be seized, displaced or taken over by other organizations, but on the contrary, it should be the main driving force in solving problems through correct, up-to-date and working policies.

Conclusion

The analysis presented in this chapter demonstrates that Bulgaria has developed a relatively well-defined institutional framework for the management of asylum and international protection. The responsibilities related to granting protection are clearly distributed among the President, the Council of Ministers and the Chairman of the SAR with the CoM, while border management and migration control are regulated within the structures of the Ministry of Interior. At the strategic level, coordination is formally ensured through the National Council for Migration, Borders, Asylum and Integration. In addition, international organizations and non-governmental actors provide substantial operational and expert support.

However, despite the developed institutional system, a structural gap remains in the area of integration. While responsibilities for granting protection are precisely regulated, there is no single, clearly designated state institution with primary and

comprehensive responsibility for the long-term integration of newcomers. This statement is also discussed with an expert from the International Relations Directorate of the SAR with the CoM, who, in a personal conversation with one of the authors of the current chapter shared similar claims.

What is more, integration measures are fragmented across different bodies, often project-based, and frequently dependent on the initiative and capacity of international organizations and NGOs. In practice, civil society actors and international organizations have assumed a leading role in areas such as language training, social mediation, access to employment, psychosocial support and community inclusion. Although their contribution is invaluable, integration is ultimately a core public policy function that requires stable state leadership, predictable funding and long-term strategic vision.

The absence of a centralized and specialized integration authority creates risks of policy inconsistency, duplication of efforts, insufficient coordination between national and local levels, and uneven access to services across regions. Furthermore, the lack of a unified monitoring and evaluation mechanism limits the ability to assess the effectiveness of integration measures and to adjust policies accordingly.

In light of the above-mentioned, several key recommendations can be formulated:

- Establishment or designation of a central integration body – A specific state institution or a clearly mandated structural unit should be entrusted with primary responsibility for the coordination, implementation and monitoring of integration policies for beneficiaries of international and temporary protection.
- Adoption of a long-term national integration strategy – Integration policies should move beyond short-term project frameworks and be embedded in a stable, multi-annual strategic document with measurable objectives and clear institutional responsibilities.
- Strengthening interinstitutional and local coordination – Municipalities, as frontline actors in integration, should be systematically involved and supported through targeted funding and capacity-building mechanisms.
- Ensuring sustainable state funding – Integration measures should rely less on external donor funding and more on predictable allocations from the state budget.
- Developing monitoring and evaluation mechanisms – Clear indicators should be introduced to measure integration outcomes in areas such as employment, education, housing and social inclusion.

In conclusion, while Bulgaria has established functioning mechanisms for granting protection and managing migration flows, the long-term integration dimension remains institutionally underdeveloped. Given the country's strategic geographic position and the increasing number of protection applicants in recent years, strengthening the state's role in integration policy is not only a matter of social cohesion but also of national security, economic sustainability and democratic stability.

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CHAPTER IV

LEGAL DIMENSION OF ASYLUM: BULGARIAN LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND GOOD PRACTICES ACROSS THE EU

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Dr. Raquel Cardoso

Abstract

This chapter provides a critical analysis of Bulgaria's legal framework concerning asylum and refugee issues, tracing developments since the country's democratic transition in 1989. It examines a range of national documents, including strategies and associated action plans, laws, legislative acts, and decisions of the Council of Ministers. Given the international dimension of these issues, the chapter also considers globally recognized instruments and policies that directly or indirectly shape national legislation. Documentary analysis serves as the primary research method, allowing for a systematic evaluation of these sources.

Additionally, a comparative perspective is employed, drawing on best legal practices from other EU member states. Based on this analysis, the chapter formulates targeted recommendations for enhancing the Bulgarian legal framework, particularly in relation to the socio-economic aspects emphasized in the present monograph.

Keywords: Asylum Seekers, Legal Framework, Benchmarking.

4.1. Methodology

The main method used in this chapter of the monograph, given the issues studied here, is documentary analysis. It is applied to study Bulgarian normative legal acts and by-laws in the field of migration, asylum and integration, adopted in the country in the period 1989-2025. Among the critically analyzed documents are decrees and decisions of the Council of Ministers, laws, plans and strategies. The period covering the years from the onset of democratic changes in the country to 2025 provides an in-depth overview of the regulatory framework, since it is during this period that the country undergoes a number of strategic changes – from the transition from a planned to a market economy, to full membership in the EU and the related facilitated crossing of international borders, to mixed and complex migration flows that the EU has been facing since 2014.

In addition, the second part of the analysis is dedicated to extracting good practices through the application of comparative analysis in combination with a documentary perspective, which will help to formulate workable recommendations from practices

already implemented in other EU Member States. The identification of good practices will focus on the legal procedure for requesting asylum, and the integration of individuals once asylum is recognized, encompassing access to education and training, housing, financial security and awareness of the local community. The aim is to improve perceptions of the vulnerable group.

4.2. Bulgaria's Legal Approach to Asylum and Refugees Since 1989

Refugee issues, and more specifically their legal regulation, became particularly relevant in the period after World War II, when unprecedented numbers of people were forcibly displaced. It was after the war and in response to this situation that the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol were created, which became the foundational documents for a number of national and regional regulations and policies. However, due to falling into the Soviet sphere of influence and the connection with this immigration-emigration restriction, Bulgaria did not take an active commitment to refugee issues, not recognizing these documents until 1993 (UNHCR, 2015).

One of the first legal steps towards resolving these issues at the national level was the implementation and adoption of Decree No. 208 of the Council of Ministers of 4 October 1994 on the adoption of an ordinance on granting and regulating the status of refugees, accompanied by an Ordinance on granting and regulating the status of refugees, published in the State Gazette, issue 84 of 14 October 1994 (Ciela, 1994). A little later, in 1999, a Refugees Act (Ciela, 1999) and Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria Act (Council of Ministers, 1999), were adopted by the Bulgarian Parliament. In 2002, the Refugees Act was repealed and then the new Asylum and Refugee Act (Council of Ministers, 2002) was adopted, which is still in force.

The country's accession to the EU in 2007 poses new horizons, but also challenges. As already discussed in the previous chapters of the monograph, Bulgaria, due to its geographically strategic position as an external EU border and as a crossroad between predominantly Christian democratic West and mainly Muslim totalitarian East is facing periodically increasing mixed migration flows. Despite the highlighted relevance due to this fact, the country's policy, especially in its legal and regulatory dimension, does not seem consistent and responsive to current challenges. For instance, the first strategy adopted in this direction was only introduced in 2008 (National Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria on Migration and Integration 2008–2015, 2008). However, in 2010, at the very beginning of its implementation, and without providing public information regarding the rationale for its revision, the development of a new strategy began, which entered into force in 2011. Its main priorities, however, were not aimed at solving the social problems faced by such groups in the country but rather focused on ensuring the security of the EU's external borders, effectively countering illegal migration and human trafficking (which is in line with the shifting priorities of the EU).

In response to the situation, in 2015 the government created a third strategy in the field of migration and integration, even though half of the implementation period of the 2011–2020 strategy had not yet elapsed. The National Strategy in the Field of Migration, Asylum, and Integration 2015–2020 was, however, left without a specific action plan for its implementation for a long time. Such a plan was only realized in 2020 (Council of Ministers, 2020), well after the peak of the so-called migration crisis of the mid-second decade and at the very end of its execution. The plan included 34 strategic goals, only some of which were specifically aimed at integrating persons granted protection in Bulgaria. However, a critical review reveals that despite the special attention given to integration, similar to the 2011 strategy, the emphasis remained on counteracting irregular migration, safeguarding the country's and the EU's borders, and preventing human trafficking (which is in line with the shifting priorities of the EU).

Among the strategic goals focused on integration were also those aimed at facilitating labor market access in the country. In parallel with the development of this strategy, in January 2018 the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy (2018) attempted to push a bill amending the Labour Migration and Labour Mobility Act, thereby burdening asylum seekers with numerous additional and unfeasible requirements for accessing the labor market. These actions, contradictory to the strategy's action plan, were prevented by some international organizations, including UNHCR, which proves the statement that international organizations, along with non-governmental sector are far more active in providing social support to asylum seekers in the country than the state institutions responsible for this. This specific case also shows that in certain situations, the state can even act to the detriment of these individuals.

The document that replaced the 2015–2020 strategy is the National Migration Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria 2021–2025. Similar to its predecessor, this strategic document was initially left without a specific action plan, which was only established in 2022, in the second year of its implementation. In the 2022 action plan for the implementation of the priorities of the National Migration Strategy 2021–2025, “strategic goals” were replaced by nearly twice as many “measures” (70 in total), categorized under seven priorities, including free movement, legal migration and integration, security, protection, and asylum.

However, a review of this plan shows that only some of the aspects relevant to this study, which have unambiguous relevance, are addressed. For example, attention to the education of children and adults seeking asylum in Bulgaria is included in Measures 47 and 48, formulated respectively as “Inclusion of children seeking international protection in the educational system of the Republic of Bulgaria” and “Conducting Bulgarian language courses for persons seeking protection accommodated in Temporary Placement Centers under the State Agency for Refugees at the Council of Ministers.” Against the backdrop of the apparent prioritization of other measures, such as combating illegal migration and protecting national borders, education – which is of critical importance – seems secondary. Moreover, among the measures in the 2022

plan, there is not a single one related to preserving capacity or improving conditions in Reception and Registration Centers in the country, despite the strong need for it.

In addition, although most of the period covered by the report precedes the start of the war in Ukraine, its main focus is on addressing the consequences of that conflict and the associated flows of Ukrainians into the Republic of Bulgaria, while attention to asylum seekers of other nationalities and conditions in the RRCs in the country seems secondary in importance.

With regard to the adoption of the new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum that entered into force on 11 June 2024, and which sets rules on managing migration and establishing a common asylum system at EU level the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria developed a new National Strategy on Managing Migration and Asylum 2025–2030 (Council of Ministers, 2025). Following the example of the previous strategies, the current one also entered into force before the objective expiration of the previous one, since the Strategy 2025–2030 entered into force on 3 September 2025. It is important to mention that this approach also has its advantages, as it demonstrates the government's commitment to both current challenges and European policies and practices for addressing this complex issue.

The new Strategy includes 6 strategic objectives, which at first glance address problems outlined in this monograph. Among them are: “Ensuring effective management of the migration and asylum system by implementing a comprehensive and coordinated approach aimed at reducing migratory pressure and strengthening the resilience of the state to external and internal migration challenges; Effective management of external borders; Maintaining and further improving the existing asylum and integration system through sustainable management, guaranteeing fundamental rights and promoting the full inclusion of persons seeking and receiving international protection in public life; Maintaining and improving the mechanism for preparedness and contingency planning in migration and asylum for an effective and coordinated response to crises; Promoting and implementing an integrated approach in the development and implementation of migration and asylum policies through effective coordination between sectoral policies and institutions at all levels of government; Ensuring the necessary administrative, financial, technical and human capacity for the effective and sustainable implementation of the Strategy.”

The strategic objectives outlined in this way are, however, too abstract and general to expect any specific measurable result from their implementation. In this regard, the Strategy has formulated specific activities and measures for each of the strategic objectives. Those directly aimed at the socio-economic dimensions, also outlined in the monograph, are:

In the field of education and training:

- Activity 3.1.4.3. Signing an integration agreement that provides access to a wide range of services and financial incentives in the initial stage of integration.

- Activity 3.1.4.4. Ensuring access for children of persons seeking or granted international protection to schools and kindergartens.
- Measure 6.1.1. Strengthening the capacity of competent institutions through targeted training and technical assistance programs.
- Activity 3.1.4.1. Improving Bulgarian language skills for adults and children.

In the field of accommodation:

- Measure 3.1.3. Maintaining and developing a reliable system for the reception of persons seeking international protection, ensuring decent living conditions and access to basic services, including ensuring accommodation capacity and optimizing social activities in the SAR centers at the Council of Ministers in Sofia and Harmanli for timely removal and accommodation of unaccompanied children.
- Activity 3.1.4.3. Signing an integration agreement that provides access to a wide range of services and financial incentives in the initial stage of integration, which includes the development of an individual integration plan by the mayors of individual municipalities with specific measures in areas including accommodation.

In the field of improving perceptions among local population:

- Activity 3.1.4.1. Improving Bulgarian language skills for adults and children, which also includes the conduction of information sessions aimed at adaptation and effective social inclusion in society and local communities.

In the field of financial resources provision and distribution:

- Measure 6.1.1. Strengthening the capacity of competent institutions through targeted training and technical assistance programs **financed both from the national budget and from European funds.**
- Activity 3.1.4.3. Signing an integration agreement that provides access to a wide range of services and financial incentives in the initial stage of integration.
- Activity 3.1.4.5. Improving access to social services for stateless persons and persons seeking/receiving international protection, which also includes providing financial support for foreigners with permanent disabilities, consisting of two components of monthly financial support, according to the degree of disability, to which people with permanent disabilities over the age of 18 are entitled.
- Activity 3.1.4.7. Introduction of a single cost standard for financing activities in “Safe Zones” (special zones for unaccompanied minors, established in two RRCs in the city of Sofia (“Voenna Rampa” and “Ovcha Kupel”) and RRC in the city of Harmanli) for unaccompanied and separated children

Although the new strategy includes measures and activities associated with the six established strategic objectives, some of them are quite poorly represented, such as information campaigns to improve the perceptions of the local community towards those seeking or receiving international protection in Bulgaria. In addition to the above-mentioned measures and actions in this direction, the Strategy sets other activities and measures related to the development of information materials are rather aimed at raising awareness of the vulnerable group itself on important issues such as rights and requirements for education, including the admission of children and students seeking or receiving international protection in kindergartens and schools, employment, possible abuses in terms of pay, social and health insurance, the rights and obligations of workers, as well as information materials for social workers working with the vulnerable group, aiming to build a unified approach at the European level.

In order to monitor and control the implementation of the Strategy, as well as to report on progress, the document provides that “action plans will be developed annually”, based on a report on the implementation of the planned activities during the previous period, which will be based on the Plan for the Implementation of the European Union Pact on Migration and Asylum in the Republic of Bulgaria, adopted by Decision of the Council of Ministers No. 883/19 December 2024. Due to the deteriorating political situation in the country since 2020, when a number of changes of government were observed, and probably due to a lack of political will, previous strategies were left for a long time without such an operational plan and report on the implementation, as mentioned above, which leaves what was set out in them practically unfulfilled and only on paper.

Other strategic documents adopted at the national level, which are in effect at the time of writing and are relevant to the topic, include the National Strategy for Integrated Border Management in the Republic of Bulgaria 2020–2025 (adopted by Decision No. 792 of the Council of Ministers on 30 October 2020) and the National Strategy for the Integration of Persons Granted International Protection in the Republic of Bulgaria (Saveti.Government.Bg, 2023; UNHCR, 2022).

In order to illustrate key regulatory documents, including strategic ones, the main papers adopted on a national level in the Republic of Bulgaria from the post-democratic transition period to 2025 are presented in the table below.

Table 4.1. Main regulatory documents affecting people seeking or receiving international protection in the Republic of Bulgaria, adopted in the period 1989–2025

Strategic documents
National Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria on migration and integration 2008–2015
National Strategy in the Field of Migration, Asylum and Integration 2011–2020
National Strategy on the Integration of People Receiving International Protection in the Republic of Bulgaria 2014–2020
National Strategy on Migration of the Republic of Bulgaria 2021–2025
National Strategy on Managing Migration and Asylum 2025–2030
Acts and Laws
Decree No. 208 of the Council of Ministers of 4 October 1994 on the adoption of an ordinance for granting and regulating the status of refugees, accompanied by an Ordinance for granting and regulating the status of refugees, published in the State Gazette, issue 84 of 14 October 1994.
Refugees Act, 1999
Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria Act, 1999
Asylum and Refugees Act, 2002 (ongoing)
International documents to which Bulgaria is a party
1951 Refugee Convention – ratified on 12 May 1993
1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees – ratified on 12 May 1993
Pact on Migration and Asylum
Country responsible for asylum application (Dublin Regulation)
Other EU Directives (e.g. Directive 2013/32/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 on common procedures for granting and withdrawing international protection; Directive (EU) 2024/1346 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection; Council Directive 2001/55/EC of 20 July 2001 on minimum standards for giving temporary protection in the event of a mass influx of displaced persons and on measures promoting a balance of efforts between Member States in receiving such persons and bearing the consequences thereof; Directive 2008/115/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 December 2008 on common standards and procedures in Member States for returning illegally staying third-country nationals).

Source: Author’s compilation based on sources cited in the text

4.3. Benchmarking Asylum and Refugee Laws: Insights from the EU (and Member States)

Following the adoption of the Geneva Convention at the international level, the EU was committed to building a Common European Asylum System (CEAS). This led to the adoption of the building blocks of the current legislative framework governing

asylum (and other forms of protection) in the EU, and which establish minimum standards to be respected by every Member State. The initial package comprised six instruments (many of which suffered amendments, mainly in 2013)¹:

- the Eurodac Regulation – Regulation (EU) No 603/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 on the establishment of Eurodac for the comparison of fingerprints for the effective application of Regulation (EU) No 604/2013 establishing the criteria and mechanisms for determining the Member State responsible for examining an application for international protection lodged in one of the Member States by a third-country national or a stateless person and on requests for the comparison with Eurodac data by Member States' law enforcement authorities and Europol for law enforcement purposes, and amending Regulation (EU) No 1077/2011 establishing a European Agency for the operational management of large-scale IT systems in the area of freedom, security and justice (recast);
- the Temporary Protection Directive – Council Directive 2001/55/EC of 20 July 2001 on minimum standards for giving temporary protection in the event of a mass influx of displaced persons and on measures promoting a balance of efforts between Member States in receiving such persons and bearing the consequences thereof;
- the Reception of Asylum Seekers Directive – Directive 2013/33/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection (recast);
- the Dublin Regulation replacing the 1990 Dublin Convention – Regulation (EU) No 604/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 establishing the criteria and mechanisms for determining the Member State responsible for examining an application for international protection lodged in one of the Member States by a third-country national or a stateless person (recast);
- the Qualification Directive – Directive 2011/95/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 December 2011 on standards for the qualification of third-country nationals or stateless persons as beneficiaries of international protection, for a uniform status for refugees or for persons eligible for subsidiary protection, and for the content of the protection granted (recast);
- the Asylum Procedures Directive – Directive 2013/32/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 on common procedures for granting and withdrawing international protection (recast).

As evidenced above, most of the initial instruments were amended or replaced by newer versions around 2013, after an initial period during which the direction in which the EU desired to frame the CEAS was identified, especially bearing in mind that

¹ The legal instruments will be mentioned in the version applicable at the time of writing (early 2026), instead of the version first adopted, to ensure more clarity.

significant differences in protection standards still existed among Member States under the initial framework.

The first massive influx of migrants (many of whom were asylum seekers) in 2015 brought many flaws and issues with the CEAS to the forefront. This prompted the drafting and presentation of a third package of legislation governing asylum in the EU, which culminated in the adoption of ten legislative texts, forming the Pact on Migration and Asylum, in 2024. The two-year transition period between their coming into force and implementation by Member States will end in mid-2026.

At the time of writing, this is the existing legislative framework, which directly influences Member States practices, as it establishes a common approach to asylum. Conceptually, asylum seekers differ from refugees and beneficiaries of temporary or subsidiary protection, as well as economic immigrants. Asylum is definitely the oldest legal instrument for granting international protection to people fleeing certain circumstances, while the other categories (namely temporary or subsidiary protection) were adopted more recently (Carvalho, 2016, 125).

Beginning with the least problematic concept, *economic immigrants* are individuals who voluntarily leave their country in search of better living conditions or economic opportunities. Although this distinction may not be so straightforward as it seems, particularly as poor living conditions may result from discriminatory measures against a person or group of people (Carvalho, 2016, fn. 2), this is, in principle, the easiest group to identify. However, it is also the group that states have imposed the most restrictions on, as they are not usually granted international protection or legal recognition. *Refugees* are people who are forced to flee their country because of war, armed conflicts or other similar reasons, while *asylum seekers* are also forced to flee, but because of systematic violations of or danger to their fundamental rights, often resulting from persecution due to religious, political or other discriminatory grounds.

Differentiating between these two statuses is not particularly easy, as there are common grounds for granting asylum or refugee status (Rodrigues, 2021, 101), such as the “persecution of individuals or groups resulting from armed conflict or as a result of the inertia or inaction of the State of origin in safeguarding social peace and security; systematic violations of basic human rights, that could jeopardize or endanger the life or integrity of people and that are current and effective”. This difficulty explains why both categories are usually simply grouped together (Carvalho, 2016, 126; see, however, Ramos, 1994, 86, and Alland, 1997, 16). Once recognized, this status is recognized internationally, meaning it must be respected regardless of the country of recognition.

Temporary and subsidiary protection emerged only in the 20th century to respond to specific situations. *Temporary protection* allows for a rapid response to a (projected) mass influx of people fleeing their country of origin who are unable to return to it for a period of time. This mechanism enables them to legally remain in the host country for the specified period of time. The first and only time that temporary protection was used in the EU so far was during the initial years of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. This meant

that people fleeing Ukraine did not need to prove individual circumstances in order to obtain temporary protection in the EU. As it is temporary, this protection will end once the initial or extended deadline is reached, by which time the beneficiaries will be expected to return to their country of origin, unless they are permitted to remain in the host territory for another reason.

As for *subsidiary protection*, it aims to provide international protection in situations where a third country national does not qualify for refugee status, but still cannot return to their country of origin, mostly due to facing serious harm if returned. This status offers temporary rights to its holders, who likewise do not need to prove an individual risk, as it is based on a general risk persisting in the origin country.

These two forms of protection end up granting their holders a more favorable set of rights, such as temporary residence authorization, access to the job market, adequate housing, social rights, education, etc. (Rodrigues, 2021, 106). Access to these rights is correspondingly easier, as individuals will not be required to prove an individualized risk of being the object of serious offences, given that the general situation in the country of origin will suffice to prove it (already in CJEU, C-465/07, *Elgafaji*, § 43). In asylum (*lato sensu*), beneficiaries will have other rights (e.g. reunification rights) once they are recognized as such, and they will enjoy the protection conferred by the principles of *non-refoulement* and non-criminalization of their irregular entry into the territory (Carvalho, 2016, 138), but obtaining that status is rather more difficult. It is thus increasingly necessary that access to the rights corresponding to that status is ensured, which means, first and foremost, obtaining it in the first place.

This is where the best practices are most visible and important. Asylum seekers and refugees will usually be attracted to countries with the best infrastructures: stable political systems, the rule of law, respect for fundamental rights, and a developed economy with social services and benefits (Moro, 2007). These countries will, in principle, offer individuals the greatest safety, stability, and future prospects. However, states are not always enthusiastic about recognizing asylum, and will often hinder it by adopting practices designed to bypass or obstruct the functioning of the legal system. The next paragraphs will summarize the most important best practices.

While the Asylum Procedures Directive aimed to harmonize legal standards and practices across EU Member States, the fact that it established only minimum standards and had to be transposed into national legal orders meant that, in practice, a substantial margin of appreciation and conformation was still left to states (particularly through the ample derogations and exceptions that it allowed). This led not only to different interpretations of the same rules, but also to differing practices: some above the minimum threshold and others even below it (UNHCR, 2010).

One of the most important aspects of the asylum procedure is the right to obtain a written, reasoned decision on the application. This is particularly relevant in decisions denying asylum, as the duty to state the facts and law that led to the refusal is essential for an effective judicial review of the case. Stating the facts will also enable the appeal judge to verify the evidence taken into consideration and its credibility when deciding

on the asylum request, as well as the standard of proof applied. This was recently found to be of extreme relevance also in the designation of a safe third country, as the CJEU ruled that “a Member State, which designates a third country as a safe country of origin, must ensure that there is, in respect of the sources of information, within the meaning of Article 37(3) of that directive, on which that designation is based, sufficient and adequate access that must, on the one hand, enable the applicant for international protection concerned, who is from that third country, to defend his or rights under the best possible conditions and to decide with full knowledge of the facts whether it is useful to bring his or her case before the court or tribunal having jurisdiction and, on the other hand, enable that court or tribunal to review a decision taken on the application for international protection” (CJEU, C-758/24, *Alace*). In this regard, best practices include: (a) informing the applicant of the refusal decision in writing, stating the full facts and law on which the decision is based; (b) ensuring that the information on the country of origin is up-to-date and reliable (e.g. based on international reports by reputable human rights organizations); (c) avoiding generic phrasing or lengthy standard legal paragraphs, as these do not engage sufficiently with the applicant’s individual situation, nor apply the law specifically to the facts of the case; (d) not bypassing or relaxing these requirements, even within border or accelerated procedures, since these usually determine the applicant’s fate but paradoxically have reduced deadlines, therefore prompting quicker decisions that are insufficiently based on reliable evidence and legal reasoning. Nevertheless, asylum requests should not be unreasonably prolonged, as waiting periods and uncertainty have been shown to be “significant sources of emotional strain” (Borges, 2024, 285).

The decision on the asylum request, along with the reasoning behind it, should be communicated to the applicant in a language they understand. For the applicant to be able to exercise their right to access justice, it is important that they fully understand the final decision and what led to it. This must be interpreted as precluding the communication of the information in a language the applicant is *supposed* to understand. Best practice in this instance includes: (a) providing the written notification of the decision and reasoning in a language the applicant actually understands; (b) where such a notification is not possible, communicating the decision orally with the help of a translator and legal counsel; (c) NGOs may be engaged in providing these basic services, but they should not be (as they are) the first or only opportunity asylum applicants have to understand the decision reached on their case.

During the procedure, applicants should have the opportunity to be interviewed in person. In many cases, the outcome of a preliminary interview determines the subsequent asylum process (UNHCR, 2010), which is why it should not be omitted (for adults capable of answering the questions posed during the interview), and it should gather the relevant facts as thoroughly as possible. The best practices in this regard include: (a) using interpreters to conduct the interview in a language the applicant understands, so they can answer the questions with relevant information, ensuring a seamless communication with the national authority; (b) conducting the interview with

a qualified, trained national authority, capable of representing the decision-making body; (c) conducting the interview in such a way as to allow the merits of the individual application to be considered; (d) ensuring that an individual interview is always conducted, as failing to do so is liable to undermine the fairness of the procedure; (e) conducting the interview, as much as possible, in a way that allows the interviewee to provide the relevant information without constraints – this includes, for instance, providing a suitable environment, allocating sufficient time, allowing them to be accompanied during the interview (especially children or people with special needs), providing confidentiality assurances, respecting cultural factors wherever possible, and ensuring the quality of interviews, through monitoring and proper channels for complaints.

Once again, to ensure effective access to justice, this interview must be thoroughly recorded. This allows the state to justify its decisions based on the facts gathered, and enables the applicant to appeal if necessary. As such, it is the best to provide a full record of the interview, and not only selected parts of it, as selected content may omit relevant parts of the conversation or be misleading, if certain statements are taken out of context. This can be achieved using different technologies, as long as they are able to provide a faithful and reliable account of the information transmitted during the interview. It is also important to give the applicant access to the report prior to its archiving, as well as the right to disapprove of (or part of) the report, or correct information that is not faithfully represented therein.

Although it is possible to explicitly withdraw an application for international protection exists, the option to request a reappraisal of the application (or reopening of procedures) may be insufficiently envisioned. The opportunity to request consideration of new facts should be ensured, thus allowing for an up-to-date evaluation of the applicant's case. In the same vein, the circumstances under which an application is considered to have been implicitly withdrawn must be carefully framed, to avoid exposing the applicant to an unnecessary, real risk. In this context, the transmission of information is of paramount importance: the applicant must be informed, in a language they understand, of the consequences of certain behavior (e.g. not complying with legal obligations during the application process). This communication must be clear and comprehensible, allowing the individual to truly understand their rights and duties throughout the procedure. It is important to note that Member States will still not be able to violate the principle of *non-refoulement* simply because of a failure to comply with procedural obligations. Instead, this should translate into the discontinuation of proceedings, rather than an outright denial of refugee status, since there may still be a need for protection that cannot currently be adequately assessed. The same applies to the opportunity to submit a subsequent application: best practice in this case is to allow a re-evaluation of the applicant's case whenever new, relevant information emerges. In this case, the right to remain in the host territory should be maintained until a final assessment of the new evidence is made, as this is the only way to ensure the decision remains useful and the applicant's fundamental rights are not violated.

During the interview and procedure, sensitive information will be collected about the applicant, especially regarding the motives that underpin the protection request. It is crucial that this information, as well as the fact that an application has been made, remains confidential and is not disclosed, particularly to entities representing the applicant's country of origin, as this would put the applicant, their family and friends at risk in both the host and origin countries, should they be returned. During the asylum procedure, some information concerning the origin state will need to be requested or gathered. Just as before, it is imperative that this information about the prospective risk to the applicant's fundamental rights does not entail disclosing information about the applicant themselves. Good practice in this regard would be to not disclose the applicant's identity or characteristics that would allow the state of origin to indirectly identify them. Final decisions should also remain anonymous towards representatives or agents of the origin state, except in the event of a decision to return the applicant.

Although asylum procedures deserve priority, sufficient time must be allowed for a thorough and fair evaluation of each case, for applicants to exercise their rights, and for up-to-date, relevant information about the applicant's country of origin country and individual circumstances to be gathered. Regardless of the type of procedure adopted, or whether the applicant is detained, sufficient time must be allotted for applicants to effectively exercise their rights.

Regarding the existence of other states in which the applicant would be able to obtain protection, particular attention must be paid to circumstances that indicate the possibility of the applicant being effectively safe in that territory. This includes requesting or obtaining international protection and the guarantee of *non-refoulement*, and being free from risk of persecution or treatment contrary to Art. 3 of the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR)/ Art. 4 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU (CFRUE). This evaluation is particularly relevant for establishing the concept of a 'safe third country'. In this regard, it is necessary to stress that, while the designation of a safe third country can be generic, it must nonetheless be evaluated individually, in the context of the applicant's circumstances: the country must be safe for *that* individual. This means that, for a third country to be considered safe, it must be safe for all people (CJEU, C-758/24, *Alace*). Similarly, it cannot be considered partially safe, as the territory must be considered safe as a whole (see, to this effect, CJEU, C-406/22, *Ministerstvo vnitra České republiky, Odbor azylové a migrační politiky*). Lastly, in order to be removed there, the individual must have a real connection to that third country, (see CJEU, C-564/18, *Bevándorlási és Menekültügyi Hivatal (Tompá)*, §44 f., which determined that the simple fact of the applicant having transited through the territory of a third country does not sufficiently establish a connection to "make the applicant's return to that country reasonable"). A case regarding a request for a preliminary ruling from Bulgaria sought to establish whether the fact that a Syrian minor who had lived in Istanbul for one month could allow the designation of Türkiye as a safe third country, also taking into account that two of his brothers and three of his sisters live there too (CJEU, C-718/24, *Aleb*). The CJEU

replied in the negative, clearly demonstrating that presumption of a connection, or of a safe third country, must also be rebuttable.

In principle, the notion of a safe country of origin may simplify the assessment of a request, provided that there is no persecution, torture, degrading treatment or general situation of indiscriminate violence in the country. In such cases, the presumption is that there will be no grounds to grant the request for international protection. However, best practice dictates that an individual evaluation must still be carried out, based on transparent, up-to-date information about the country and the applicant's individual circumstances. Similarly, it is not possible to designate only certain regions or certain groups for which that country is considered safe.

Throughout this procedure, and bearing in mind the various judicial decisions that may arise (e.g., interim judicial decisions, the final decision on the asylum request, the decision on the request to reopen the procedure, etc.), it is crucial that an effective judicial remedy is available whenever there is reason to believe that the initial judicial decision is flawed. In order to be effective, the right to an appeal entails that “a rigorous scrutiny must necessarily be conducted of an individual's claim that his or her deportation to a third country will expose that individual to treatment prohibited by Article 3” (ECtHR, *Jabari v. Turkey*, § 39), meaning that formal grounds alone should not determine refusal of the request or appeal (ECtHR, *Jabari v. Turkey*, § 40), and that the court must have the power to review questions of both fact and law. The consequences arising from this procedure are such that its effectiveness depends on the suspensive effect of the appeal (ECtHR, *Gebremedhin*, § 66–67; as well as ECtHR, *Čonka*, § 79 f.); otherwise, the *non-refoulement* obligation may, in fact, be breached. The appeal must be judicial in nature, meaning that the decision must be made by a court. This necessarily entails free legal assistance to be provided by the state, so as not to nullify the right to appeal.

During this procedure, it can also happen that there may be a need to detain migrants. This is a non-punitive detention (see, for instance, Bernardini, 2022), as it does not stem from a criminal offence or pursue the same objectives. The purpose of this detention is to confine the migrant to a specific, restricted location so that they are available throughout the procedure and for the enforcement of the return decision, should it be required. However exceptional it should be, it is allowed in EU law, although Member States are increasingly introducing national rules to govern the detention of migrants (EPRS Briefing, 2023). In this setting, best practices include detention pending the asylum decision being a last resort, not extending unreasonably, and providing for periodical reassessment. This should include an evaluation of migrants' human rights, taking into consideration the conditions in which they are detained, including access to health care (physical and mental).

However, best practices extend beyond the procedure of recognizing or refusing an asylum request. Whenever an applicant is recognized the right to remain in the host country, duties regarding their integration arise. Those who acquire the right to remain are usually unable to speak or understand the language, have no jobs or housing, are

not registered with social services and generally have no social support network. Europe was ill-prepared for the large number of people arriving during the 2015–2016 period; states were not ready for such a high volume of requests or the subsequent integration needs.

As international unrest spreads and wars begin and continue, Europe must be aware of the fact that it will remain an attractive destination for people seeking protection. For now, the most proactive and creative solutions for promoting integrating have come from civil society, mostly through NGO's, which struggle, most naturally, with funding. In this context, best practices include (Lāce, 2018):

- providing newcomers with basic language training or courses, to facilitate integration into daily life;
- providing assistance within the education, social and housing systems, to welcome individuals into society and prevent them from being marginalized;
- providing assistance with the integration of refugees into the job market, in lawful and dignified conditions, thus ensuring that their more vulnerable position does not result in exploitation;
- ensuring that unaccompanied minors are cared for, integrated into society and placed in stable education and housing conditions, to minimize the impact of their highly vulnerable situation in their lives;
- prioritizing regional action over national action where necessary, depending on the capacity of local/national actors and how quickly local and national policies can be implemented;
- applying inclusive welfare policies to refugees, thus ensuring that the host country does not become a factor of subsequent violation of their fundamental rights, especially with regard to inhuman or degrading treatment.

Therefore, the integration of refugees depends on a proactive and open attitude from the host community, which must provide the necessary conditions for refugees to effectively belong to that community (Borges, 2024, 288; Borges, 2025, 242). Much of the backlash from civil society regarding the acceptance of refugees stems precisely from preconceptions, prejudices and the marginalization of this group of people, which is why investing in education (language, cultural values, cultural diversity) and integration is the best path towards a sustainable future in European society.

In this scenario, the Baltic states were mostly caught off guard (Lāce, 2018). Bulgaria, for instance, showcases just how significant civil society can be in the integration of refugees, given that the country has lacked a stable, functioning national program since its redesign in 2013 (Lazarova, 2018)

Although the criminalization of (irregular) migrants seeking asylum solely for their illegal arrival is not allowed under the Geneva Convention, states are increasingly employing criminal law in an effort to reduce the flow of migrants. This has been explicitly documented in a number of EU Member States, as well as former Member States (see Taylor, 2024 and 2025 for recent data in the United Kingdom). Member States' policy strategies include the criminalization of migrants as facilitators, simply

for driving vehicles carrying other irregular migrants, the criminalization of humanitarian associations, and even children – all of which do not possess the purported effectiveness in managing irregular migration into the EU (for an assessment, Cardoso and Pavlov, 2025). The criminalization of migrants/ asylum seekers solely for arriving irregularly has already been deemed incompatible with EU law (CJEU, C-61/11 PPU, *El Dridi*), as it delays the return of migrants determined to have no right to remain in EU territory. However, this is not the same as sentencing asylum seekers (or refugees) for crimes committed in the host territory: when a prolonged or even lifelong sentence is imposed, the execution of the return decision will inevitably have to be delayed (or not reached at all, due to practical impossibility), presumably without it being contrary to EU law (see, to the effect, CJEU, Opinion of AG Spielmann on case C-877/24, *Shamsi*). With regard to this issue, it is clear that asylum seekers should not be subject to criminalization for their irregular arrival, given that there are (practically) no means of obtaining asylum – and thus a legal way of arriving in the EU – outside the territory of the requested State.

Conclusion

Managing the influx of large numbers of people seeking international protection is certainly no easy task. This requires sufficient resources, infrastructures and time – all of which are lacking in Member States. Although examples of best practice can be found, they remain unevenly implemented across the EU.

Perhaps it would be useful at this point to assess a closely linked instrument of international protection – temporary protection – in a comparative exercise capable of drawing valuable lessons applicable to asylum as well. As mentioned above, temporary protection was applied across the EU only once, during the initial years of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In practice, this meant a hugely simplified procedure for acquiring the right to legally remain in the territory of the Member States.

More than 5 million people (according to UNHCR, 2026) have entered Europe following Ukraine's invasion and, although there have been multiple challenges, Member States have demonstrated that it is possible to adequately respond to such a situation, when they are willing to do so. Most issues are connected to a lack of existing resources to meet the suddenly increased demand – for housing, education, health services, etc. – and the adaptation of national programs to the specific needs of individuals, including the lengthy timeframe between requesting assistance and receiving it (Vaitovich, 2025). The willingness to effectively employ resources, respect international commitments, and open communities to outside influences seem, indeed, to be fundamental to a state's capacity to manage migration.

The best practices described will likely remain unchanged, at least when in comparison with international obligations stemming from, *inter alia*, the Geneva Convention. However, a new European legal framework will be fully implemented by

mid-2026, which is why the next chapter will briefly touch upon the most important challenges relating to asylum arising from the implementation of the new Pact.

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CHAPTER V

A COMMON EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK FOR ASYLUM: FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

This chapter explores the key (problematic) changes to asylum policy in the EU introduced by the new framework, which must be implemented by mid-2026. The new Pact on Asylum brings with it several challenges, which can be identified through a legislative analysis of its rules. While an in-depth analysis is not possible due to the limitations of the chapter, the focus will be on changes affecting asylum seekers' rights or the best practices described in the preceding chapter. The first section will therefore focus on identifying the main aspects of the new pact, while the second will highlight the anticipated challenges. This will be followed by some concluding remarks that raise the question of the compatibility of the European regime with the international legal order and address future concerns.

Keywords: European Approach, European Legal Framework, the New Pact on Migration and Asylum.

5.1. Introduction

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the entire legal framework governing asylum in the EU has been redrafted, with the purpose of adapting the previously existing rules to the challenges that emerged and were identified as the number of asylum seekers in the EU steadily increased. The new Pact on Migration and Asylum (PMA), which was adopted in 2024 and is in principle implemented across the EU at the time of reading, comprises ten legislative instruments:

- the Screening Regulation – Regulation (EU) 2024/1356 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 introducing the screening of third-country nationals at the external borders and amending Regulations (EC) No 767/2008, (EU) 2017/2226, (EU) 2018/1240 and (EU) 2019/817;
- the Amending Screening Regulation – Regulation (EU) 2024/1352 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 amending Regulations (EU) 2019/816 and (EU) 2019/818 for the purpose of introducing the screening of third-country nationals at the external borders;
- the Eurodac Regulation – Regulation (EU) 2024/1358 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on the establishment of ‘Eurodac’

for the comparison of biometric data in order to effectively apply Regulations (EU) 2024/1351 and (EU) 2024/1350 of the European Parliament and of the Council and Council Directive 2001/55/EC and to identify illegally staying third-country nationals and stateless persons and on requests for the comparison with Eurodac data by Member States' law enforcement authorities and Europol for law enforcement purposes, amending Regulations (EU) 2018/1240 and (EU) 2019/818 of the European Parliament and of the Council and repealing Regulation (EU) No 603/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council;

- the Asylum Procedure Regulation (APR) – Regulation (EU) 2024/1348 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 establishing a common procedure for international protection in the Union and repealing Directive 2013/32/EU;
- the Return Border Procedure Regulation (RBPR) – Regulation (EU) 2024/1349 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 establishing a return border procedure, and amending Regulation (EU) 2021/1148;
- the Asylum and Migration Management Regulation (AMMR) – Regulation (EU) 2024/1351 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on asylum and migration management, amending Regulations (EU) 2021/1147 and (EU) 2021/1060 and repealing Regulation (EU) No 604/2013;
- the Crisis and Force Majeure Regulation (CFMR) – Regulation (EU) 2024/1359 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 addressing situations of crisis and force majeure in the field of migration and asylum and amending Regulation (EU) 2021/1147;
- the Qualification Regulation – Regulation (EU) 2024/1347 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on standards for the qualification of third-country nationals or stateless persons as beneficiaries of international protection, for a uniform status for refugees or for persons eligible for subsidiary protection and for the content of the protection granted, amending Council Directive 2003/109/EC and repealing Directive 2011/95/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council;
- the Reception Conditions Directive – Directive (EU) 2024/1346 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection;
- the Union Resettlement Framework – Regulation (EU) 2024/1350 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 establishing a Union Resettlement and Humanitarian Admission Framework, and amending Regulation (EU) 2021/1147.

These legal instruments purportedly guarantee “more secure European borders”, “faster, more efficient procedures for asylum and return” and “more solidarity with the Member States at our external borders” (Press Corner, 2024).

5.2. Methodology

This chapter applies a documentary analysis methodology to analyze the forthcoming legal framework governing asylum in the European Union. Given the scope of the analysis, a plethora of documents are included, such as policy documents, legal instruments and case law. The relevant research period begins in 2024, when the new Asylum Pact and its building blocks were discussed and approved, and ends at the time of writing (February 2026). Due to publishing constraints, later developments will not be considered. The main purpose is to provide a general comparative framework based on the earlier identified best practices, in order to pinpoint the main issues that may arise from the new asylum rules, which are expected to be fully implemented by mid-2026 (European Commission, 2024).

5.3. The New Pact on Asylum – the Core Amendments

The legislative instruments that make up the new European Pact on Migration and Asylum were approved by a large majority, but not without some controversy. The process was characterized by a particular lack of transparency, with the Council managing to obtain the European Parliament's approval for versions of the texts that had not been negotiated in trialogues beforehand (Baccini, 2024).

The Regulation replacing the Dublin III framework (AMMR) now takes a dual approach to migration. On the one hand, it maintains the traditional principle of assigning responsibility for evaluating an asylum request to the Member State (MS) corresponding to the first point of entry in the EU (Art. 16 f.). However, there are exceptions which can shift this responsibility to another MS, such as if the applicant has family members in another EU Member State, has obtained a recent diploma in another MS, or is seeking family reunification, now including with beneficiaries of international protection and holders of an EU long-term residence permit. This approach to a clearer responsibility is intended to reduce situations in which applicants seek to choose the MS responsible for evaluation, regardless of the point of entry, thereby also reducing secondary movements within the Schengen Area, and ensuring that non-compliance with these rules bears serious consequences for asylum seekers, such as not receiving the full range of reception conditions. The expected evaluation timeline has also been reduced through the simplification of certain aspects: transferring responsibility between MSs will entail a notification, rather than a mutual process requiring the agreement of the first MS. The new deadlines mean that the MS of entry will be responsible for applications for 20 months (Art. 33(1)); for search and rescue missions, this responsibility stops at 12 months (Art. 33(2)); for rejected applications, responsibility ceases after 15 months (Art. 37(2)); and in case the applicant absconds to another MS and is not transferred back, responsibility will shift to that MS after three years (Art. 46(2)).

On the other hand, solidarity now plays a role in supporting MSs that are usually most impacted by migration routes into the EU, and that are especially burdened by the impact on their asylum systems. The solidarity mechanisms encompass several options (Art. 56 f.), including the relocation of asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection or, if an MS objects to the relocation of a percentage of people from another MS, it can contribute financially to support projects in third countries or contribute with other solidarity measures to EU MSs, such as personnel or capacity building. Offsetting responsibility will also enable other MSs to process applications without physically transferring applicants (Art. 63).

The APR introduces new common rules on the procedure, which now includes mandatory border procedures to quickly assess whether an asylum application is manifestly unfounded or inadmissible, standard rights and obligations for asylum seekers, and clearer procedures. The new border procedure (Art. 43 f.) aims to prevent certain migrants from entering EU territory, allowing for a quick assessment of their claims. This procedure is applicable in a number of situations, *inter alia* to individuals considered to pose a threat to the security of the EU; individuals coming from a third country with a low recognition rate; and individuals who cross the border irregularly or following a search and rescue mission. MSs are also expected to implement a mechanism to assess compliance with the fundamental rights of migrants subject to this procedure (Art. 43(4)). The border procedure is expected to allow a decision to be reached within a maximum period of 12 weeks, which can be extended up to 16 weeks (Art. 51(2)).

Migrants are also granted certain rights and obligations (Art. 8 f.), including the right to information, interpretation services, a personal interview, and free legal counselling (during the administrative procedure) or free legal assistance (during the appeal, where permitted). They have the right to remain in the territory where their application is being assessed during the administrative procedure (Art. 10), although this allows for several exceptions. Their obligations encompass (among others) providing biometric and other data, information, attending the interview, and remaining available of the MS.

A key concept in the APR is outlined in Art. 57 f.: the concept of a safe country. Both EU and national lists of safe third countries can be established to expedite return decisions, unless there are concrete reasons to believe that an individual would not be safe in that third country. Several criteria are taken into account when determining whether a third country is safe, including whether migrants will have the right to remain in the territory, access to education and healthcare, international protection, means of subsistence, and whether the principle of *non-refoulement* will be respected. The Return Regulation complements the APR (as well as other legislative instruments forming the Pact), by establishing swift and common procedures for the forced (when not voluntary) return of individuals who do not have the legal right to remain in the territory of the Union. This Regulation also includes rules on detention (Art. 5), as well as special rules applicable during crises (Art. 6 f.).

The procedure leading to the recognition of the status of a beneficiary of international protection also requires common and consistent standards, which are set out in the Qualification Regulation. This Regulation harmonizes stricter criteria susceptible of leading to the recognition of the refugee status or subsidiary protection, although it has the clear advantage of providing a common framework for consistent assessment across EU MSs. As well as determining the elements to be considered in applications for international protection (Art. 4), it also defines the grounds for recognition (Art. 9 f. and 15 f.), and the status of the individuals recognized as refugees or beneficiaries of subsidiary protection (Art. 13/14 and 18/19). This status will now be uniform, as one of the objectives was precisely to standardize the rights and obligations of these individuals, regardless of the host MS (Art. 24 f.). They include, among others, rules on residence permits and travel documents, as well as integration measures such as access to employment, education, housing, healthcare, and social security.

The new Screening Regulation facilitates the decision on the type of procedure an individual is to follow. The Regulation envisions a preliminary screening of third-country nationals who have crossed the external border in an unauthorized manner, applied for international protection during border checks, or been disembarked following a search and rescue operation, before they are referred to the appropriate procedure. It also provides for the screening of third-country nationals who are illegally staying within the territory of the MSs, where there is no indication that they have been subject to controls at the external borders (Art. 1). Screening includes identity verification, health and vulnerability checks, as well as security checks (including registration in the Eurodac database) (Art. 12 f.). The individuals subject to screening have an obligation to provide the required information and biometric data (Art. 9), while MSs must ensure that fundamental rights are respected (Art. 10). Detention is permitted during the screening (Art. 8(7)), and following the screening, individuals may be referred to the asylum or return procedure.

The Eurodac database has also been expanded. The Regulation, designed to support the asylum system, already included the fingerprints of asylum seekers to determine if they had previously applied for asylum or been apprehended while entering European territory, and to establish which MS should be responsible for their application. The new database, which will register individuals instead of applications, will display an array of new features, now fostering personal information and biometric data (mandatory for individuals aged six and over) (Art. 13 f.), collected from asylum applicants, resettled persons, beneficiaries of temporary protection and irregular migrants (entering the territory of the EU, following search and rescue missions, or subsequently found within the EU territory). This data will be stored for different periods of time, depending on the individuals' legal category, ranging from one to ten years (Art. 29). The system also boasts interoperability with several other European information systems (eu-LISA, ETIAS, VIS – Art. 8 f.), and allows for a facilitated

access by law enforcement authorities (Art. 32 f.) and to flag individuals who represent a security risk (Art. 17(4)).

The new pact also envisages a rapid response mechanism for ‘crises’, such as the peak in migration to the EU registered in 2015-16. The controversial CFMR is applicable in situations where the influx of migrants could render a MS’s asylum system non-functional or where it could have consequences for the European common asylum system, therefore triggering certain derogations from the common rules (Art. 10 f.) as well as a solidarity response from other MSs (Art. 8 and 9). Examples of situations that can impact the national or European asylum system in such a manner are included in the Regulation: e.g., the mass arrival of individuals seeking asylum, instrumentalization of migrants (Art. 1(4) and Art. 2), or other crises, such as emerging from a natural disaster (Art. 1(5) and recital 20).

As this introduces exceptions to the normal procedures, the decision to apply the rules of this Regulation is not unilateral: it requires a reasoned request from a MS, as well as a Commission decision and approval from the Council. These derogations apply for a period of three months, which can be renewed up to a maximum of twelve months (Art. 5). The derogations from the common asylum system particularly concern the extension of timeframes for determining the responsible MS or evaluating applications, as well as reducing or increasing the number of applications examined at the border, whereas the solidarity measures reinforce the duty of other MSs to accept asylum seekers or contribute in other ways, such as financially, through capacity building or by providing personnel. Responsibility offsets can become mandatory in this scenario (Art. 9).

The Reception Conditions Directive establishes common standards for MSs receiving applicants for international protection. It lays down rules – which, however, must be transposed into the national legal system, with the possible fragmentation resulting therefrom – on information, documentation, detention, restrictions on movement, access to education and employment, language courses and healthcare. They also cover the situations in which certain conditions may be reduced or withdrawn (Art. 23). One of the clear aims of this Directive is to reduce the secondary movement of applicants for international protection within the EU.

Finally, the new migration pact also includes a Resettlement Regulation establishing a European Resettlement and Humanitarian Admission Framework (Art. 1), intended to contribute to the regular and safe admission of individuals to the Union for the purpose of granting them international or humanitarian protection. This shall be done in consultation with the UNHCR regarding global resettlement needs and regions, but it does not give individuals the right to request or be granted admission to the territory of a MS, nor does it oblige a MS to accept an individual (Art. 1(2)(3)). Rather, it is meant to “encourage” MSs to scale up their efforts in accepting the resettlement of individuals, thereby contributing to increasing the EU’s contribution and efforts globally, and strengthening its partnership with third countries hosting large numbers of displaced individuals in need of international protection (Art. 3). This will be done

based on a Commission proposal, followed by a Council humanitarian admission plan (Art. 8).

Since the adoption of the Pact, and while the implementation of the new rules governing asylum is ongoing, MSs have agreed on a solidarity pool for 2026 (Council of the EU, 2025a), have reached a provisional agreement on a revision of the safe third country concept, with the aim of expanding the circumstances in which an asylum application can be rejected as inadmissible (Council of the EU, 2025b), and the Council and the European Parliament have agreed on the first EU list of safe countries of origin (Council of the EU, 2025c).

5.4. The New Pact on Asylum – the Main Challenges

The main concerns regarding the implementation of the new Pact start with the misuse of European funds to prioritize border procedures over other aspects of the asylum system, and the fragmented implementation of (or lack of adherence to) the new rules, as migration remains a highly politicized topic and the adoption of the Pact demonstrated that there are still profound divergences between MSs' willingness to effectively adopt these rules (European Parliament, 2025). Failure to implement the common rules may lead to a situation where MSs seek alternatives that are worse than these common rules, such as relying more heavily on external cooperation through extraterritorial processing, return hubs or agreements with third countries (thus expanding the safe third country lists)¹. The externalization of migration management continues to prove challenging on multiple fronts, and the EU is not the only bloc seeking to outsource asylum (see, recently, the condemnation of Australia by the UN Committee against Torture for its treatment of migrants in Papua New Guinea – UN OHCHR, 2026). However, plenty of challenges and concerns remain regarding the use of these practices (see, among many accounts, Meijers Committee, 2025; or Zandonini and Vermeulen, 2026).

While this is indisputably true, there are also several concerns about the new common asylum rules, as they are expected to raise several issues and challenges.

One concern is that more emphasis will be placed on facilitated returns (through the expansion of the concept of a safe third country in the APR) and on financial contributions towards agreements with third states, rather than on establishing a truly common European asylum system. The flexible solidarity mechanism (in the AMMR) may provide additional funding without enhancing the EU's overall capacity to respond to requests for international protection. One recent example may illustrate the issue: Portugal opted to pay € 8.44 million rather than accept 420 migrants currently in

¹ These are only the legal routes that MSs could opt for. However, there are also situations in which the law is simply disregarded, as demonstrated by the recent *O.H and Others v. Serbia* judgement of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR, 2026). The concern is that, given the current backlash against migrants (in general), not even these minimum rules will be respected.

reception centers in Italy, Spain, Greece or Cyprus (four MSs that remain under migratory pressure) (Público, 2026). These MSs will remain under pressure, and it is unclear what objective the money will be spent on, or how this is supposed to express solidarity within the Union. Only a handful of MSs have chosen to accept their percentage of asylum applicants (Bulgaria is among them, having accepted 214 applicants currently in other MSs). Contrary to the current anti-migration discourse and policy, Spain made the opposite choice: it recently issued a decree for the regularization of half a million irregular migrants in its territory (The Guardian, 2026), thus favoring integration, solidarity and positioning itself alongside European core values. The very real risk is that funds will be used to implement further migration prevention mechanisms, which could result in continued collaboration with third countries that have a poor human rights record (De Leo and Milazzo, 2024).

The right to an appeal (and therefore, the right to access justice) has also suffered severe restrictions. One such example is Art. 43 of the AMMR, which now explicitly provides for only three grounds on which transfer decisions (between MSs) can be challenged, therefore excluding many of the grounds on which an appeal was possible under the previous rules (in analysis: Bodson, 2025). The introduced changes raise the broader question of whether the new rules on appeal will be compatible with Art. 47 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU (CFREU), on the right to an effective remedy, since there are now many situations in which asylum seekers can be transferred based on an incorrect or unjust decision without the right to appeal it. Further questions regarding the right to an effective remedy stem from the time limits for filing an appeal (given the expediency of the procedures), the general non-suspensive effect of the appeal (which has an undeniable impact on respect for the principle of *non-refoulement*), and the new provisions on legal aid (as individuals subject to the AMMR procedure only receive free legal counsel, not representation). Of particular concern is the fact that the suspensive effect of an appeal against a return decision must be requested, given that the limited timeframes for decisions are mostly incompatible with a careful assessment of the individual's situation and can lead to a violation of the *non-refoulement* principle, given the dire consequences of returning someone to a place where their fundamental rights are likely to be violated.

Beyond the obvious risk to migrants' rights and continued over-reliance on external cooperation as part of European migration policy (with all its associated risks), there is also concern that the rule on the expanded concept of safe third country may be disapplied in practice by courts (De Leo and Milazzo, 2024). In principle, the case law of the CJEU, which determines that the criteria used to establish whether a third country is safe must be public and subject to a case-by-case review, will still be applicable (see, most recently, CJEU, C-718/24, *Aleb*). If a judicial review concludes that a presumably safe country is not safe for an individual, the facilitated return procedure may not be applicable and the request for international protection must proceed. In this sense, rules that rely too heavily on presumptions of safety may actually prove more ineffective, as

asylum procedures would then take longer to conclude, prolonging the vulnerable and uncertain situation of individuals applying for international protection.

Still within the rules regarding safe countries, the new Pact introduces a variation on what was previously possible: from mid-July onwards, the country does not have to be safe in its entirety, either geographically or for all people (in comment, see Peers, 2025). Individuals will also not be required to have an effective link with a third country in order to be returned to another territory (see Art. 59(2) APR). This directly contradicts prior EU case law (discussed in the previous chapter), which will now have to apply the new rules. Nevertheless, it does seem that the designation of a safe country will still need to be subject to judicial review, to enable individuals to argue in court that a certain country is unsafe for them (in CJEU, C-758/24, *Alace*). The fact that an application can be considered inadmissible (meaning that the substance of the case will not be evaluated) when the individual had the opportunity to lodge the application in a third country prior to lodging it in a MS (Art. 38 and 39 of the APR) is also subject to stark criticism. The rejection of an application on the grounds of its inadmissibility will determine that the individual will simply be returned to the third country, where they can submit their application, unless that third country refuses to take them back.

The Pact determines that individuals who should be considered vulnerable should be identified and benefit from special guarantees. However, it no longer automatically exempts them from border procedures; instead, it provides for the option to proceed with these procedures where the guarantees can be met. This introduces complexity into a procedure that is especially swift (Tsourdi, 2024, 25), and will either result in border procedures becoming more expensive and lengthy; that these categories of people will never be able to be processed at the border, if their guarantees are to be respected, but requiring an individual decision to be taken regarding the non-suitability of the border procedure; or that their vulnerability will be exacerbated by the procedures at the border.

The generalized restriction of movement implied by the various Regulations (with sanctions now in place aimed at reducing secondary movements within the Union – see Peers, 2024, for a detailed analysis), as well as the increased use of detention (even though it should be subject to the principle of proportionality *lato sensu*), exacerbates the risk of vulnerable people being detained. This is liable to include minors, as families are no longer exempt from detention, nor are unaccompanied minors who pose a risk to national security or public order. There is an additional concern that MSs will impose a *de facto* detention while characterizing it as a mere restriction of movement (Tsourdi, 2024, 26), therefore imposing migrant detention as the rule, rather than the exception (see the mischaracterization of detention by Hungary, already under the previous legal framework: CJEU, 2020, C-924/19 and C-925-19, *FMS and Others v. Országos Idegenrendészeti Főigazgatóság Dél-alföldi Regionális Igazgatóság*). Detention will also become standard practice for anyone screened at special centers, given the legal fiction of non-entry into the EU territory and the simultaneous obligation to remain at the disposal of national authorities. In this case, since individuals will not be able to

enter the territory of the MS in question, they will effectively be required to remain bound to the premises of the screening center.

The new solidarity mechanisms between MSs are welcome and necessary to alleviate the pressure on the asylum systems and reception conditions of the most impacted MSs. However, their effectiveness will depend on the implementation of these rules (Bruycker, 2024). Their defective or non-implementation can determine not only that these MSs will still predominantly be left alone, but also that their capacity to respond to asylum requests may be impaired, which would have consequences for the fundamental rights of migrants and people in need of international protection. These consequences also affect reception conditions, which depend on the finite resources of host MSs and can lead to the compounded vulnerability of individuals if and when such conditions do not provide the minimum living standards and safety expected of a MS.

With respect to the wide interconnection of information systems and databases, there is a persisting concern regarding racial profiling and national authorities' ample and direct access to information on these systems. Lowering the age from which biometric data can be collected to six years also raises concerns about the compatibility of this rule with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which states that processing is lawful only if the minor is at least 16 years old. The mandatory information now included in these systems and the access granted to national authorities opens the door to mass surveillance across the EU (e.g. through photographs and inserted data), with little control or oversight over the purposes for which the data is accessed. There is also a vast array of security alerts that can be introduced into Eurodac, including a (problematic) alert for illegal crossing of a border.

The CFMR aims to create conditions within the EU that allow for a more effective response to migration "crises". However, the derogations and exceptions it provides for may undermine legal certainty and fundamental rights, while their added benefit is questionable (Neidhardt, 2024). The situations in which it would be applicable (even though the derogations should remain exceptional measures) are themselves uncertain: words such as 'abnormal', 'non-functional', or 'destabilization' provide ample leeway for the EU to make use of this Regulation and its more flexible rules to exempt MSs from fulfilling their usual obligations under the AMMR and APR. The risks to migrants' fundamental rights are evident, as exemplified by the response of some MSs to what they perceive as a (protracted) situation of instrumentalization: by denying access to the border zones – including to NGO's and the media – they preclude civil and judicial scrutiny of the practices and conditions in these zones, where individuals already have the right to claim asylum (see e.g. Neidhardt, 2024, 64). It is also problematic, running counter to good practice, that the personal interview may be omitted in these situations (Art. 14 of the CFMR).

There is a concern that, much like the reintroduction and unlimited extension of internal border controls in the Schengen Area, the derogations and exceptional measures set out in the CFMR could become standard practice in some MSs, thus reintroducing prolonged fragmentation into the CEAS. Even though the maximum

timeframe envisioned is 12 months, this is possible because MSs may be allowed to apply further measures whenever they face several situations covered by the Regulation simultaneously (Recital 25), or a crisis that lasts longer than those 12 months. In such cases, MSs may attempt to extend the use of the CFMR to prolong the state of exception in asylum matters. While NGOs will not be included in the definition of instrumentalization in this Regulation (in principle), there may be a risk that they may need to prove that they did not intend to destabilize the asylum system of the MS in question, raising the question of the continued criminalization of solidarity in the EU.

As mentioned above, the Reception Directive sanctions secondary movements within the EU with reduced or withdrawal of certain conditions, which has the potential to turn an already vulnerable situation into an untenable one, eventually even violating the individuals' fundamental rights. The safeguards envisaged in Art. 23(4) may not be sufficient to avoid the risk of violations, especially since so many refugees already live in precarious conditions under the existing rules.

Finally, the Resettlement Regulation's aim to reduce the number of irregular arrivals by providing legal and safer ways to reach the EU may be undermined by the fact that individuals still do not have the right to request admission to the territory of a MS/ EU.

Conclusions and future prospects

The new pact is definitively a renewed effort to establish a truly common European asylum system, one that attempts to strike a balance between prospective migration to the EU and the European resources to accommodate migrating population. However, there are still many issues that will undoubtedly emerge with the implementation of the new rules on asylum, mainly relating to respect for migrants' fundamental rights.

Legislatively, there are aspects that could be reformed to better reflect best practices; politically, however, reaching an agreement on these rules could be extremely difficult, given the current antagonistic response to migration. Ultimately, it should be remembered that many effective responses to migration lie outside the legislative realm. Most often, this phenomenon will respond to the improvement of living conditions and future prospects in origin countries, rather than restrictive policies whose main aim is to keep migrants out of the EU (preventively or subsequently).

As brilliantly showcased by the recent reluctance of the majority of MSs to stand in solidarity with the most pressured MSs (by preferring to pay not to receive asylum seekers in their territories), the way forward for the EU will continue to rely heavily on restricting irregular arrivals and facilitating returns to third countries. In such a scenario, the fight against migrant smuggling and the externalization of migration management will remain "instrumental for the sustainability of the newly reformed CEAS" (De Leo and Milazzo, 2024, 78). The flexible solidarity mechanisms and an anti-migration European attitude should therefore continue to promote investment into containing arrivals and stronger cooperation with third countries (however detrimental

this may be to the defense of migrants' human rights), in an effort to shift responsibility for evaluating their claims for international protection from the EU to any other country willing to accept those deemed undesirable. Consequently, the EU will continue to empower unreliable partners to challenge, dictate or blackmail European decisions by threatening to 'open the gates' at the border.

However shaky these foundations of the CEAS have proven to be, it appears that the EU's plan is set to continue down the same path. In the recently published European Asylum and Migration Management Strategy (COM (2026) 45 final), the European Commission has confirmed that the externalization of migration control will remain the primary focus. Of the five established priorities, at least three entail the rapid removal (or prevention of arrival) of people from the EU: "Stepping up Migration Diplomacy", "Strong EU borders to enhance control and security", and "More effective return and readmission". A fourth one, "A fair, firm and adaptable asylum and migration system", also involves this to some extent, with the introduction of "innovative aspects" and the firm statement that it "it is Europe that decides who comes to the EU" (EC Press Release, 2026).

The EU has further demonstrated that it will continue to pursue this path with the Proposal for a Regulation establishing a common system for the return of third-country nationals staying illegally in the Union, and repealing Directive 2008/115/EC of the European Parliament and the Council, Council Directive 2001/40/EC and Council Decision 2004/191/EC (COM(2025) 101 final). This Regulation is presumably necessary given the low return rate (20%, as mentioned in the proposal) and the need to return those without a legal right to stay in Europe more effectively and quickly. However, researchers (e.g. Majcher, 2025) and international specialists (e.g. 16 UN rapporteurs, 2026) have voiced grave concerns about this proposal and its new rules, particularly with regard to the protection of human rights. Among new provisions are, notably, rules on the mutual recognition of return decisions (with the introduction of the European Return Order), forced return, the obligation to cooperate and the consequences of non-cooperation, detention, entry bans, the lack of an automatic suspensive effect on appeals, readmission and return hubs (which, as demonstrated globally across jurisdictions, are problematic and often lead to sanctions for States). Concerns revolve around the risk of the violating the *non-refoulement* principle, forced over voluntary returns, the externalization approach to returns, insufficient guarantees for particularly vulnerable people, and the extensive use of detention (and other similar measures intended to restrict movement). In short, experts warn against a dehumanizing new set of rules that goes against European values.

The next chapter will provide insights into the perspectives of those most affected by these policies – namely, asylum seekers and refugees –, in an effort to show that these are not mere abstract rules and decisions; rather, they have a profound impact on the fate and lives of countless people around the globe.

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CHAPTER VI

PERCEPTIONS FROM WITHIN: INSIGHTS FROM IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS WITH ASYLUM SEEKERS

Dr. Vasil Pavlov

Abstract

The current chapter of the monograph is focused on the results of in-depth interviews, conducted among 11 people who are still in procedure of seeking protection in Bulgaria or already have received such (refugee status, humanitarian status, or temporary protection) in the country. Part of the interviews were carried out face to face with the help of professional Arabic translators on 15 October 2025 when 9 people from Syria and Afghanistan were interviewed, and on 17 October 2025 with two individuals from Ukraine who are now benefiting temporary protection in Bulgaria through personal phone calls.

The interviews were based on pre-developed semi-structured questionnaire which included 25 questions, divided into 5 different sections. The purpose of the first section were rather to collect demographic information about the interviewee, it was designed to collect basic data about participants, such as age group, gender, and education background, however in anonymous manner without the requirement of sharing of any personal data. The rest of the sections were closely related to the socio-economic dimensions examined in the monograph – namely the access to: education and training services, financial support, accommodation, and local people attitude towards the very vulnerable group. The analysis in the current chapter is based on the results of the abovementioned interviews carried out by the scientific team of project KII-06-M85/1 “Refugee Processes: Socio-Economic Dimensions in the Contemporary Security Environment”, funded by the Bulgarian National Science Fund at the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Bulgaria.

Keywords: Asylum Seekers Perceptions, In-Depth Interviews, Obstacles Identification.

6.1. Introduction and Literature review

The growing complexity of migratory processes in Bulgaria, particularly in the context of last two distinct refugee inflows to the country, has drawn the attention of many scholars examining these issues. Although such studies in Bulgaria have expanded rapidly, especially after the 2014–2016 refugee crisis, a significant portion of research remains concentrated on structural, policy-oriented, or even host-community perspectives, while the perceptions of the very vulnerable group remain underexplored. Examining newcomers’ personal view on certain socio-economic conditions such as those examined in the current monograph is crucial for clear

understanding of existing problems and formulation of scientifically based and accurate recommendations that are targeted precisely to the most urgent issues.

Although the perspective of refugees themselves is poorly researched in Bulgaria, there are still scientific studies for the purposes of which interviews have been conducted with representatives of the vulnerable group. An example of such a study is that of Koroutchev and Peev (2022) which along with the examination of Bulgaria's role as an entry gate to Europe, explores also the refugees' point of view through interviews which reveal that the immigrants accommodated at the RRC in the city of Harmanli are people fled war, violence, and poverty in their countries of origin and now are seeking safety and better opportunities in Europe. However, the interviewees share that they often face hardship, uncertainty, and social isolation. Their research also incorporates interviews with local people, which highlights the continuing shortcomings of Bulgaria's reception conditions and integration schemes. However, despite the fact that their study contributes to the existing knowledge with qualitative data from a region where the biggest RRC in the country is located, their findings are very limited as the authors have talked just to several immigrants mainly with the intention to understand their story, aims, and experience at the reception center.

Earlier but more in-depth work is that of Nazarska and Hajdinjak (2011), which is a whole book entitled "Migrations, Gender and Intercultural Interactions in Bulgaria". The book extends the migration discourse by incorporating a gendered lens. In their paper the authors conduct in-depth interviews among female Muslim immigrants and mixed families and explore how gender relations and intercultural interactions shape the processes of adaptation and belonging within Bulgaria's landscape. By doing so, the author's approach offers valuable methodological insights and broadens the sociocultural understanding of migration in Bulgaria.

The question of belonging and boundary-making is further developed in Carlsson's (2022) analysis of interactions between local minorities and newly arrived refugees. Drawing on interviews with integration workers and minority organizations, the author elucidates how ethnic, linguistic, and religious boundaries are reproduced and negotiated within Bulgarian society. According to the author, refugees, on the other hand, often encounter exclusionary forms of belonging, which is basically shaped by spatial segregation and institutional neglect. Although the study does not directly foreground refugees' own voices, it offers a crucial conceptual framework for understanding how this exact vulnerable group experience "otherness" in a socio-political environment marked by both post-socialist nationalism and EU border securitization.

In addition, Mancheva & Ivanova (2017) research outlines Bulgaria's institutional and policy frameworks, again identifying the structural weaknesses of its reception and integration systems. Moreover, they also highlight that there is a methodological gap in existing research as just a few studies so far are based on asylum seekers' subjective experiences, despite the crucial role such perspectives play in designing effective policies and interventions. Despite the fact that the authors identify this need and

contribute in practice to understanding the perspective of newcomers by conducting a total of 13 in-depth interviews with asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection, their contribution is minimal and only an exception to the general picture of scientific research on the topic, in which such a perspective is rarely found.

Ethnographic inquiry into the Bulgarian borderlands has been developed most extensively in Nalbantov's (2018) dissertation, entitled "Life at the Southern – Bulgaria Border: Ethnographic Investigation of Socio-Cultural Relations between Minority and Majority Groups, in light of the Refugee 'Crisis'". In his work Nalbantov is trying to investigate how mobility, ethnicity, and border securitization shape intergroup relations in southern Bulgaria. Although asylum seekers appear as part of the landscape, they are not consistently treated as primary narrators of experience. Although the focus of the study is on the border region as a place of contact and tension, it also offers a valuable methodological basis for qualitative research focused on the lived realities of asylum seekers themselves.

Taken together, the existing literature underscores a clear underrepresentation of refugee and asylum-seeker personal perspectives. This is particularly striking given Bulgaria's geopolitical position as an EU external border state and a primary entry point for people fleeing conflict such as these in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and Ukraine. Consequently, there is an urgent need for in-depth, narrative-based research that captures asylum seekers' perceptions from within. By situating the present chapter within this underexplored field, it becomes evident that interviews with asylum seekers are not only methodologically innovative in the Bulgarian context but also necessary. Such an approach can reveal how refugees negotiate belonging, perceive institutional care or neglect, which, subsequently might deal existing problems of the Bulgarian integration system by formulating adequate recommendations addressed to policy makers.

6.2. Methodology

The empirical findings presented in the current chapter of the monograph "Refugee Processes: Socio-Economic Dimensions in the Contemporary Security Environment" are based on a series of semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted with individuals seeking or receiving international protection (namely refugee status, humanitarian status, or temporary protection) in Bulgaria. The qualitative fieldwork encompassed a total of eleven respondents. Nine of these interviews were conducted in person on 15 October 2025 with participants from MENA region, and more specifically Syria and Afghanistan. During the talks, professional Arabic interpreters facilitated the communication. The remaining two interviews were carried out remotely on 17 October 2025 via personal telephone calls with people fleeing the war in Ukraine and currently benefiting from temporary protection in Bulgaria.

For the purposes of the interview, a pre-developed semi-structured questionnaire comprising twenty-five questions organized into five thematic sections have been developed. The purpose of the first section is to collect basic demographic information, including interviewee's age, gender, educational background, current occupation, as well as professional skills and competences. This data was gathered in an anonymous manner, without requiring the disclosure of personal information such as name, contact details, etc. The subsequent four sections addressed key socio-economic dimensions central to the research focus of the current monograph, namely, access to education and vocational training, financial support, accommodation and housing conditions, and perceptions regarding the local people attitudes toward refugees and asylum seekers as a particularly vulnerable group.

All interviews were conducted and analyzed by the research team of Project KII-06-M85/1 "Refugee Processes: Socio-Economic Dimensions in the Contemporary Security Environment", funded by the Bulgarian National Science Fund under the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Bulgaria.

6.3. Demographic Profile of the Participants

The demographic profile of the participants in the conducted interviews among individuals who are seeking or receiving protection in Bulgaria has been clarified in the very first section of the semi-structured questionnaire. According to the results, the group represents a diverse age, gender, educational background, and current employment status of the interviewees, which guarantees reliability of the data obtained. However, despite this diversity, certain inequalities emerge that reflect broader socio-economic trends among refugees and individuals benefiting from temporary protection in Bulgaria.

Regarding the age structure, the respondents' age varies from seventeen to forty-two years, encompassing young people, middle aged ones, as well as early-to-middle adulthood. More specifically, it should be mentioned that the majority of participants – Afghans and Syrians, are predominantly young males (5 out of 9 representatives). The rest of them are respectively two females aged 32, 39, and 42, as well as a male aged 33. The predominant representation of young male refugees from the Middle East also corresponds to the official Eurostat (2025) data, according to which males represent 87% of all first-time asylum seekers in Bulgaria as of 2024, fact that is also valid for broader European asylum dynamics, as on EU level their share is 67%. The remaining interviewees were women from Ukraine aged respectively 20 and 42 years of age, suggesting that within Ukrainian refugees, women are more prominently represented. The last statement is proved by official Eurostat (2025a) data according to which 59% of the Ukrainian citizens benefiting from temporary protection in the EU are women, and on a national level in Bulgaria their share is 56% as of August 2025.

Educational background among the respondents also varies considerably. The younger male Syrian and Afghan participants typically possess only basic education, having completed primary school before their displacement interrupted their studies. In contrast, the older interviewees from Middle East region demonstrate significantly higher levels of education. Two women, aged 32 and 42 respectively, report holding university degrees, one in architecture and another with a bachelor's qualification but not specifying specialty, while an additional male participant has completed secondary education. One of the Ukrainian respondents – women aged 20, reports having secondary education, and the other aged 42 – higher educational background. These variations suggest that educational background is closely linked to both age and country of origin, revealing unequal opportunities for education across different conflict and post-conflict approach.

On the other hand, employment status among the participants further illustrates the complexity and diversity between education, gender, and socio-economic inclusion opportunities and barriers. The young male participants from Syria and Afghanistan are predominantly unemployed or engaged in manual or service-based occupations, such as construction work, carpentry, and hairdressing. The adult respondents, in contrast, exhibit a more diverse range of professional experiences. The 32-year-old woman with a bachelor's degree has acquired multiple professional specializations, including hairdressing, tailoring, and sports training, which together demonstrate a considerable experience and skills diversification. Another female respondent, an architect by education, currently works as a translator while supplementing her income with informal service work such as sewing and hairdressing.

The Ukrainian participant, on the other hand, also report active employment, one in the service sector and the other combining work with university studies. Their relatively stable economic situations may be attributed to the more favorable administrative conditions of the European Union's temporary protection policy and measures, which facilitates quicker access to the labor market for Ukrainian nationals.

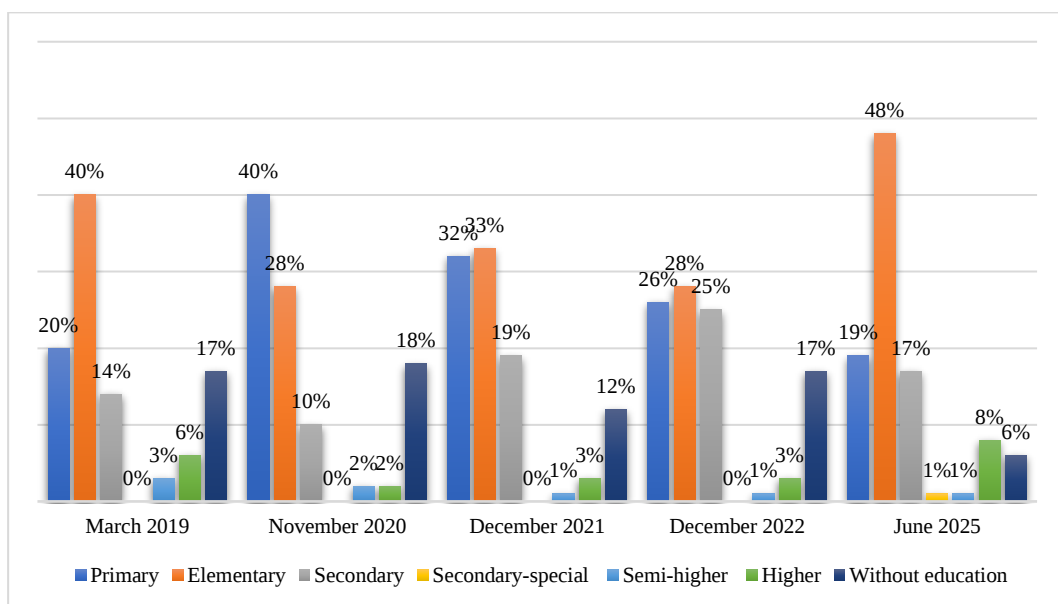
Taken together, these findings reveal a complex demographic and socio-economic picture. The predominance of young male refugees from the Middle East with limited education corresponds to patterns of early labor market entry and low-skilled employment, while the profiles of older female respondents reveal both higher educational background and greater availability of professional opportunities. The Ukrainian respondents appear somewhat better integrated into the Bulgarian labor market, a difference that highlights the decisive role of institutional frameworks and legal status in shaping refugees' socio-economic inclusion. Overall, the analysis underscores the intersection of age, gender, and country of origin in defining the educational and employment trajectories of refugees in Bulgaria, and points to the broader structural challenges of interrupted education, limited labor mobility, and skill underutilization within refugee communities.

6.4. Perceptions regarding access to specific socio-economic services

6.4.1. Access to education

Education is a fundamental element in the integration process of immigrants, especially those from vulnerable groups such as asylum seekers who have been forcibly displaced due to armed conflict or political persecution in their countries of origin. The task of the host country becomes even more complex when newcomers have low or no educational qualifications, which is explained by the involuntary and often rapid departure from their homelands. In fact, most asylum seekers in Bulgaria have only primary or elementary education at the time of applying for asylum, while those with higher or semi-higher education were less than 10% in all the years considered. More detailed structure of the educational background of people seeking asylum in Bulgaria for certain years between 2019 and 2025 is presented in Figure 6.1.

Figure 6.1. Education degree of asylum seekers over the age of 14 in the Republic of Bulgaria



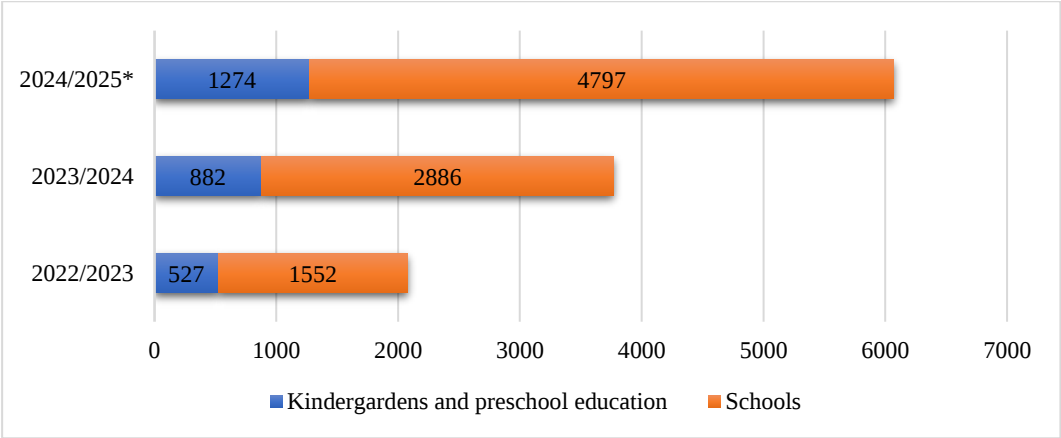
Source: State Agency for Refugees, 2025

Such data may be interpreted as a major challenge for Bulgaria, as the low level of education attained by most asylum seekers suggests that the state will have to make significant efforts to include in the Bulgarian education system those granted international protection to make their integration in social and economic terms more likely. Concerning this, it is worth mentioning that years of schooling and educational attainment of parents may substantially affect children's educational and behavioural outcomes, hence, the host state should introduce measures aimed at breaking such

“intergenerational social and societal chains of deprivation” (Hartonen et al., 2021: 33). The available data shows that the current levels of their enrolment are very low, as the total number of children seeking or receiving international protection enrolled in preschool education and schools in Bulgaria in the period 2015-2024 is 1 195 out of 34 560 (Ministry of Education and Sciences of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2025), which is approximately 3.5% of all. This raises concerns about the accessibility, outreach, and capacity of the country’s education system to address the needs of refugees and asylum-seekers.

The political will and targeted state measures are indeed of great importance, as evidenced in the case of Ukrainian citizens in Bulgaria (Figure 6.2.). Over the 2022–2023, 2023–2024, and 2024–2025 school years, that is, since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, their total number in schools amounted to 9 235, while another 2 683 Ukrainian children were enrolled in kindergartens. Whereas factors such as linguistic similarities and cultural affinity between Bulgarians and Ukrainians may facilitate integration to some extent, the decisive element should be found in the robust institutional support extended specifically to beneficiaries of temporary protection from Ukraine and endorsed both at the national and EU levels.

Figure 6.2. Information on the number of children receiving temporary protection enrolled in preschool education in kindergartens and schools in the country between 2022–2024



*As of 17 October 2024

Source: Ministry of Education and Sciences

Yet, the school enrolment rate in Bulgaria among Ukrainians is only around 7%, which can be considered low and insufficient in absolute terms. In addition, the number of Ukrainian citizens under the age of 18 who are benefiting from temporary protection in Bulgaria strongly varies. In October 2022, that is, right after the beginning of the school year in the country, their number was 52 215, in October 2023 – 57 305, while

in October 2024, the number dropped sharply to 16 850 (Eurostat, 2025). The initial increase likely reflects the ongoing displacement due to the war in Ukraine, while the sharp decline may indicate voluntary returns, onward migration to other EU countries, or changes in the international protection status.

At the same time, it should be noted that it is not known how many (if any) Ukrainians granted temporary international protection in Bulgaria are enrolled in an online form of education, hosted by Ukrainian state institutions, and due to this, they do not attend Bulgarian schools. Nonetheless, we argue that even with the current state targeted measures, the Bulgarian education system does not meet the needs of the beneficiaries of international protection in the country, and thus, the very state cannot seize all the economic and social opportunities that thousands of young people can bring to it.

In order to identify the obstacles and reasons for the low inclusion of people in the educational system in Bulgaria for the purposes of this monograph, the participants in the eleven in-depth interviews were also asked key questions that cut across this social aspect. Among the questions they were asked were whether they found the educational opportunities provided to them to be successful, what educational service they found to be the most important (vocational, language or other type of training), how often and by which organizations such services are offered to them.

In this regard, it is important to note that among the majority of those interviewed, there is a perception that the informed educational and training opportunities in Bulgaria are good. For all participants from countries in the Near and Middle East, the main and most significant educational service is language training. Among the answers that people from Afghanistan and Syria give to the question “What educational service do you think is the main thing to receive in order to be able to integrate successfully?” are:

“The language, so that I can integrate into society”, as well as

“The language, because I have 4 children who need to go to school”

Regarding the frequency of offering educational and training services in the RRCs, all 9 participants from the Near and Middle East stated that such initiatives are relatively rare and rather than regular and frequent. The participants, as mentioned above, were also asked what kind of organizations are involved in the organization and implementation of such activities, with the most frequent answers being non-governmental or international organizations, rather than initiatives of the social workers working in the centers themselves.

The two Ukrainians who took part in the interview, however, are strikingly of the opposite opinion. From their answers related to the study opportunities in the country, it is clear that they find them to be successful. Moreover, as mentioned, one of the interviewees is a 20-year-old student who works in parallel with her academic studies. When asked if she is satisfied with the conditions in Bulgaria, she shared the following:

“They are great, I appreciate positively that I have the opportunity to study, to be at a university, to use dormitories, so yes, the conditions are good.”

On the other hand, if the participants from the Near and Middle East share that for them the most important thing is language learning, this does not apply to the Ukrainians, probably due to the fact that the Ukrainian language belongs to the same language group as the Bulgarian one and for the recipients of temporary protection in Bulgaria, such as people from Ukraine, it is much easier to master the local language, without the need for additional intensive courses. In this regard, as a fundamental aspect and subject of training, the same Ukrainian woman indicates that she needs:

“Rather, professional skills, since the language is learned by communicating with the locals.”

In conclusion it should be mentioned that the educational integration of people seeking or receiving international protection in Bulgaria faces fundamental challenges, that are driven predominantly by low initial levels of educational attainment, limited enrolment of children in the national school system, and insufficiently coordinated institutional support. While the experience of Ukrainian refugees demonstrates that targeted state policies can significantly improve access and outcomes, overall enrolment rates among all groups remain low, preventing Bulgaria from fully leveraging the social and economic potential of young newcomers. Insights from the interviews further confirm that language acquisition and regular, accessible training opportunities, particularly for those coming from the Near and Middle East are essential, however inconsistently provided. What is more, such people often rely on external rather than state-led initiatives. To ensure meaningful long-term integration. In this regard, Bulgarian authorities must strengthen its educational outreach, align support measures across all refugee groups, and invest in systematic language and vocational training as core components of its integration policy.

6.4.2. Access to financial support

Along with access to education and various types of training, another aspect covered in the semi-structured questionnaire used for the interviews among the target group is that related to the financial support that people seeking or receiving protection on the territory of the country can or have benefited from. From the analysis of the qualitative results obtained, it is clear that there is again some division and to a certain extent privileging of people coming from Ukraine. The five 17-year-old participants from the Middle East are unanimous and indicate that they received financial support in the amount of BGN 20, which is far from enough to cover any social and household needs. Furthermore, in response to the question “Do you know where to look for information about financial support opportunities in Bulgaria?” not only they, but all participants

from this particular region shared that such information was not shared with them either by people working in the RRCs, or by external organizations with whom they communicated in relation to their education and training, as became clear from the previous section.

It is important to clarify that older participants from the Near and Middle East give more comprehensive answers to the same questions. For example, one of the interviewees, a 42-year-old woman, to the question “Have you received financial support while you are in Bulgaria?” answers the following:

“I have not received any financial support, I receive humanitarian support once, but in the form of one, they also provide clothes, but they do not even consider whether we need men's or women's clothes, sizes, etc.”

Evidence of the imbalance and privileging of certain nationalities seeking or receiving protection in the country by the state lies precisely in the answers of the two Ukrainian women who took part in the interviews. Despite everything, it should be noted that they, as well as people coming from the Near and Middle East, indicated that they received financial support once. Opinions regarding whether it was sufficient are diverse, as the 20-year-old student indicates that the amount was rather insufficient to cover basic needs, while the older participant finds it adequate. An important clarification is the amount of the one-time free financial support provided by the Bulgarian authorities, which is clear from the answer of the younger participant, namely:

“I don't remember what the exact amount was, but around BGN 200.”

In general, the analysis of the data indicates significant inconsistencies in the financial support provided to people seeking or receiving protection in Bulgaria. Participants from the Near and Middle East consistently reported receiving only minimal assistance, in most cases a one-time payment of BGN 20 or none at all, which they viewed as entirely insufficient to meet even their most basic needs. Equally concerning is the unanimous acknowledgment that they were not informed about other potential opportunities for financial assistance, whether by staff in the reception centers or by external organizations.

By contrast, Ukrainian beneficiaries of temporary protection in the country noted that they are receiving one-time financial support as well, but much higher – approximately BGN 200, which, while still perceived as insufficient by some, represents a much better form of assistance. This discrepancy reflects wider patterns of state and EU prioritization of Ukrainian refugees, resulting in a de facto two-tier system of support. The qualitative data therefore suggests that current financial aid mechanisms are neither equitable nor fully responsive to the diverse needs of protection seekers in the country.

6.4.3. Attitudes to accommodation

In each group of questions, the interviewees were asked questions regarding the conditions in the registration and reception centers and the overall opportunities for finding housing for people seeking or receiving protection in the country. An important clarification here is that Ukrainians have the opportunity to benefit from accommodation in state-run holiday centers, as mentioned on the official government website containing information about Ukrainian citizens in Bulgaria (Bulgaria for Ukraine, 2025). It is for this reason that people of such nationality are not accommodated in the RRCs, which is another privilege, along with access to and the amount of financial assistance. Given the fact that they cannot assess the conditions in the centers since they have not stayed in them, the interviewed Ukrainians were asked whether they were able to easily find housing, to which they answered positively, and the younger 20-year-old participant shared:

“After my arrival, I started studying and was accommodated in a dormitory. I appreciate the fact that I have the opportunity to study, to be at a university, to use dormitories, so yes, the conditions are good.”

On the other hand, all participants in the interviews from the Near and Middle East state that they benefit from accommodation in the RRCs of the State Agency for Refugees. However, they all unite around the statement that the conditions are not good. Despite the poor conditions that they declare through their answers, all 9 interviewees from Syria and Afghanistan state that they feel safe and secure in the center, which is understandable given the deteriorated security environment in their countries of origin.

Specifically, participants described their negative experiences in the centers, stating that the food and the provision of basic services, such as hygiene and heating, were categorically inadequate and incompatible with normal living conditions. Furthermore, two of the participants – a 33-year-old man and a 42-year-old woman – shared that the center where they were accommodated had a chronic pest problem, stating the following:

“The conditions are very bad, there are cockroaches and bedbugs.”

“The conditions are bad; my son's whole body is bitten by bedbugs.”

Despite this generally negative experience, two of the 17-year-old participants also share positive impressions of their stay at the center. Both point to the responsiveness of the social workers in the RRC where they are housed as an advantage, sharing the following:

“The employees are very caring and well-intentioned towards me.”

“The employees are very responsive to me.”

Based on the analysis, a clear division between the experiences of Ukrainians and those arriving from the Near and Middle East regarding accommodation and reception conditions in Bulgaria can be observed. On one hand, the Ukrainians benefit from distinct institutional privileges, and more specifically access to state-run holiday centers and student dormitories, which not only remove the need for accommodation in RRCs but also provide easier and more convenient access to housing, education, and financial support.

Conversely, people seeking or receiving international protection from Near and Middle East countries report uniformly poor material conditions within the RRCs. While they acknowledge feeling safe, the descriptions of inadequate food, insufficient hygiene and heating, and persistent pest infestations indicate systemic shortcomings that undermine basic living standards. The negative experiences shared by adult participants underscore these deficiencies, though it is noteworthy that a small number of younger interviewees highlight the supportive behavior of social workers as a positive experience.

Overall, the findings illustrate a marked disparity in reception conditions based on nationality and protection. Ukrainian's experience facilitated access to dignified housing and services, while those from countries such as Syria and Afghanistan face structurally inferior conditions despite feeling physically secure. This discrepancy points to unequal treatment within the reception system, revealing the need for more consistent standards to ensure humane and equitable accommodation for all individuals seeking asylum in the Republic of Bulgaria.

6.4.4. Attitudes of local population

The last aspect explored in the interviews conducted among people seeking or granted protection in Bulgaria is the attitude of the local community towards them. Among the questions that were asked to the interviewees were related to how they would rate the overall attitude of the locals towards them, whether they received any help or support from a local, and whether they encountered any discriminatory and disrespectful practices towards them by the locals.

On the first question of this section, related to the overall sense of continuity, it is important to note that all the participants in the interviews defined the attitude of the locals towards them as generally positive. Moreover, some of the representatives from Syria and Afghanistan shared that they were able to establish contacts with people from the local community, which in itself indicates certain levels of social inclusion. Despite these generally positive impressions, the participants also shared negative experiences in their communication with local people. Examples of this are:

“Although the society as a whole is well-intentioned, sometimes there are signs of disrespect towards me.”

“Although society as a whole is well-intentioned, sometimes there are acts of disrespect towards me.”

“Sometimes there is discrimination and disrespect towards me.”

“Very often I am refused housing when I am looking for a rental, most say that they do not want to rent to a refugee.”

The perceptions of both Ukrainian citizens who took part in the interview are similar. They confirm their positive experience from communication with local people, but nevertheless, the 20-year-old Ukrainian citizen benefiting from temporary protection in Bulgaria shares the following:

“It is relative, as I think it is in every country. At first, the locals were more sympathetic towards us, they sympathized with the problem of the Ukrainian refugees, but now they seem to be more distant. I avoid saying that I am from Ukraine, because I don't know what the reaction will be – whether they will support me or ask me why you are in Bulgaria. People think that the state supports Ukrainians, but I personally work, study and take care of my own living.”

In general, the findings reveal that, while people seeking or receiving protection in Bulgaria generally perceive the local community's attitude as positive, this overall impression is tempered to some extent by negative experiences of subtle and overt discrimination. Participants from Syria and Afghanistan report instances of social inclusion, such as establishing contacts with locals, suggesting that integration at the interpersonal level is possible. However, their accounts also highlight moments of disrespect, discriminatory behavior, and in some cases explicit rejection, particularly in the housing market, where being identified as a refugee often results in denied rental opportunities.

Similarly, Ukrainian participants describe a predominantly positive attitudes but note a shift over time. Initial sympathy linked to the outbreak of the war has, according to one interviewee, given way to a more distant or uncertain response from locals. This ambivalence has led to self-censorship regarding their nationality, driven partly by misconceptions about the level of state support Ukrainians receive.

Overall, the analysis suggests that while the atmosphere in Bulgaria is broadly welcoming, refugees and beneficiaries of temporary protection continue to encounter prejudice rooted in stereotypes, misinformation, and socio-economic tensions. Positive interactions coexist with subtle barriers and interpersonal discrimination, reflecting a complex social environment in which acceptance is present but not uniform, and in which vulnerabilities persist regardless of nationality.

Conclusion

In conclusion it should be mentioned that empirical analysis conducted within this chapter provides a comprehensive understanding of key socio-economic aspects (access to education, financial support, accommodation, and local people's attitudes) experienced by individuals seeking or receiving international protection in Bulgaria. Drawing on eleven semi-structured interviews with people from Syria and Afghanistan, as well as Ukrainian citizens benefiting from temporary protection, the findings reveal a complex perception shaped by demographic characteristics, institutional frameworks, and broader policy environments.

First, the demographic data indicates clear structural differences between participants. Young men from the Middle East report low levels of formal education and limited professional experience. In contrast, the Ukrainian respondents, both women, report higher levels of education and more stable employment. These differences further highlight that age, gender, and country of origin significantly influence access to education, employment trajectories, and integration potential.

Second, access to education and vocational training presents persistent challenges. For Syrians and Afghans, language acquisition is viewed as essential yet insufficiently supported, with opportunities offered irregularly and primarily through NGOs, international or external organizations rather than state institutions. Low education system enrolment rates further demonstrate systemic shortcomings in educational outreach. Although Ukrainians report more positive experiences, the overall picture remains one of limited institutional capacity, fragmented provision, and underutilization of the human capital that young refugees bring to the host country.

On the other hand, financial support mechanisms also appear to be disproportionate and not in line with the needs of individual nationalities. Refugees from the Near and Middle East report minimal financial assistance and rare information about available support. Meanwhile, Ukrainian participants received considerably higher payments and benefited from more structured financial assistance frameworks.

Fourth, a remarkable contrast in housing and reception conditions further illustrates these inequalities. Ukrainians, exempt from placement in RRCs, benefit from access to state-run holiday facilities and student dormitories. In comparison, interviewees from the Middle and Near East, accommodated in RRCs describe substandard living conditions marked by inadequate hygiene, poor food provision, and even pest infestations. These findings underscore systemic deficiencies in reception standards and point to the urgent need for harmonized and humane accommodation policies.

The last aspect related to perceptions of local community attitudes reveal a generally welcoming environment tempered by recurring experiences of discrimination. While many participants report positive interactions and emerging social ties, both Syrian/Afghan and Ukrainian respondents describe moments of disrespect, social distance. In this regard, it could be stated that these mixed experiences reflect broader lack of systematic community engagement and public awareness.

Taken together, the interviews' findings demonstrate that Bulgaria's integration system is characterized by significant structural disparities, inconsistent state support, and varying outcomes across refugee groups. While specific policies, predominantly aimed at Ukrainian citizens who are benefiting temporary protection in Bulgaria have shown that rapid, effective integration measures are possible, the experience of those coming from the Middle East highlights persistent gaps in aspects examined. In addition, the social environment, though broadly positive, remains fragile and shaped by fluctuating public perceptions.

Overall, the chapter's evidence underscores the need for Bulgaria to adopt a more coherent, equitable, and long-term integration strategy, one that standardizes support across all protection categories, strengthens institutional capacity, expands language and vocational training, and improves material conditions in reception centers. Only through such comprehensive measures can Bulgaria fully harness the socio-economic potential of newcomers who are benefiting protection and ensure their meaningful participation in society, while upholding the principles of fairness, dignity, and protection that lie at the core of international humanitarian commitments.

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CHAPTER VII

SOCIO-ECONOMIC INTEGRATION OF ASYLUM SEEKERS IN BULGARIA: EXPERT INSIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Dr. Vasil Pavlov

Abstract

The current chapter is focused on the analysis of the results of expert survey, conducted between 28 May and 4 June 2025 among 53 experts, directly or indirectly engaged in the management of mixed migration flows in the Republic of Bulgaria. Among the specialists, who took part in the survey are representing state institutions among which SAR with the CoM, the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, as well as non-governmental organizations, academic institutions, and international organizations. The survey is focused on four key socio-economic dimensions, namely access to education and training, allocation of financial resources, housing opportunities and conditions, and public attitudes.

The results reveal challenges in the Bulgarian asylum management system, including lack of support for language acquisition, underfunding of services such as education and training, bad reception infrastructure, and low levels of public awareness. At the same time, for each aspect experts highlight some possibilities for reform, where measures are most urgently needed.

Keywords: Expert Survey, Perceptions among Specialists, Reform Opportunities.

7.1. Introduction and Literature Review

Migration issues have become particularly relevant since 2015, a fact that was confirmed in the previous chapters of this monograph. Migration issues have become particularly relevant since 2015, a fact that was confirmed in the previous chapters of this monograph. In order to identify the challenges and formulate sound, scientifically based recommendations, researchers rely on various methods, one of which is expert research, which is based on a survey of the opinions of specialists with proven experience in the researched issue.

In this regard, it is worth mentioning that some studies focused on migration issues, conducted in Bulgaria also relies on expert assessments. An example of application of expert knowledge could be found in the Bulgarian Migration Report, which integrates evaluations from policymakers, NGO practitioners, and sector specialists to analyze the socio-economic and demographic forces shaping migration (Kostadinova et al., 2005). Rather than relying solely on quantitative indicators, the report synthesizes professional assessments to explain labor-market trends, policy inconsistencies, and the broader

governance environment. This emphasis on practitioner insight demonstrates the value of expert-based approaches in identifying gaps that remain invisible in aggregate data.

Another similar example is the study of Erolova (2019) that examines refugee integration in Bulgaria through qualitative insights drawn from social workers, local administrators, and NGO staff. In her analysis the author illustrates how experts perceive systemic weaknesses, particularly in reception capacity, administrative coordination, and communication between institutions. On the other hand, Nazarska and Hajdinjak (2011) also rely significantly on expert viewpoints, including those of cultural mediators, researchers, and community leaders, to analyze how gender and intercultural dynamics influence the integration of migrants in Bulgaria. Their findings show that stakeholders with hands-on experience often identify structural gendered barriers and cultural misunderstandings that are not captured in policy documents. This aligns with the argument that expert assessments offer a crucial interpretive layer for understanding socio-cultural dimensions of integration.

Studies that examine migration and integration beyond Bulgaria further highlight the significance of the results, obtained from expert method. For instance, Horvat (2019), in a comparative study of the refugee crisis in former Yugoslav states, demonstrates how expert assessments are essential in policy environments marked by uncertainty, politicization, and institutional fragmentation. The study shows that professionals in NGOs, international organizations, and state institutions play a key role in shaping responses, yet their knowledge is often underutilized. This insight mirrors many of the challenges identified by Bulgarian experts in the current survey, particularly regarding coordination, funding, and evidence-based policymaking.

Sector-specific research also relies on professional assessments to identify systemic barriers. Kotsioni et al. (2022), studying access to healthcare services for asylum seekers in Romania, derive their conclusions from expert interviews with healthcare workers, administrators, and social-service providers. Their findings underscore how professionals' subjective evaluations can reveal obstacles such as administrative complexity, language barriers, and insufficient institutional support that align with similar patterns reported by experts in the Bulgarian context.

To sum up with, it should be mentioned that the current literature review does not cover all the existing studies that rely on expert method in order to solve migration issues, its purpose is rather to prove its application advantages in such matters. It also aims to demonstrate that expert-based methodologies are central to understanding migration governance and integration practices not only in Bulgaria but on regional level. In the examples shared above experts provide indispensable insights into the socio-economic, administrative, and cultural dimensions of migration processes, often pinpointing issues that quantitative data alone cannot illuminate. The present chapter builds directly on this tradition by employing an expert survey to assess perceptions of education, financial resources and their distribution, housing capacity and living conditions, as well as public attitudes, thereby contributing to an established methodological approach in the field.

7.2. Methodology

The analysis presented in this chapter is based on an expert survey conducted between 28 May and 4 June 2025 as part of the project KII-06-M85/1 “Refugee Processes: Socio-Economic Dimensions in the Contemporary Security Environment”, funded by the Bulgarian National Science Fund. The survey targeted specialists directly or indirectly engaged in the management of mixed migration flows in the Republic of Bulgaria. A total of 53 experts, representing state institutions such as SAR with the CoM, the Ministry of Interior, and the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, as well as non-governmental organizations, academic institutions, international organizations, and individual practitioners participated.

The questionnaire consisted of both closed and open-ended questions and examined four socio-economic aspects, namely: access to education and training, distribution of financial resources, housing conditions and reception capacity, and local community attitudes. The survey also collected demographic information to contextualize expert assessments, including institutional affiliation, duration of professional experience, degree of direct contact with asylum seekers, and specific areas of expertise.

Data were analyzed descriptively, with graphical representations used where appropriate to illustrate key results visually. Open-ended responses were examined through thematic content analysis to capture recurrent patterns and deeper insights into systemic challenges and opportunities for reform. Together, these methodological components provide a comprehensive foundation for assessing expert perceptions of Bulgaria’s asylum and integration system and for identifying areas requiring targeted policy intervention.

7.3. Expert Assessment of the Access to Specific Socio-Economic Services

7.3.1. Demographic Profile of the Experts Surveyed

The demographic profile of the 53 participants in the expert survey reflects that the people taking part in the it are professionals, affiliated with different background and direct or indirect connection with individuals seeking or receiving protection. A bigger part of the specialists indicate that they are part of state institutions – 58% of the sample, followed by respondents from higher education or research institutions, representing approximately 25%. Smaller proportions of participants are drawn from the private sector, non-governmental organizations, international organizations, and individual practitioners, such as lawyers. This composition shows that the survey primarily captures perspectives from public authorities, which may account for the emphasis on administrative and policy-related insights in the responses, while the views of NGOs and private sector stakeholders are comparatively underrepresented.

Regarding the direct relevance of participants’ work to the migration and refugee issue, 24 respondents reported that their professional activities are directly related to

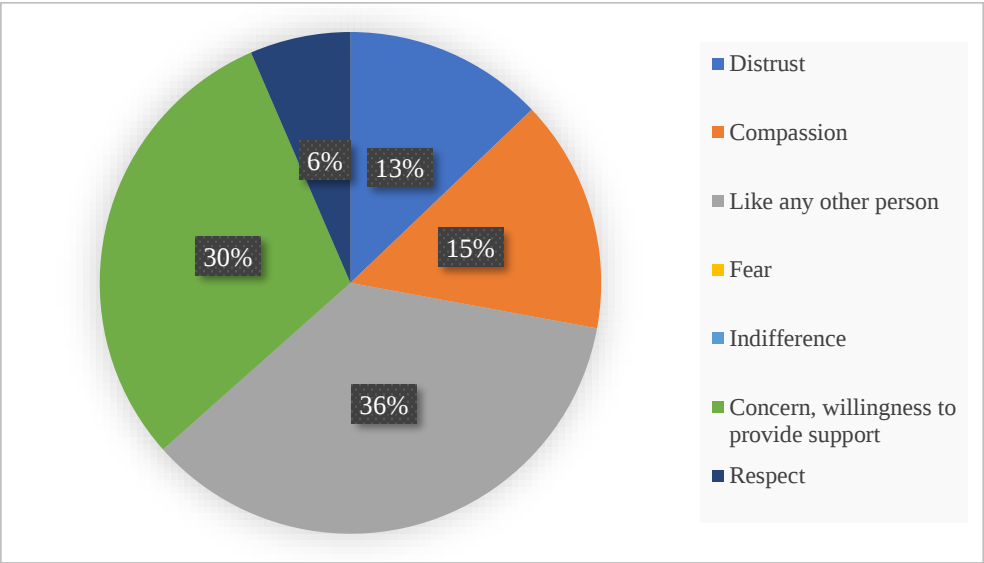
the research topic, whereas 29 indicated that their work is rather indirectly connected with this problem. This distribution suggests that while nearly half of the experts possess practical experience in the field, the remaining participants contribute perspectives grounded in broader policy, research, or administrative roles, providing a combination of experiential and structural insights.

In terms of the socio-economic aspects most closely aligned with participants' professional responsibilities, the survey reveals a concentration on access to education and training, distribution of financial resources, and accommodation opportunities. These areas were identified respectively by 15, 11, and 9 respondents. The duration of the experts' professional experience is another aspect examined in the demographic section. In this regard it should be mentioned that the majority of them report less than five years of involvement, while fewer respondents indicated experience ranging from five to ten years, eleven to fifteen years, or more than fifteen years.

On the other hand, a substantial proportion of respondents, 34 out of 53, reported having direct contact with individuals seeking or receiving protection, whereas 18 indicated no direct contact, and one was uncertain of the origin of the foreigners. This indicates that the majority of experts possess firsthand exposure to the population under study, enhancing the practical validity of their insights regarding needs, service provision, and challenges.

Contrary to public opinion, experts' opinions on the last question in the demographic section, related to how they would characterize their attitude towards the vulnerable group (people seeking or receiving protection), are presented graphically in Figure 7.1.

Figure 7.1. How would you specifically characterize your attitude towards the vulnerable group?



Source: Own survey

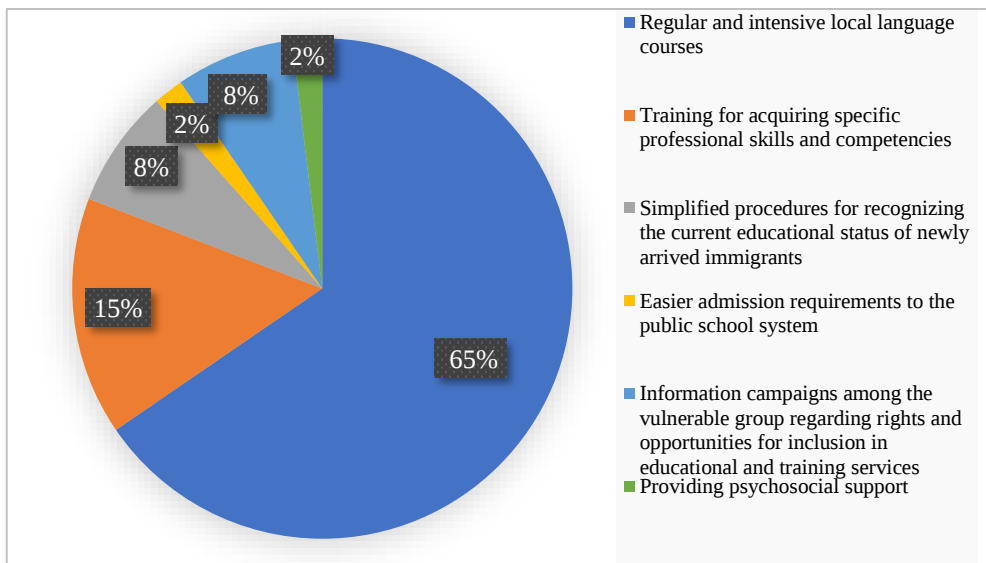
The results of this question clearly show that the majority of experts show rather positive feelings and emotions towards people with refugee backgrounds. The largest part of the respondents – 32.1% are of the opinion that they should treat newcomers like any other person, 26.4% are concerned about them and show readiness to provide help and support, just over 13% show sympathy, and nearly 6% feel respect for the situation such people find themselves in. In addition to these positive answers, it is also important to note that options such as fear, hatred or indifference were not chosen by any of the respondents.

7.3.2. Access to Educational and Training Services

The expert survey, conducted under project KII-06-M85/1 “Refugee Processes: Socio-Economic Dimensions in the Contemporary Security Environment” offers a multidimensional perspective on the access of people seeking or receiving protection in Bulgaria to different socio-economic services, among which is the access to education and vocational training. The main objective of the analysis is to reveal systemic challenges, but also to indicate areas where targeted interventions could yield substantial improvements.

In the field of education and vocational training, the findings highlight a fragmented perceptions among participating specialists. The prioritization of language acquisition courses (65% of responses), along with acquiring professional skills and competences (15%) underscore the key role of linguistic and proficiencies integration as both a prerequisite and catalyst for socio-economic inclusion. The rest of the educational and/or training opportunities that experts classify as most important for the successful integration of newcomers are presented on Figure 7.2.

Figure 7.2. Which of the following educational and/or training services is most important for the successful integration of newcomers?



Source: Own survey

Along with the most important services for successful integration of newcomers, the experts also were asked to identify key fields where educational barriers for people seeking or receiving protection occur. In this regard, more than 50% of the participating experts state that lack of adequate Bulgarian language acquisition system represents a fundamental obstacle for successful integration. To the same question, some experts add the following:

“The language situation for adults is deplorable and they rely entirely on NGO projects, the recommendation is that the state offer language courses at a greatly reduced price (BGN 30 per month or free). The situation is similar for children – the Ministry of Education and Science provides additional Bulgarian lessons under the Regulation, but the number is not enough, and they are only for the first year, which is insufficient for older children. Otherwise, if they know the language – there is access.”

“Different categories have different challenges. In general – for all categories of refugees – with international protection and with temporary protection (Ukrainians), the challenge is learning Bulgarian at levels B1/B2 – which they need to participate in various educational and training services.”

Other challenges highlighted by experts include long-lasting administrative procedures, a lack of individual motivation both among newcomers and responsible state institutions, and the overall absence of targeted informational and awareness-raising campaigns on the subject.

In addition to key barriers and obstacles, experts were also asked to identify specific measures that can help resolve the identified problems. In connection with the fact that they identify the lack of appropriate educational measures for learning the local language, most of their recommendations are precisely in the direction of active state policy, to some extent even mandating the learning of the Bulgarian language as a matter of urgency after their arrival. Specific answers supporting this are:

“Requirement (by SAR with the CoM) for mandatory completion of a Bulgarian language course at a minimum level of A1 and A2 for all international protection seekers and those granted temporary protection.”

“To provide for deadlines in the legislative system for the person granted protection to submit a document on language and professional skills.”

“The state should further commit to stimulating them by providing them with qualifications and requalification and providing them with jobs. This could be a measure that would provide a workforce for sectors where there is a shortage of such.”

Other strategic recommendations include digitalization of administrative processes, which, in expert's view can reduce bureaucratic complexity, more transparent interactions with public institutions, which can foster easier access to information platforms for legal, social, and economic support. The combination and full-scale implementations of measures such as mandatory language and skills training, digitally accessible public services can lead to not only accelerate integration outcomes but also social cohesion, reduced risk of marginalization, and an overall sense of belonging and mutual responsibility between immigrants and host society.

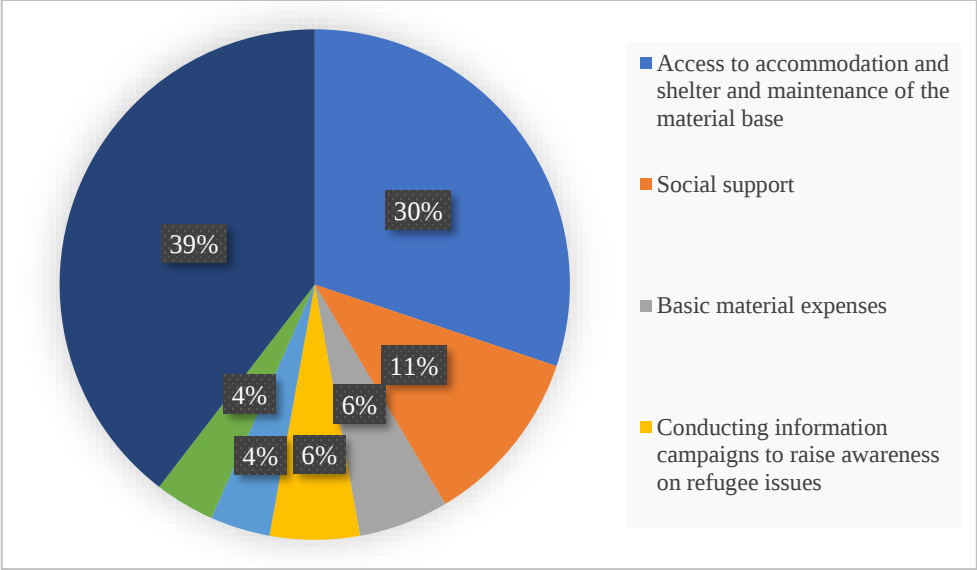
7.3.3. Distribution of Financial Resources

The allocation and provision of sustainable funding for integration initiatives and access to financial support of people seeking or receiving protection in Bulgaria is the second aspect in the expert survey. The issue of whether financial resources are being allocated adequately constitutes the first question in this section of the questionnaire. When analyzing the results of this question, it can be mentioned that many experts do not appear to demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of how these resources are being distributed. A possible reason for that lack of understanding and knowledge in this aspect is the fact that majority of them are not directly engaged in budgetary or financial decision-making processes. This is understandable given the fact that in the Republic of Bulgaria, the Parliament is the institution that votes on the state budget, therefore distributing public resources in various directions, and the survey does not include respondents from the National Assembly.

The second question in this section is related to which service offered to those seeking or receiving protection in the Republic of Bulgaria has the most noticeable lack of funding. In this regard, Figure 7.3. offers a more detailed information of the particular services within the system that require the greatest financial attention.

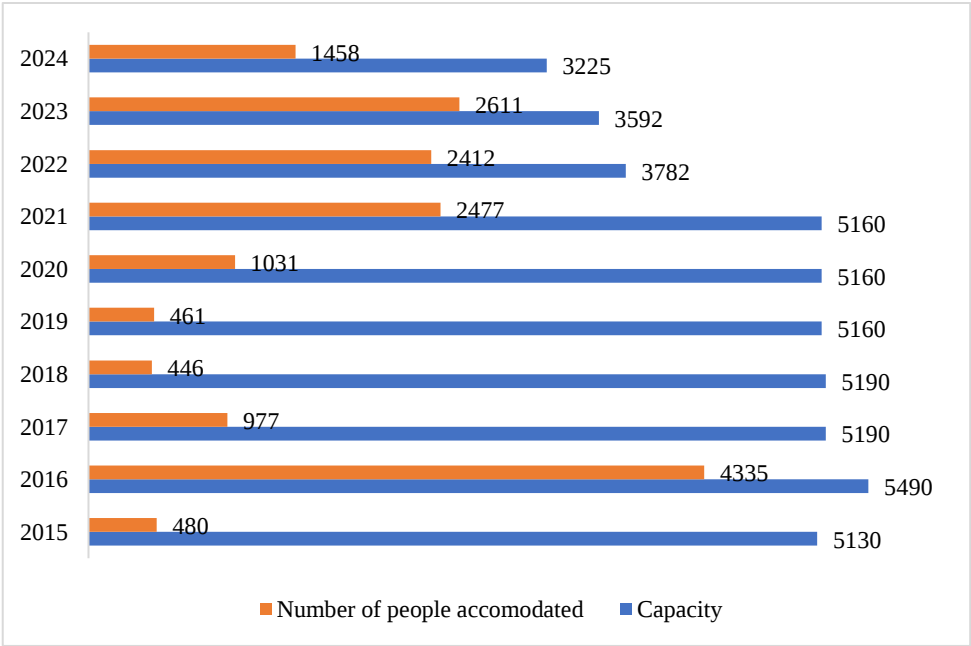
The data presented in Figure 7.3. clearly illustrate that access to accommodation and conditions at the RRCs, as well as the provision of educational and training services are among the social services that are most severely affected by underfunding. Confirmation of the chronic lack of funding for accommodation conditions and maintaining sufficient capacity of the RRCs at the SAR with the CoM can be found in data extracted from the Migration Statistics collected by the Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Bulgaria. Information in this regard is presented in Figure 7.4 below.

Figure 7.3. Which of the listed services offered to the vulnerable group in the Republic of Bulgaria has the most noticeable lack of funding?



Source: Own survey

Figure 7.4. Capacity of RRCs at the SAR with the CoM as of December of each year between 2015 and 2024



Source: Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Bulgaria (2025)

The data in Figure 7.4. clearly and distinctly show a trend of shrinking the capacity of the centers for accommodation of people seeking or granted protection on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria, which are under the management of the Agency for Refugees. The only small exception is 2016, when the capacity of centers of this type reached its peak value for the period 2015–2024 of 5490 available places. The increase in available places in 2016 is understandable given the migration crisis in which not only Bulgaria, but also the whole of Europe was then. However, the steady shrinking of this capacity in all years until the end of the studied period contradicts logic, as in 2024 it reached 3225 places, which represents a shrinking of about 43.1%.

Another thing that is striking from the data presented in Figure 7.4. is the low occupancy of the accommodation centers, which suggests poor living conditions, although the statistics are intentionally presented as of December, when the climatic conditions in Bulgaria are worse and it is assumed that more people will need shelter. In terms of the ratio between capacity and number of accommodated, the centers were most full in December 2016 – at approximately 79% of their capacity, and the least full in December 2018 – at about 8.6%. Despite some exceptions such as in 2016, however, the arithmetic average occupancy of the RRCs at SAR with the CoM for the entire ten-year period amounts to 37.4%. This pattern suggests not merely a temporary shortfall in budgetary support, but rather a chronic and systemic misalignment between the distribution of available resources and the concrete, lived realities of asylum seekers.

In addition to the quantitative findings, the qualitative evidence collected from respondents sheds further light on the underlying factors contributing to these deficiencies. Among the answers to the question related to the biggest challenge in the distribution of public financial resources intended for people seeking asylum or who have received a certain type of protection on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria, the most frequently encountered and highlighted are the lack of transparency and accountability in the spending of available funds, lack of interinstitutional coordination and cooperation, as well as the shortage of finances for such social activities. In support of the results of the in-depth interviews analyzed in the previous chapter of this monograph and in particular the imbalance in terms of the free financial support provided to different groups of asylum seekers, three of the surveyed experts report similar observations, indicating the following:

“The funds should be spent appropriately for a specific group of asylum seekers.”

“The uneven distribution of resources among different nationalities.”

“Discrimination against the country of origin of the refugees.”

Similar to the answers of the previous question, similarly diverse are the recommendations of the experts for a better distribution of financial resources. Among the most frequent answers are those for solutions, justification of a thorough analysis

of the needs of people seeking or receiving protection and financing precisely for the activities that are most urgently needed, creation of a clear framework and differentiation of financing – for shelter, for household needs, for training and educational needs, for social integration, as well as mechanisms for reporting and transparency of the funds spent. Other more specific recommendations highlighted by the experts are:

“Better management of resources, which depends on the preparation of managers, experts, the regulatory framework and its implementation. More transparency and accountability. Economic thinking in action – economy, efficiency.”

“Development of a long-term strategy, in which the goals and results are clearly stated.

Again, a reference to the answers to the first model – Bulgarian language training at levels above the basic level, linked to a specific commitment – an obligation on the part of those seeking/receiving protection.”

“The state should allocate a national/local budget, and there should be coordination at the deputy minister level, as provided for in the Regulation on the Integration Agreement.

In addition, the last expert’s quotation adds the following:

“I recommend you to have a look at the Manifesto on Refugee Integration in Bulgaria, which my NGO Multi Kulti developed together with the Bulgarian Society for the Integration of Bulgarians, UNHCR and dozens of interested parties.”

“In order to have sufficient financial resources, it is necessary to direct funds only to those who really want to stay and are realizing themselves in Bulgaria.”

“The funds should be directed as a priority to those who are truly in need, to provide shelter, food, clothing, training, etc., and not to accommodation in hotels and vacations for other nationalities.”

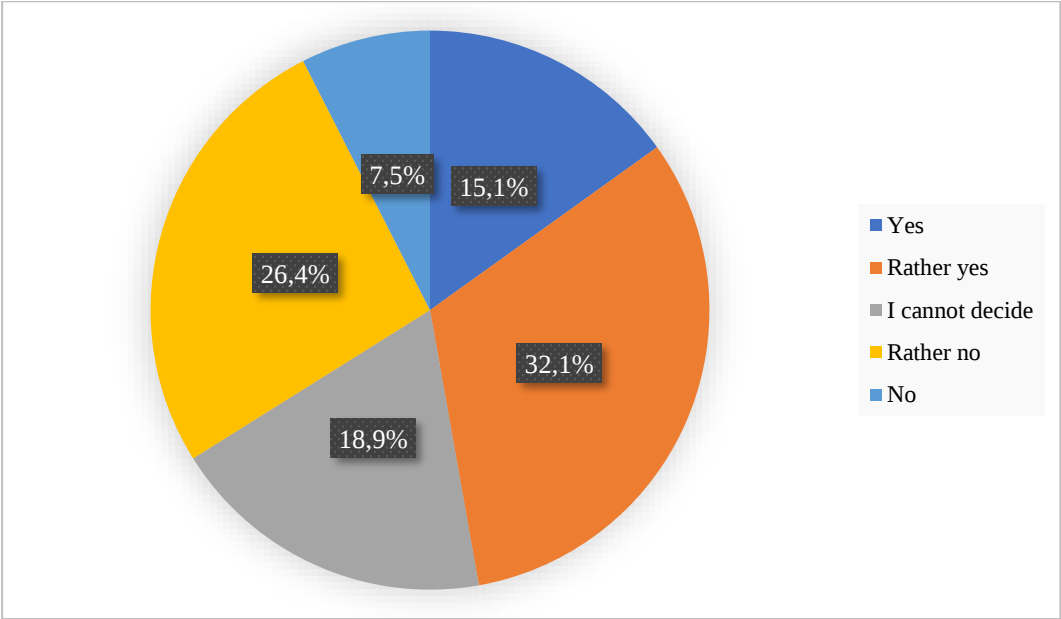
In conclusion it should be mentioned that the analysis highlights a systemic underfunding of key social services for people seeking or receiving protection in Bulgaria. According to the experts, participating in the survey their most common manifestations are expressed in accommodation, living conditions at RRCs, and educational and training programs. The findings indicate not only a quantitative shortfall, which is illustrated by the steady decline in RRC capacity and low occupancy rates, but also qualitative challenges, including a lack of transparency, accountability, and coordination in the allocation of financial resources. Experts emphasize the need for more targeted, needs-based funding, better management, and the establishment of

clear frameworks for financial distribution. Overall, the evidence points to a chronic misalignment between the resources available and the actual needs of asylum seekers, underscoring the urgency of strategic, long-term planning and reforms to ensure effective and equitable support.

7.3.4. Housing Conditions and Reception Capacity

Along with the access to education and training services, as well as financial resources distribution, the third aspect examined within the expert study is related to the accommodation opportunities available to individuals seeking or receiving international protection in the Republic of Bulgaria. Similar to the structure of the previous sections, this first question to the experts is aimed at the overall assessment of the accommodation conditions provided to people seeking or receiving protection on the territory of Bulgaria. This assessment that the participating individuals make with regard to this question is on a five-point scale of the result, allowing it to be presented graphically, which is made in Figure 7.5.

Figure 7.5. Do you think that you know the conditions for establishing the asylum sought or receiving a certain type of protection on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria are appropriate?



Source: Own survey

From the data in Figure 7.5. it is clear that the majority of experts (47.2%) are of the opinion that the conditions and accommodation opportunities provided to those seeking or receiving protection in Bulgaria are rather or completely adequate. This contrasts

with what was shared by the users of this type of service themselves, whose responses were analyzed in Chapter Five of this monograph. This discrepancy in the perceptions of the experts and the vulnerable group itself may be due to the fact that the majority of the interviewed persons seeking or receiving protection in Bulgaria come from the Near and Middle East region, and people with such origins are often accommodated in the RRCs, where the conditions, as it became clear, are poor, while Ukrainian citizens are provided with the opportunity to be accommodated in hotels and state-run holiday resorts. Given the latter, the responses of the participating experts are probably rather positive regarding the accommodation conditions.

Regarding the aspects affecting accommodation conditions that need the most urgent improvement, experts point to “Simplifying administrative procedures” (20.8%), “Improving the material base in the RRCs” (18.9%), “Increasing the number and qualification of personnel working in the RRCs” (18.9%), “Creating a digital infrastructure (platform/website) containing important information on accommodation options” (15.1%), as well as “Improving access to basic services (medical, legal, psychosocial) for representatives of the vulnerable group accommodated in the RRCs” (13.2%).

Given the fact that the following question, related to identifying the most significant challenges to access to accommodation for people seeking or granted protection on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria, can be answered freely by the experts, their views are diverse. Among the coincidences that are observed more often are cumbersome administrative procedures, lack of sufficient capacity both in terms of available places and staff engaged in the RRCs, poor living conditions. Specific answers shared by the participants and supporting the latter include:

“The RRCs that are on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria have very difficult living conditions. This is suggested by the fact that mothers with small children or single individuals sleep and live on the streets.”

“Shortage and depreciation of the material base.”

“The biggest challenge is for candidate refugees to preserve the material base and bear responsibility; the next point is insufficient funding for maintenance and renovation of the environment.”

“Poor material base, insufficient capacity for all those in need, lack of individual approach to each newcomer, lack of work with psychologists.”

“The limited capacity of accommodation facilities and poor material conditions.”

“If we talk about purely organizational challenges, the training of staff is very important, as is the capacity of the reception centers themselves.”

In response to the identified challenges, the experts were asked to propose specific options for overcoming the existing problems in their opinion. In this regard, it should be said that the answers of the majority of participants focused on more investments in the material base, increasing the capacity of the engaged staff, but also on investing in digital platforms through which newcomers can find alternative accommodation options if they wish to stay outside the RRCs. Some experts also shared more in-depth and comprehensive recommendations, some of which are:

“More investments in the material base, trained and qualified staff who can communicate with newcomers. More control by the state in the first stages of their stay. It seems to me that newcomers are accommodated for a short period in centers and then everyone starts to find a job on their own and struggle to survive.”

“More trainings, in which representatives of different organizations/institutions that have common responsibilities within the asylum system should participate.”

“Targeted financing. Including annual rehabilitation of the material base, which depreciates quickly, also due to the high turnover of the residents.”

Although the recommendations of the experts seem rational, their implementation will require public resources, which are always insufficient and difficult to allocate among the urgent needs of the country. In this regard, applying for European funding, for example through the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund of the European Commission (2025), is an option, also supported in some of the participants' responses. However, for this purpose, the capacity of administrative experts to develop project proposals under EC procedures should be increased, which could significantly support and improve the situation related to those seeking or receiving protection in Bulgaria.

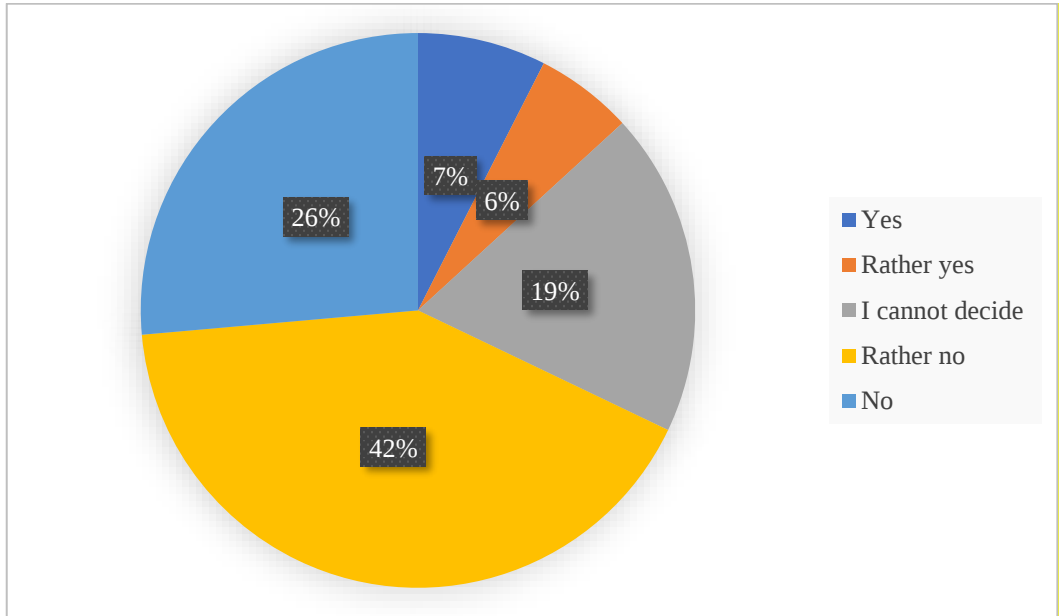
7.3.5. Public Attitudes and Awareness

The fourth aspect examined in the expert study, conducted within the project KII-06-M85/1 “Refugee Processes: Socio-Economic Dimensions in the Contemporary Security Environment” is related to the perceptions of the local population toward individuals seeking or receiving international protection. This domain is of particular significance, as the attitudes of host communities inevitably shape the broader social environment within which asylum seekers attempt to establish their lives. Local perceptions not only influence everyday interactions but also affect the overall potential for integration and social inclusion.

Similar to the previous sections, in this section, the experts were asked a total of four questions, two of which were closed (with specific answer options) and two open, where they had the opportunity to share their own opinion. The first and introductory question from the section related to the attitude of the locals towards those seeking or receiving protection on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria was aimed at whether

there is sufficient awareness among the local population on migration issues. The results in this regard are presented graphically in Figure 7.6.

Figure 7.6. Do you think that there is sufficient awareness among the local population on issues related to asylum seekers or those who have received a certain type of protection on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria?



Source: Own survey

What emerges most strikingly from the expert assessments is the pronounced concern regarding the limited awareness of the Bulgarian public on issues related to asylum. A considerable share of respondents (68%) expressed the view that the local population lacks reliable and sufficient information on this issue. This consensus among experts highlights a systemic informational gap, suggesting that the broader public discourse on asylum in Bulgaria is not grounded in accessible or comprehensive knowledge.

As alternatives for raising awareness among the local population on issues related to those seeking or receiving protection in Bulgaria, the majority of experts point to “Initiating activities involving representatives of the local community and vulnerable groups” (24.5%), “Conducting information campaigns through traditional media” (24.5%), and “Conducting information campaigns through alternative media and blogs (podcasts and YouTube channels)” (20.8%).

When asked what they think is the biggest challenge to the awareness of the local population on issues related to asylum seekers or those granted a type of protection on

the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria, the experts share diverse opinions, but the majority focus on the lack of information campaigns, fake news and propaganda content that instills fear among the locals, as well as the previous distrust of Bulgarians towards the unknown. Similar to the answers to other open questions from previous sections, more in-depth and comprehensive opinions are also gathered here, including:

“People's concerns, caused by the attitude that the foreign and unknown is more dangerous than safe.”

“The lack of public information, so that it can reach everyone in society.”

“Xenophobia – fear, fake news, lack of clear information, positive political position, incl. from the so-called democratic parties, poisonous media environment, Russian propaganda, lack of education on the topic of human rights, denial of the efforts of NGOs.”

“Prejudices towards asylum seekers and the reluctance of the local population to inform themselves on the issue.”

“The local population distrusts asylum seekers because they do not know their culture, customs and mentality.”

As already made clear from the analysis of the second question in this section, about a quarter of the participants are of the opinion that more information campaigns should be conducted with broad inclusion and engagement of the local community. This is also supported in the last question, in which participants were given the opportunity to freely share specific recommendations to address this challenge. It is important to note, however, that some experts also suggest including the vulnerable group itself in these initiatives, which is a good alternative given the fact that this will shorten the distance between local society and newcomers, which in turn may mitigate some prejudices. Other more in-depth suggestions for solving the awareness-related problem are:

“Targeted awareness campaigns that do not use narratives of division by gender, nationality, skin color and religion, but emphasize the specificity of the personality.”

“Organization of events/meetings at the local level, Distribution of brochures, posters and videos on the topic.”

“Information campaign, digital environment in which employers and employees can meet these common interests in order to facilitate the integration of people.”

Organization of meetings and working discussions at the local level on the number of newcomers and their specific characteristics.”

“Initiatives (paid or voluntary) involving both the local population and the vulnerable group. Organization of events presenting the lifestyle and culture of both countries.”

In general, although a few responses express uncertainty or skepticism about the possibility of overcoming the challenges under current conditions, the dominant perspective highlights a dual approach: combining credible, systematic information campaigns with participatory activities that engage both locals and newcomers. This integrated model is regarded as the most effective pathway to countering prejudice, reducing disinformation, and fostering a more informed and cohesive social environment.

Conclusion

The expert survey reveals a predominantly institutional and policy-oriented respondent group, whose insights reflect both practical engagement with asylum seekers and broader structural perspectives. While experts generally hold positive attitudes toward people seeking or receiving protection, their assessments highlight significant systemic challenges across key socio-economic domains. Access to education and training is hindered primarily by inadequate Bulgarian-language provision, insufficient administrative support, and limited targeted outreach. Financial resources are perceived as chronically misaligned with actual needs, particularly in accommodation and integration services, compounded by low transparency and weak interinstitutional coordination. Housing conditions similarly suffer from underinvestment, outdated infrastructure, and insufficient staff capacity, despite many experts viewing them as adequate – an assessment that diverges from the lived experiences of asylum seekers themselves. Finally, experts identify a widespread lack of public awareness, driven by misinformation and entrenched prejudices, underscoring the need for sustained information campaigns and inclusive community initiatives. Taken together, the findings point to the necessity of coherent, long-term, and better coordinated state policies that prioritize language acquisition, targeted funding, improved reception conditions, and public engagement as essential pillars of successful integration.

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CONCLUSION REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This monograph was developed to summarize the results of a project KII-06-M85/1 “Refugee Processes: Socio-Economic Dimensions in the Contemporary Security Environment”, funded by the Bulgarian National Science Fund at the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Bulgaria. It provides a comprehensive examination of migration and asylum governance in the Republic of Bulgaria within the broader European framework during a period marked by several significant periods of increased immigration activity of forcibly displaced persons to Europe, respectively Bulgaria, legal reforms, and geopolitical instability. Across its seven chapters, the analysis demonstrates that migration is not a temporary or isolated phenomenon, but a structural and multidimensional process shaped by global inequalities, armed conflicts, political instability, and regional disparities.

Bulgaria’s geographic position as an external border of the EU places it in a strategically significant yet structurally vulnerable position. Although the country remains primarily a transit country and accounts for a relatively modest share of total EU asylum applications, it carries substantial responsibilities in the protection system, particularly following its full Schengen integration and the forthcoming implementation of the new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum. Statistical trends confirm fluctuating but sustained migratory pressure, diversification of nationalities, and differentiated protection regimes, especially in light of the temporary protection mechanism activated for displaced persons from Ukraine.

The research shows that Bulgaria has established a functioning legal and institutional framework for granting international protection. Competences are clearly distributed among state authorities, and administrative structures are capable of processing applications and granting status. However, significant structural weaknesses persist. Reception capacity remains uneven, living conditions in some facilities are suboptimal, and socio-economic integration mechanisms are fragmented and often dependent on project-based initiatives and external funding.

A central finding of the monograph is the existence of a structural integration gap. While the procedures for granting protection are relatively well regulated, no single state authority bears comprehensive responsibility for long-term integration policy. As a result, integration efforts are inconsistently implemented, inadequately coordinated between national and local levels, and frequently reliant on the initiative of international organizations and civil society actors. Empirical evidence from interviews and expert surveys further confirms disparities in access to language training, employment, housing, education, and healthcare, as well as insufficient financial allocation and limited public awareness.

At the European level, the analysis of the new Pact on Migration and Asylum and related legislative developments reveals a growing emphasis on externalization, return

mechanisms, and border control. While these measures aim to enhance efficiency and predictability within the Common European Asylum System, they raise serious concerns regarding the protection of fundamental rights, solidarity among Member States, and compatibility with international legal standards. The increasing focus on preventing arrivals and accelerating returns risks shifting responsibility beyond EU borders and may undermine the humanitarian foundations of the European asylum regime.

Taken together, the findings suggest that the sustainability of migration governance in Bulgaria, and in the EU more broadly, depends not solely on effective border management or restrictive policies. Rather, it requires a balanced approach grounded in rule of law, human rights guarantees, institutional coordination, and long-term integration strategies. Strengthening centralized integration governance, ensuring stable state funding, improving reception standards, expanding access to social services, and fostering informed public discourse are essential components of such an approach.

Ultimately, migration should not be framed exclusively as a security burden, but as a structural reality that, if managed coherently and humanely, can contribute to social cohesion, economic resilience, and democratic stability. The future of Bulgaria's and Europe's migration systems will depend on their ability to reconcile control with protection, sovereignty with solidarity, and efficiency with dignity.

APPENDIX I

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR CONDUCTING THE IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS OF THE VULNERABLE GROUP

This study is being conducted within the framework of project KII-06-M85/1 “Refugee Processes: Socio-Economic Dimensions in the Contemporary Security Environment”, funded by the Bulgarian National Science Fund at the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Bulgaria. The project, headed by Dr. Vasil Pavlov and members of the scientific team, Dr. Goran Angelov, doctoral student Svetla Aleksandrova, Boyan Kirov and Dr. Raquel Cardoso (Lusíada University, Porto, Portugal), is being implemented by the University of National and World Economy (UNWE) in the period 13.12.2024 – 13.12.2026. The aim of the project is to identify and analyze the main socio-economic challenges facing the policy of the Republic of Bulgaria in the field of asylum seekers and, as a result, to formulate specific recommendations for addressing them.

The survey includes 25 questions, structured in 5 main sections. Four of them are thematic and address the key socio-economic aspects studied within the project: access to education and training, financial support, accommodation opportunities and attitudes of the local population. The first section aims to collect demographic information, such as age, gender, education and professional skills, without requiring the sharing of personal data, which guarantees the complete anonymity of the participants.

SECTION 1: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION – This section is designed to collect basic data about the participants (such as age group, gender, education, etc.). The information will be used solely for research purposes, and responses are completely anonymous and do not require the sharing of any personal data.

- Which age group do you belong to?
- What is your gender?
- What is the highest educational degree you hold?
- What is your current employment status?
- What professional skills and competencies do you possess?

SECTION 2: ACCESS TO EDUCATIONAL AND TRAINING SERVICES – This section of the questionnaire aims to identify potential problems in accessing educational and training services for asylum seekers or those who have received a type of protection on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria.

- Do you think that the opportunities for education and training in Bulgaria for people like you are good?

- What educational service do you think is essential to receive in order to successfully integrate?
- Do you have the opportunity to take advantage of this service at the Registration and Reception Center where you are accommodated?
- How often do you have the opportunity to use this service?
- What type of organizations are most often involved in providing educational and training services at the Registration and Reception Center where you are accommodated?

SECTION 3: ACCESS TO FINANCIAL SUPPORT – This section collects data on the availability and type of financial support that asylum seekers or those granted protection in Bulgaria have access to. The information will help assess the extent to which the support is accessible and sufficient to cover basic needs.

- Did you receive financial support while you were in Bulgaria?
- What kind of financial support have you received?
- How often do you receive financial support?
- Do you think that the financial support you receive (if any) is sufficient to cover your basic needs?
- Do you know where to look for information about financial support opportunities in Bulgaria?

SECTION 4: ACCOMMODATION CONDITIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES – This section collects data on the housing conditions and accommodation opportunities of those seeking or receiving protection in Bulgaria. The aim is to assess the extent to which the available accommodation is accessible, adequate and meets basic needs.

- How do you assess the accommodation conditions at the Registration and Reception Center where you are or have been staying?
- Do you feel safe at the Registration and Reception Center?
- Do you think that the food and basic services (e.g. laundry, heating, electricity) in the center are sufficient to cover daily needs?
- What would you improve in the accommodation conditions in the center?
- Can you share a positive experience or something you liked about the center?

SECTION 5: ATTITUDE OF THE LOCAL POPULATION – This section collects data on the interactions and impressions of those seeking or receiving protection in Bulgaria regarding the attitude of the local population. The aim is to understand how this impacts their daily lives and integration.

- How would you rate the attitude of local people towards you?
- Have you received any kind of support or help from local people?
- Do you encounter discrimination or disrespect from the local population?
- How would you describe your contacts with local people in everyday life?
- Is there anything additional you would like to share about your experience in Bulgaria?

APPENDIX II

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR EXPERT STUDY OF THE ACCESS OF ASYLUM SEEKERS AND THOSE GRANTED HUMANITARIAN, REFUGEE STATUS, OR TEMPORARY PROTECTION TO VARIOUS SOCIOECONOMIC SERVICES ON THE TERRITORY OF THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA

This expert study is being conducted within the framework of project KII-06-M85/1 “Refugee Processes: Socio-Economic Dimensions in the Contemporary Security Environment”, funded by the Bulgarian National Science Fund at the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Bulgaria. The project, headed by Dr. Vasil Pavlov and members of the scientific team, Dr. Goran Angelov, doctoral student Svetla Aleksandrova, Boyan Kirov and Dr. Raquel Cardoso (Lusíada University, Porto, Portugal), is implemented by the University of National and World Economy (UNWE) in the period 13.12.2024 – 13.12.2026. The goal of the project is to identify and analyze the main socio-economic challenges facing the policy of the Republic of Bulgaria in the field of asylum seekers and, as a result, formulate specific proposals for addressing them.

The survey includes 22 questions, structured in 5 main sections. The main questions are divided into 4 thematic sections related to the socio-economic aspects studied within the project, namely access to education and training, distribution of financial resources, accommodation opportunities and improving attitudes towards newcomers from on the part of the local population, are structured in two directions – measuring the intensity of the problem and possibilities for overcoming it. The last part of the questionnaire aims to establish the experience of the specific respondent, but without require the entry of personal data, which guarantees the anonymity of the participants.

FIRST ASPECT – ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND TRAINING SERVICES –
This section of the questionnaire aims to identify potential problems in accessing education and training services for asylum seekers or those who have received a certain type of protection on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria. In order to formulate specific recommendations, some of the questions are related to possible solutions to the identified challenges.

Do you think that asylum seekers or those who have received a certain type of protection on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria have access to educational and training services?

- Yes
- Rather yes

- I cannot decide
- Rather not
- No

Which of the following educational and/or training services is most important for the successful integration of newcomers?

- Regular and intensive courses for learning the local language
- Training for acquiring specific professional skills and competencies
- Easier admission requirements to the public school system
- Simplified procedures for recognizing the current educational status of newly arrived immigrants
- Information campaigns among the vulnerable group regarding rights and opportunities for inclusion in educational and training services
- Providing psychosocial support
- Other (open-ended response)

Please indicate what you believe is the biggest challenge to access to educational and training services for people seeking asylum or granted a type of protection on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria.

- Open-ended response

Please indicate a specific possibility to overcome what you stated in your previous answer.

- Open-ended response

SECOND ASPECT – DISTRIBUTION OF FINANCIAL RESOURCES – This section of the questionnaire aims to establish the appropriateness of spending public financial resources intended for asylum seekers or people who have received a given type of protection on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria. In order to formulate specific recommendations, some of the questions are related to possible solutions to the identified challenges.

Do you think that the financial resources intended for people seeking asylum or who have received a certain type of protection on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria are distributed appropriately?

- Yes
- Rather yes
- I cannot decide
- Rather not
- No

Which of the listed services offered to the vulnerable group in the Republic of Bulgaria has the most noticeable lack of funding?

- Educational and training services
- Access to accommodation and shelter and maintenance of the material base
- Basic material costs
- Conducting information campaigns to raise awareness on refugee issues
- Social support
- Other (open-ended response)

Please indicate what you think is the biggest challenge in the allocation of public financial resources intended for people seeking asylum or who have received a certain type of protection on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria.

- Open-ended response

Please indicate a specific possibility to overcome what you stated in your previous answer.

- Open-ended response

THIRD ASPECT – ACCOMODATION OPPORTUNITIES – This section of the questionnaire aims to establish whether the provided accommodation conditions for asylum seekers or people who have received a certain type of protection on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria are adequate. In order to formulate specific recommendations some of the questions are related to possible solutions to the identified challenges.

Do you think that the conditions provided for accommodation of asylum seekers or those granted a certain type of protection on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria are appropriate?

- Yes
- Rather yes
- I cannot decide
- Rather not
- No

Which of the following aspects of accommodation needs the most urgent improvement?

- Simplification of administrative procedures
- Increasing the capacity of the Registration and Reception Centers at the State Agency for Refugees
- Improving the material base in the Registration and Reception Centers at the State Agency for Refugees

- Increasing the number and qualifications of staff working in the Registration and Reception Centers to the State Agency for Refugees
- Improving access to basic services (medical, legal, psychosocial) for vulnerable groups
- group accommodated in the Registration and Reception Centers at the State Agency for Refugees
- Creation of a digital infrastructure (platform/website) containing important information about opportunities for accommodation
- Other (open-ended response)

Please indicate what, in your opinion, is the biggest challenge facing the accommodation opportunities for people seeking asylum or who have received a certain type of protection on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria.

- Open-ended response

Please indicate a specific possibility to overcome what you stated in your previous answer.

- Open-ended response

FOURTH ASPECT – IMPROVING ATTITUDES AMONG LOCAL POPULATION – This section of the questionnaire aims to seek solutions to improve the awareness of the local population on issues related to asylum seekers or people who have received a certain type of protection on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria.

Do you think that there is sufficient awareness among the local population on issues related to asylum seekers or those who have received a certain type of protection on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria?

- Yes
- Rather yes
- I cannot decide
- Rather not
- No

How could the awareness of the local population be increased on issues related to asylum seekers or those granted a certain type of protection on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria?

- Conducting information campaigns through traditional media
- Conducting information campaigns through digital media
- Conducting information campaigns through alternative media and blogs (podcasts and Youtube channels)
- Conducting information campaigns by official institutions

- Initiating activities involving representatives of the local community and vulnerable groups
- Promoting volunteer initiatives involving representatives of the local community and vulnerable groups
- Other (open-ended response)

Please indicate what, in your opinion, is the biggest challenge facing the awareness of the local population on issues related to asylum seekers or those granted a certain type of protection on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria.

- Open-ended response

Please indicate a specific possibility to overcome what you stated in your previous answer.

- Open-ended response

FIFTH SECTION – RESPONDENTS’ QUALIFICATION QUESTIONS –

This section of the questionnaire aims to establish the respondents' experience on the topic related to asylum seekers or those who have received a certain type of protection on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria.

Please indicate the type of organization you work for.

- Government institution
- Non-governmental organization
- Higher education institution/scientific organization
- International organization
- Private sector
- Other (open-ended response)

Is your work in the above organization directly related to the research issue?

- Yes
- No

Which of the socio-economic aspects studied does the subject of your workplace overlap with the most?

- Access to education and training
- Allocation of financial resources
- Accommodation options
- Improving the attitudes of the local population
- Other (open-ended response)

What is the length of your experience with the research topic?

- Less than 5 years
- Between 5 and 10 years
- Between 11 and 15 years old
- Over 15 years

Have you had direct contact with an asylum seeker or a person who has received a type of protection on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria?

- Yes
- No
- I cannot decide

How would you specifically characterize your attitude towards the vulnerable group?

- Distrust
- Sympathy
- Like any other person
- Fear
- Indifference
- Concern, willingness to help
- Respect
- Hate
- Trust
- Friendship
- I cannot decide

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Reviewers

Prof. Svetoslav Spasov, PhD
Prof. Anna Krasteva, PhD

Cover design

Daniela Dancheva

Prepress

Teodora Markova

Format 16/70/100. PS 8

Academic Publishing UNWE

University of National and World Economy
1700 Sofia, Student District, No.19 December 8th str.
Director *Petar Petrov*, phone: (+3592) 8195 264
Editor-in-Chief *Valentin Mitev*, phone: (+3592) 8195 665

press.unwe.bg

ISBN 978-619-06-0021-3
ISBN 978-619-06-0022-0 (pdf)

UNWE Printing House