



A Pathway to Integration:

Perception Study with
Migrants, Refugees, and
Host Communities in
Bulgaria

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Contact us:

Requests for commercial reproduction should be directed to the IFRC Secretariat:

Address: Chemin des Crêts 17, Petit-Saconnex, 1209 Geneva, Switzerland

Postal address: P.O. Box 303, 1211 Geneva 19, Switzerland

T +41 (0)22 730 42 22 | **F** +41 (0)22 730 42 00 | **E** secretariat@ifrc.org | **W** [ifrc.org](https://www.ifrc.org)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction:

Migration patterns have drastically changed over the last 20 years. New and long-standing crises, climate change, and economic instability caused by COVID-19, and other global economic factors have increased the number of migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees throughout the world. As of May 2023, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that there are over 110 million refugees and forcibly displaced people in the world¹. The impact of this mass global migration makes it necessary to continually rethink how humanitarian and governmental systems respond and adapt to the ever-changing needs of migrants, as well as the interaction and eventual integration and inclusion into host communities.

The escalation of conflict in Ukraine which started in February 2022, saw an immediate migration of roughly 7,785,514 people displaced from Ukraine across Europe, and over 5,828,000 refugees from Ukraine had registered for temporary protection or similar national protection schemes across the continent by September 2023. More than 7 million internally displaced persons were estimated to remain within Ukraine at the same time². In addition to Ukraine, refugees and migrants from the Middle East, Asia, and Africa have significantly increased since 2015, especially with Syrians fleeing civil war, Afghans, Eritreans, Iraq, Pakistan and others leaving their countries because of conflict and economic reasons. In 2022, there was an increase in crossings of refugees and migrants on the Central Mediterranean (+56%, 105,600), the Eastern Mediterranean (+113%, 43,900) and the Western Balkan routes (+134%, 144,100) compared to 2021³. This crisis has greatly impacted the neighbouring

countries of the European Union (EU) and the Western Balkan countries (WB) which have absorbed these migrants and refugees.

Bulgaria, one of the two countries participating in the study, has been greatly impacted by changing migration patterns over the past four years.

Bulgaria, like many other European countries, has been affected by the refugee crisis, particularly in terms of managing arrivals, providing humanitarian aid, and addressing integration and inclusion challenges. In 2020, Bulgaria received around 3,525 asylum applications⁴, while in 2022, these applications increased drastically to 20,390 due to the country's proximity to Ukraine. Since February 2022, more than two million people displaced from Ukraine entered Bulgaria, with some staying and others passing through to other European countries. Along with migrants from Ukraine, Bulgaria has also been hosts for refugees and asylum seekers from other countries. UNHCR 2023 data states more than 25,000 refugees entered Bulgaria from Syria and more than 1,000 from Iraq. People from Syria, Afghanistan and Morocco were the top three asylum seekers accounted for more than 8,000 people⁵. Additionally, on the 31 March 2024, Bulgaria eliminated air and maritime internal border controls marking their partial integration into the Schengen area⁶, which could potentially mean changes in routes to Europe affecting the country as a transit one.

The International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC) along with other components of the Red

¹ Statistics. UNHCR, 2023

² Situation Ukraine Refugee Situation, UNHCR, 2024.

³ Statistics on migration to Europe, European Commission, 2024.

⁴ Eurostat - Asylum Statistics, 2020.

⁵ UNHCR Bulgaria Fact Sheet, 2023. <https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/bi-annual-fact-sheet-2024-02-bulgaria.pdf>

⁶ <https://eucrim.eu/news/bulgaria-and-romania-join-schengen-area/>

Cross Red Crescent Movement (RCRC) have been supporting the European National Societies (NS) to support migrants across Europe for decades. The teams have strategic operations that assist people with shelter, basic aid items, cash assistance (CVA), medical supplies, psychosocial support, and medical treatment. In recent years and in response to the various migration changes, National Societies started with emergency response operations in line with their auxiliary role and have adapted their programs to the evolving needs, perceptions, and patterns of the migrant populations⁷. In addition, both Bulgaria is part of the IFRC Global Route Based Migration Programme – comprising 15 NS in Europe – focused on countries in transit, assisting and protecting people on the move, reinforcing the capacity of the NS and working on local and global humanitarian diplomacy.

As the needs of refugees and migrants move into a new phase of possible integration and inclusion of both people displaced from Ukraine and other migrants within host communities, the Regional IFRC Community, Engagement and Accountability (CEA) team commissioned this **Perceptions Study to explore the knowledge, perceptions, and practices of communities related to the migration and refugee situation in Bulgaria and Montenegro, with the intention of identifying community sentiments and experiences towards the reception, cultural practice, and power dynamics, conflict and tensions, and opportunities for integration, cohesion, and inclusion between host communities, migrants, and refugees.**

The findings and recommendations of this Study will be used by National Societies and IFRC to understand community dynamics, to adapt operational planning and identify appropriate, effective interventions, advocacy strategies, and messages.

Methodology:

At the initial phase of the study design, the IFRC CEA Europe teams engage National Societies within the region to participate in the study

Due to the workload and limited capacities of the contacted National Societies, only two of them – Bulgaria and Montenegro – agreed to participate in this study.

Data collection and sampling: The consulting team identified a sample size, and location of the research, and developed tools for both Focus Group Discussions (FGD) and Key Informant interviews (KII). Two virtual training of data collection tools were conducted for key NS team members and data collectors. Data collectors were then trained in the field, and provided the necessary data collection resources, including recording devices and the translated FGD and KII guides by NS team members. Interviewees were recruited by NS volunteers. Data collection in both countries was conducted between January and March 2024. All interviews were conducted in the relevant local languages and translated into English for analysis.

Data analysis: The qualitative data analysis was conducted by all three AFC team members for accuracy and to ensure cross-collaborative veracity. Results and recommendations were broken out by population and country, while conclusions were provided at both the country-level and extrapolated for generalised key learnings.

A total of 66 participants from Bulgaria, comprising of 37 data collection activities were conducted in Bulgaria.

Study Findings:

Bulgaria:

General sentiment indicated that people displaced from Ukraine felt comfortable in the country, and they perceived the culture as not too dissimilar from their own. They felt welcomed by the host community, and most

⁷ Internal Operational Review (2022), IFRC's Response to Ukraine and Surrounding Countries.

were able to describe Bulgarian customs and foods that were similar or different from their own. Some incidents of conflict or discomfort were noted, but for the most part, Ukrainian respondent's perceptions were positive about their experience in Bulgaria. Both people displaced from Ukraine and refugee populations from other countries complained of the high cost of living and specifically the housing accommodations that were both hard to find and had specific rental laws that restricted them from easy access to housing for their families.

Refugees from other countries discussed the difficulties in finding work as well as the high cost of living when they brought their families over to live with them. This population reported receiving less pay for the same work as their Bulgarian counterparts. Most migrants from other countries expressed deep gratitude to Bulgaria and the Bulgarian host community for the reception and welcome they had received.

All populations seemed to report easy access to education. There were some reports of trouble accessing healthcare, and the language barrier was noted by all groups as something that they had to overcome and made it more difficult to engage in paid labour.

Host community respondents had mixed feelings about migrant populations, with sentiments kinder and more accommodating to people displaced from Ukraine compared to other migrants. Some sentiments that may appear racially insensitive were expressed during some interviews regarding other migrants and bias was found across interviewers and respondents in these interviews. That being stated, some of these statements must be taken in context and many host community respondents also noted their belief that the country had a humanitarian duty to support displaced persons and migrants in their community.

Key Takeaways:



Language identified by all parties as a barrier for integration.



Consensus of acceptance on principle by host communities.



Migrants from other context struggled with bureaucratic systems and perceived experiences of bias against them.



Difficulties in accessing housing, work and health care - bureaucracy blockages.



Education a great way to integrate the children.



Consensus of safety from migrants/ people displaced/refugees with gratitude and appreciation for the Bulgarian culture.



Some biased and possibly racist comments from host community -with suspicion on reasons for migrants to move to Bulgaria, some opposed to migrants from Islamic faith, and people of colour.



Misinformation and bias in the media noted as an issue by all hosts.



Humanitarian organizations services acknowledged and appreciated by all populations.

Conclusion:

The refugee and migrant situation in Bulgaria and Montenegro represent the complexities of migration around the world. While both people displaced from Ukraine, as well as from Syria, Afghanistan, Iran and other countries mainly felt gratitude and safety in both countries, there was consistent evidence of financial hardship, high cost of living, and incidence of discrimination.

People displaced from Ukraine seemed to be more accepted by host communities than refugees from other countries in Bulgaria, though host community respondents mainly emphasised their cultures' openness to other religions, people and ethnicities.

The primary pain point for all respondents across all populations was around **economic struggles**. While people displaced from Ukraine and other refugees consistently mentioned high housing prices and government restrictions on their ability to work, both host community participants were less supportive of refugees who came for economic reasons as opposed to conflict.

Key barriers to integration identified across countries and populations included:



Language barriers: All populations noted language barriers as one of the key deterrents to immigrants' ability to integrate into society fully.



Economic struggles: In Bulgaria findings reveal disparities in economic treatment reported by migrants, such as unequal holiday pay of Bulgarians compared to workers of other nationalities. Montenegrin host communities believed "wealthy" people displaced from Ukraine

were driving up housing prices and causing homelessness. Respondents mentioned finding their new environment difficult due to challenges in finding employment opportunities. It is worth further research into the use of brokers and if any exploitation is occurring regarding work and housing access.



Housing: The lack of support in terms of affordable housing and financial assistance further exacerbates economic difficulties, placing strain on immigrant families.



Employment: Respondents mentioned finding their new environment difficult due to challenges in finding employment opportunities.

Recommendations:

The study findings underscore the significance of collective efforts by all stakeholders in facilitating the integration and inclusion of refugees and migrants into the host society and aiding their adaptation (including migrants and refugees themselves). While the government and media can significantly influence policies and shape positive messaging, NGOs and other relevant entities must collaborate closely to align these efforts with the actual needs of the community. These study findings recommend a comprehensive multi-pronged approach that can be utilised by National Societies and IFRC to address the relationship between community dynamics, perceptions, and trust on one side, and common collective behaviours and sentiments such as xenophobia and social stigma on the other.

The Top Key Recommendations included (please refer to the full report for detailed recommendations):

Top Recommendations:

NGO/Int'l
Organizations

Language learning initiatives and engaging in educational programs: All groups noted the need of language courses as imperative to facilitating integration for migrants and refugees. The recommendation is to expand these services and ensure these initiatives aim to teach not just the local language but also important aspects of the local culture, history, geography, and societal norms, generating empathy, and trust.

Policy advocacy and support for healthcare access: Advocacy for policies that improve healthcare access for immigrants and refugees, including language interpretation services, simplified enrolment processes, and culturally competent care standards. This can also be directed to efforts to improve health and WASH services in refugee camps in Bulgaria, where several respondents expressed their dissatisfaction on the low level of cleanliness, and the general difficulties on access to health care that forced some families to resort to importing medicine from their countries of origin.

Research

Research exploitation and brokers: In Bulgaria, refugees from other countries specifically discussed having to use a broker to find housing as well as employment. It was not clear why these brokers were necessary, and people displaced from Ukraine did not mention the use of them, implying refugees from other countries had a different experience when trying to access basic survival needs. It may be worth further investigation into the use of these brokers, how much they are requesting from these vulnerable populations, why they are deemed necessary and if there are better ways for refugees to access basic services.

Research wage discrimination: In Bulgaria, refugees from other countries also described wage bias against them and receiving less wage for the same work as their Bulgarian and other countries counterparts. Research into wage discrimination and payment practices might shed light on labour practices and assist with advocacy for refugee labour status in Bulgaria.

Communication
strategy and efforts

Media advocacy: Respondents recommended IFRC, NS, the government, and other humanitarian aid actors work closely with media outlets to shift the narrative around refugees and immigrants towards a more positive and accurate portrayal. This involved showcasing their successes, economic contributions, and cultural diversity while challenging stereotypes and promoting empathy. This initiative could potentially collaborate with media outlets to share uplifting stories and highlight the positive impact refugees have on society. This could help counterbalance negative narratives and stereotypes, providing a more balanced view to the public. Overall, the goal would be to create a more inclusive and empathetic society by working collaboratively with media outlets, promoting positive narratives, and empowering the public with media literacy skills.

Housing

Housing navigation: In all contexts, housing access was an issue raised by migrants and refugees and in Montenegro, even the host community. Consider building out housing navigation services that help all groups identify potential housing and navigate the legal nuances of each system (i.e. deposits, utilities payments, legal status requirements, etc).

RESULTS

General sentiment indicated that people displaced from Ukraine felt comfortable in the country, and they perceived the culture as not too dissimilar from their own. They felt welcomed by the host community, and most were able to describe Bulgarian customs and foods that were similar or different from their own. Some incidents of conflict or discomfort were noted, but for the most part, Ukrainian respondent's perceptions were positive about their experience in Bulgaria. Both people displaced from Ukraine and refugee populations from other countries complained of the high cost of living and specifically the housing accommodations that were both hard to find and had specific rental laws that restricted them from easy access to housing for their families.

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Host community respondents had mixed feelings about migrant populations, with sentiments kinder and more accommodating to people displaced from Ukraine compared to other migrants. Some racist sentiments were expressed during some interviews regarding other migrants and bias was found across interviewers and respondents in these interviews as noted in the limitation section of this report. That being stated, many host community respondents also noted their belief that their country had a humanitarian duty to receive and support displaced persons and migrants in their community.

Key Takeaways:



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Theme One: Understanding Migration Dynamics

Ukrainians

The dynamics of fleeing war, and being comfortable in Bulgaria as migrants:

Respondents displaced from Ukraine consistently noted their decision to flee Ukraine was driven by the desire to escape the dangers and uncertainty of living amidst conflict, opting instead for a safer environment in Bulgaria. Though initially intended as a temporary refuge, respondents acknowledged the uncertainty surrounding the duration of their stay, recognizing the impossibility of returning home amid ongoing danger and instability in Ukraine.



“I think that we have to live somewhere. It’s just that there is no way to go back home for now, even though we are from Kyiv ourselves it is scary, we also have danger there. We thought it would be for a short time, but we got a little delayed and we don’t know for how long.” (person displaced from Ukraine)

Reflecting on the importance of employment for a normal life, respondents acknowledged that they lived comfortably in Ukraine due to available work opportunities. However, they noted that the conflict compelled them to relocate, suggesting that they wouldn’t have chosen their current location otherwise. Respondents recounted fleeing their hometown in Ukraine due to the conflict, citing dire living conditions and constant shelling as the reasons, as well as the lack of clean water and the destruction of infrastructure. Some respondents mentioned choosing Bulgaria after hearing negative perceptions about living conditions in Romania and because they had family members or friends who were already living in Bulgaria and who helped them navigating their new surroundings.

Despite initial uncertainty, the respondents expressed gratitude for the warm reception they received in Bulgaria. They feel fortunate to have found accommodation and appreciated the support and hospitality extended by Bulgaria, its people, and the government since their arrival. This theme highlighted the widespread displacement due to ongoing conflict experienced by people displaced from Ukraine, yet their connections in the region, and their quest for safety and stability.



“I think of life generally well and thanks a lot to this country for sheltering us. The main thing is that they have provided some moral and spiritual calm. However, all of the fibres of my soul are in Ukraine, all of my actions, all of the bombardments and strikes. This is something you still let through yourself. [...]” (person displaced from Ukraine)

Some respondents recounted their journey to Bulgaria with the help of the Bulgarian Friendship Society, following six months of conflict in Ukraine. They initially found refuge in Malko Tarnovo within the scenic surroundings of Strandzha Nature Park, where they were warmly welcomed and provided with comfortable accommodation. After 1.5 years, they relocated to Sofia in search of employment and stability, influenced by family connections and Bulgarian heritage. Despite being pensioners with modest incomes, some respondents found support and opportunities in their new home country and expressed gratitude for the assistance and sense of belonging they found there.

Despite some similarities in language and culture between Ukraine and Bulgaria, nuances and challenges arose in adjusting to life in this new environment. However, they noted they had received significant support from

organisations like the Red Cross and volunteers, which facilitated their integration and inclusion process. Some student respondents, who moved to Bulgaria at the onset of the conflict, expressed gratitude for the peaceful environment and the opportunities for study and work, despite being separated from family members still in Ukraine. While the respondents did not initially have connections to Bulgarian families or social housing, they received assistance from both host community members and fellow people displaced from Ukraine through online groups, which they deeply appreciated.

Some respondents shared their experiences of previous visits to Bulgaria for work and festivals, expressing fondness for the country, particularly the southern region, before the conflict. They appreciated the reception and assistance they received upon arriving in the community, finding comfort in the familiarity of the language and mentality, which eased their interaction. Despite the initial shock of their displacement, they were grateful for the support they received.

Other refugees and migrants:

Relocating and living in Bulgaria:

Migrants and refugees from other countries expressed similar gratitude and feelings of

safety in Bulgaria, though economic struggles and family unification were important themes to emerge with this population. Based on the response from interviewees, the overwhelming perspective was that their migration to Bulgaria brought about positive effects, such as providing security and legal status, and offering safety for individuals and families, particularly those escaping war and violence in countries like Syria and Afghanistan. Organisations like Caritas, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), and the Red Cross were mentioned as playing a vital role in granting migrants' access to essential services, including psychological support, monetary cash payments, and clothing.

Additionally, initiatives by the Red Cross to provide language education to support migrants' integration into Bulgarian society fostered a sense of belonging and connection with the local community. The welcoming and friendly nature of the Bulgarians, where individuals were reported to readily assist refugees in public when they had questions, despite the language barriers, underscored the respondent's perception of the host community support in successfully helping them integrate and feel inclusion.





“We arrived here on the 27th of February, and on the 1st of March, as we strolled around Dobrych with our friend, Martenichkas were exchanged as gifts among everyone in the park. My children and I were still in a state of shock from our sudden displacement and had many uncertainties, such as what we were doing here so far away from our homes and what would happen next. However, on that day, due to the Martenitsa tradition, they began to smile again.” (refugee)

While the general sentiment was gratitude and feeling welcomed, respondents mentioned various complexity of their migration experience, including:

- **Family separation:** Many of the respondents shared poignant accounts of their experiences, revealing a deep sense of loneliness and isolation stemming from their separation from their families. This emotional burden significantly hampered their ability to adapt to life in Bulgaria. For instance, some respondents discussed their struggle to find a suitable place to live, often falling victim to exploitative house brokers who assumed their husbands, who resided in Germany or other countries, were affluent. The respondents often expressed a fervent desire for family reunification, with most expressing their hopes of reuniting with their spouses and other family members or describing their reunification if it already occurred. *Quote: “Being in a foreign country where I don’t know anything, not even the language, while my husband is in Germany is incredibly challenging. I wish to be reunited with my husband, regardless of the country where we will have to live.” (refugee)*
- **Second relocation:** Respondents noted frequent cases of migrants and refugees forced to leave Bulgaria for other European countries due to economic factors, such as the high cost of living and low wages, highlighting the ongoing economic challenges faced by immigrants from other countries in Bulgaria.
- **To find jobs** especially for educated refugees and migrants, with an example of a medical doctor and a lawyer from Syria who have not been able to get a job of their qualifications despite having Bulgarian residence permits. This is not just a labour market issue, but also a certification and authorization issues that can be addressed by government entities if desired.

The profound impact of family separation, compounded by emotional distress and financial insecurity, reverberated throughout the migrants from other countries experiences. Moreover, the pattern of secondary relocation due to economic pressures highlighted the persistent struggles with economic integration and stability. Language barriers and disparities in economic treatment, as noted in the below sections, deepened feelings of isolation and marginalisation within Bulgarian society. The lack of support mechanisms, particularly in terms of affordable housing and financial assistance, further compounded the economic strain on migrant families.



“When I first came to the country, my main difficulty was not speaking Bulgarian. It made me feel helpless because no one understood me, and I couldn’t understand them. I had trouble expressing myself or understanding others, like being unable to talk or understand.” (refugee)

Host communities

General empathy, efforts to welcome and integrate the refugees:

Bulgarian host communities expressed gratitude for living in a society where many are willing to assist migrants, particularly recognizing their plight as individuals fleeing conflict and advocating for a positive integration experience. Compassion was called for towards all suffering individuals, including migrants and refugees on Bulgarian soil, emphasizing the legal and ethical obligation to provide relief and assistance. The respondents expressed hope for continued tolerance and understanding within host communities, acknowledging the diverse religious and linguistic backgrounds among neighbours, friends, and colleagues.



“I have no idea if they reach out to all, but I think it’s important from a human point of view that everyone who’s suffering receives some sort of relief because they are located on our territory, and we are obliged to have some sort of compassion.” (host community member)

Bulgaria was described as welcoming and well-intentioned by the host community. They highlighted Bulgaria’s historical relationships with various communities, such as Bulgarian Muslims, Bulgarians with Turkish origins, and Bessarabian Bulgarians, who peacefully practiced their religion and celebrated their holidays in Bulgaria.

Respondents highlighted a multifaceted approach to migration, which included empathy, community engagement, trust in authorities, and a focus on inclusive integration strategies. These efforts created a supportive environment for migrants, fostering social cohesion and mutual understanding within the host community. Some respondents mentioned donating items for refugees

out of a sense of compassion, particularly acknowledging the hardships they faced, expressing sympathy for migrants, recognizing their suffering, and emphasizing their lack of malicious intent in coming to Bulgaria. There was a notable sense of empathy towards incoming refugees, with an understanding that they were fleeing from adversity rather than seeking better opportunities. Community initiatives to support refugees and migrants, such as organizing donation activities and integrating newcomers into neighbourhoods, underscored a dedication to fostering integration and embracing diversity. Accounts of interactions and conversations in public spaces, where Bulgarians spontaneously helped migrants and refugees, echoed the sentiment of welcome and acceptance. Overall, there was a consensus that those who arrived in Bulgaria seeking refuge were warmly received.



“I have met refugees, and since we know some of their languages, we have had short conversations, and we have run into each other in the streets, and on trams – overall, we welcome them, we don’t have any biases against them. Those who come to our land are always welcome.” (host community member)

Migration’s effect on access to services: Host Community respondents focused on the access to services between host communities and migrants, addressing issues like healthcare cost coverage, disparities in service delivery, language barriers, and misunderstandings about healthcare systems and social protections. There were concerns raised about the state of healthcare in general, with one individual noting that it’s challenging for both locals and migrants alike to access healthcare as needed. They asserted it must be particularly difficult for migrants due to language barriers requiring constant assistance and support.

It was acknowledged that healthcare needs improvement overall, which would benefit both locals and migrants. The data highlighted systemic challenges faced by migrants, including limited access due to language barriers and unfamiliarity with health insurance. Continuous assistance and support were deemed necessary. Host community respondents emphasized the importance of improved communication, support, and integration efforts to address both their access to healthcare as well as these challenges for migrants.



Quote: “For me, healthcare is a result of this entire previously mentioned integration - if they manage to integrate, learn the language, and start a job, their access to the healthcare system would be the same way as it is for Bulgarian citizens. [...]” (host community member)

Theme Two: Perceptions and Realities of Migration

Ukrainians

Living alongside host communities and experiences of discrimination:

The opinions regarding living alongside the host community varied. A majority saw it as generally acceptable, with respondents acknowledging the decent treatment received and the efforts made by most to maintain neutrality about their home countries' ongoing conflict.

Positive experiences are noted, albeit alongside occasional unpleasant encounters, particularly when identifiable as Ukrainian, indicating some instances of discrimination, often in a healthcare setting. Some respondents mentioned their struggle with registering with a local physician due to discrimination against Ukrainians.



“There are healthcare issues sometimes because they don't want to register us with the personal doctor. When I see the doctor, they can't find me in the system. Whether it's deliberate or due to ignorance, this happens. I was shocked when my colleague from Kharkiv told me their general hospitals tried to throw them out and called them “white gypsies.” It's awful that they think of us as worse than gypsies. While it's not everyone, it does happen.” (person displaced from Ukraine)

While some respondents mentioned that organisations, like the Red Cross, showed significant support and involvement in facilitating integration, concerns remained about the long-term prospects for the people displaced from Ukraine community, especially regarding housing and employment. They also expressed a lingering sense of being outsiders due to occasional reminders of their Ukrainian origin. Instances of discrimination, particularly in public transport interactions, highlighted integration challenges.



“Basically, they show us that our place is not here. There are many incidents on public transport. The ticket inspectors are very condescending, you show one of them your temporary protection document (zakryla) and he says, ‘Show your passport’. [...] There are conflicts like that, but we try to sort of round off the sharp edges, as we have to live here, and we are thankful that we have been accepted here.” (person displaced from Ukraine)

However, most respondents expressed a strong affinity for the living situation, likening it to Ukraine and feeling a sense of comfort and gratitude towards Bulgarians. Additionally, there is an expression of gratitude particularly

towards volunteers who played a significant role in the survival and adaptation of people displaced from Ukraine in Bulgaria. This gratitude extends to interactions with Bulgarian friends, involvement in local activities such as school and sports, and participation in cultural events like celebrations and theatre. Respondents mentioned that younger people displaced from Ukraine who had learned the language, secured employment and enrolled in local schools as an example of fast integration into Bulgaria communities. They also cite Ukrainian children attending Bulgarian educational institutions as evidence of integration. They attribute successful integration to the presence of a supportive community and opportunities for engagement and employment. Most cited personal effort and motivation in integration, stressing that individuals who were committed to learning the language and seeking employment could overcome barriers to adaptation. When discussing adaptation to cultural differences, some respondents emphasised the importance of respecting Bulgarian traditions while still honouring their own.



“Well, we treat the holidays of the Bulgarians with respect, and we also remember our own holidays and celebrate them. It has become so that we consider ourselves to be part of Bulgaria, because we are in such a situation that we must respect them and adapt to their way of life and their services and try to communicate.” (person displaced from Ukraine)

Socio-cultural integration and inclusion:

The respondents expressed a favourable outlook on life in Bulgaria, emphasising the resonance they felt with the language, Slavic origins, and shared traditions reminiscent of their Ukrainian heritage. Their recent

participation in the Surovo festival in Pernik left a lasting impression, as they observed similarities to Ukrainian customs and appreciated the diverse regional representation. They found the festival to be culturally enriching and were pleased by its recognition by the United Nations for its cultural significance.

Reflecting on their community's familiarity with Bulgarian cultural and social aspects, the respondents acknowledge similarities between Bulgarian and their own cultural and religious traditions. These include shared religious calendar days and ceremonies, as well as resemblances in governmental structure stemming from shared experiences during the Soviet era. While they admit to not fully comprehending Bulgarian culture, they express a dedication to immersing themselves in it and believe they understood it sufficiently. Respondents mentioned starting to learn the basics of Bulgarian culture, such as national food, clothing, and some holidays, with limited knowledge of traditions.

Additionally, interactions with Bulgarian friends, their children's engagement in school and sports, and the warmth of shared celebrations and holidays were emphasised. They were grateful for available artistic opportunities like involvement with the School of Choreography and Theatre.

Several respondents discussed differences between social standards or expectations and legislations in Ukraine and Bulgaria. They highlighted certain customs and legislative disparities, particularly regarding smoking habits. In Ukraine, there's been a societal shift against smoking, backed by legislation, whereas in Bulgaria, smoking seemed more pervasive, even in public places like buses. This stark contrast, especially witnessing pregnant women being exposed to second-hand smoke, was noted as disconcerting to them. They reminisce about the respect for elders and the lack of public smoking back home. They express disappointment and concern over what they perceive as a lack of awareness about the harmful effects of



smoking in Bulgaria. Despite this challenge, they mention their adaptation strategy of distancing themselves from smokers.

The complexities of mixed feelings about trust for the local community:

Regarding trust in the host community, some respondents' expressed uncertainty, indicating a lack of clarity. They suggest that the level of trust from the host community varies depending on the context but generally believe there is some level of trust. Factors such as the willingness to learn Bulgarian, proficiency in English, and effective communication contribute to trust-building. They viewed themselves as guests who should respect the customs, rules, and laws of the country they reside in. When asked, do you or your community trust the host community in which you live now? And what do you think, does the host community trust you? A respondent said,

"Yes. We trust them, you could say, because we're guests here and we should respect the hosts...And we should follow those customs, rules and laws which exist in the state...They are similar, they're familiar, and if a person is normal and civilised, then you could say that there isn't any kind of difficulty for us". The respondent continued, *"there are people with different political opinions and from different political parties. Those who are really from the older generation and who have lived through a hard time who still know what war is like first hand, these people of course understand and treat us with understanding and compassion."*

Some respondents acknowledged varying levels of trust within it, especially among different generations and political affiliations. They noted that older Bulgarian generations, having firsthand experience of hardship and conflict, tended to understand and empathise with the Ukrainian community, offering support

and compassion. This solidarity stemmed from the shared recognition that conflict can impact anyone. Other respondents reflected on the level of trust between the Ukrainian community and the Bulgarian host community, emphasising that trust is influenced by individual attitudes and behaviours. While appreciating the acceptance received, one respondent mentioned recognizing the importance of building trust through positive interactions and contributions to society. However, they remained sceptical about the existence of significant trust between the two communities, believing that doubts and uncertainties may exist on both sides. The respondent pointed out the pervasive influence of misinformation, leading to questioning the validity of information and relying more on self-trust. This sentiment underscored the challenges of fostering trust in a complex and uncertain environment.

The sentiment regarding trust towards foreigners in Bulgarian society appeared nuanced. While there were instances where trust was lacking, particularly if some respondents had experienced host community negative behaviour, there was also recognition that good behaviour often goes unnoticed while bad behaviour tends to garner attention and spread. This observation reflected many respondents' understanding of human nature and the impact of perception. The perception of societal dynamics, particularly in Bulgarian society, was nuanced and multifaceted.



“I don't know. It seems to me that there isn't anyone to trust much, because the information space is filled with information which is half.. I believe that there is nothing true in that information. Otherwise, you are forced to only trust yourself now and only count on yourself.”(host community member)

However, some respondents believed that they and their community were generally trusted by the host community. They attribute this trust to the ongoing support they've received over the past two years from local organisations like the Red Cross, who provided assistance upon their arrival.

Respondents reflected on significant personal growth and changes in their interactions with Bulgarians over the years. While full assimilation into Bulgarian culture might not be feasible, they believed fostering mutual understanding and harmony was possible. Despite cultural differences, there was a prevailing sense of trust and acceptance towards outsiders, indicating openness to integration and coexistence. However, practical barriers like financial constraints hindered efforts to learn the language and fully integrate into society.

Other refugees and migrants

Mixed experiences of adaptation:

The KIs and FGDs conducted with Syrian, Iranian, and Afghan refugees and migrants offer valuable insights into their experiences and the societal attitudes they encountered in Bulgaria. The narratives shared by the respondents illuminated various dimensions of their lives, highlighting themes of aspirations for family reunification, the pursuit of better opportunities, a blend of gratitude for the hospitality of the Bulgarians, concerns about discrimination, and challenges related to integration and living expenses.

Many respondents' express appreciation for the kindness and hospitality extended by Bulgarians. They feel genuinely welcomed and supported by the local community, recounting instances of strangers offering assistance whenever lost, sometimes even accompanying them to their destinations, and often only using hand gestures to communicate since they did not know Bulgarian. Furthermore, the respondents articulated aspirations for improved opportunities and a brighter future for themselves and their families. This included

access to education and employment, reflecting their aspirations to rebuild their lives and attain stability and prosperity. Almost all noted their intention to stay in the country, while a few discussed moving to other countries in Europe. No one reported an interest in returning to their home country.

Despite acknowledging Bulgaria's beauty and the kindness of its people, all respondents mentioned the language barrier as a significant challenge to integration. However, despite language barriers, Bulgarians generally were described as going out of their way to assist refugees, whether helping with translations or offering to play sports together. These acts of kindness extended beyond respondent interactions and reflect a broader culture of tolerance and acceptance within Bulgarian society. Positive experiences, such as a Bulgarian man assisting with house hunting or strangers taking the time to help navigate the city, highlighted the warmth and generosity of Bulgarians towards refugees. These interactions fostered a sense of belonging and gratitude among refugees despite their economic challenges.



"I adore this country because it granted me safety and official documents, especially during the toughest times of war in Syria. Bulgaria provided security for my children, who suffered greatly during the conflict. My daughter developed psychological issues after witnessing arrests at a young age. When we arrived in Bulgaria, she received therapy through Caritas, where we stayed for nearly a year. The government expedited the paperwork process, which was a relief." (Syrian refugee)

High cost of living in Bulgaria was frequently mentioned as a challenge by respondents, and it was mentioned to be intensified due to the lack of subsidies (food stamps) for essential goods to those in need. Tight work

schedules and the high cost of living were mentioned as leaving minimal to no time for socialisation, making it even more challenging in forming meaningful friendships with host communities.

Interactions and adjusting to a different culture:

The perspectives respondents shared highlighted differences in customs and traditions between their home countries and Bulgaria, with Syrian and Afghan societies mentioned as being more conservative than Bulgaria's more open-minded society. This was not reported as a negative but merely as a comparison. Respondents appreciate the freedom to express opinions and discuss sensitive topics that may be taboo in their countries of origin. While respondents mentioned several negative experiences that were encountered when they were living in refugee camps or collective accommodation centres in Bulgaria, such as poor living conditions, sanitation and health issues, they emphasised their other interactions with the Bulgarian society and even government officials as being generally positive, with processes and standards that worked at various degrees of speed.

Respondents mentioned engaging with coworkers had been helpful in offering insight into Bulgarian culture and customs. Some focus group respondents had lengthy conversations about interesting festivals and customs they had learned about Bulgarian society, such as customs of exchanging treats. One Syrian woman recounted her family's fondness of the cultural celebrations before New Year's festivities in Bulgaria. She shared her family's love for Christmas, especially since her eldest child's birthday fell on December 24th, a delightful coincidence that often-brought laughter to their household. Reflecting on the overlapping holidays, she noted how the tradition of bringing candies to work and school on one's naming day (imen-day) created a perpetual sense of celebration among colleagues. She recounted her children's eagerness to participate in this custom, eagerly

anticipating their own birthdays to share treats with others.

While recognizing the importance of understanding and adapting to Bulgarian customs and norms, refugees and migrants mentioned struggling with the complexities of reconciling their cultural heritage with the realities of life in Bulgaria. Efforts to bridge these cultural gaps were evident, as respondents mentioned their participation in seminars and courses offered by organisations such as the Refugee Women's Organization and Caritas. These initiatives provide opportunities for refugees and migrants to learn about Bulgarian cultural and societal norms, language, and share insights into their own customs and traditions.

However, navigating these differences can be complex, as refugees and migrants found certain aspects of Bulgarian culture unfamiliar or incompatible with their beliefs. For example, respondents noted that the discussions around gender roles and relationships reveal divergent perspectives. While Bulgarian customs may permit cohabitation without marriage, some respondents expressed discomfort with this practice, citing cultural or religious

beliefs that prioritise marital commitment and modesty. Similarly, while Bulgaria's legal framework supports women's rights, including custody of children and access to education and employment, some respondents came from societies where such rights were not guaranteed. Most didn't express judgement of these differences, but merely were identifying difference they were navigating in their home cultures versus Bulgaria. While some migrants and refugees mentioned coming from conservative backgrounds, they expressed admiration for the liberating atmosphere in Bulgaria, advocating for autonomy and the right to make personal choices without undue influence. Overall, the principle of freedom, tempered by the responsibility to avoid causing harm to others, underscores respondents' aspirations for self-determination and respect for diversity within society.

Despite the cultural differences, some respondents cited common ground with Bulgarian customs and traditions, particularly in shared holidays and celebrations. Additionally, similarities in folklore, clothing styles, and culinary preferences, such as using red in attire and preparing dishes like stuffed vine leaves



“sarmitki”, served as points of connection between Iranian migrants and Bulgarian culture. Respondents appreciated participating in and learning about Bulgarian traditions and expressed joy in shared celebrations and meaningful rituals that fostered a sense of belonging and connection to their adopted homeland. Some respondents particularly admired Bulgarian music, finding beauty in traditional folk songs and classical compositions. However, not all cultural practices seamlessly integrate into the migrant experience. For some Syrian respondents, differences in dietary preferences and unfamiliarity with Bulgarian cuisine posed challenges, especially with school lunches, with their children taking time to adapt to the new cuisine.

Through these experiences, migrants and refugees continued to navigate the delicate balance between preserving their own cultural heritage and embracing the tapestry of Bulgarian customs and traditions. Overall, the respondent’s reflections highlighted a spirit of openness, tolerance, and mutual understanding, which they believed underpinned harmonious coexistence between different cultures within Bulgarian society. Some respondents appreciated the presence of mosques for Muslims and churches for Christians, as well as the acceptance of atheists.

However, some respondents also acknowledged discrimination within Bulgarian society, particularly towards those who were visibly different or perceived as foreign. They recounted instances where language barriers or cultural differences led to difficulties in accessing services or receiving assistance. Some respondents noted examples of discrimination against veiled Muslim women, highlighting the complex intersection of ethnicity, religion, and appearance in shaping experiences of acceptance and rejection within the community. One respondent recounted a distressing incident experienced by a veiled friend who was bullied and assaulted while at the metro. While most of the respondents acknowledged feeling a change in treatment upon being recognized as non-Bulgarian, they mentioned that they had

not personally experienced such extreme forms of discrimination. Nonetheless, they recognized the impact of appearance and ethnicity on social interactions and societal acceptance.



“I have a friend who is veiled, even when she calls for a taxi, it won’t stop for her. One time, when she and I were going out, we stopped one taxi, then another taxi, then the third taxi. I told her to go back and that I would try to stop one alone. I called the taxi, and it stopped for me. When I started to get in, I called her. Once he saw that she was with me, he told me to get off, which means she was exposed to this thing. One time, she was at the metro; they bullied her and threw her to the ground. She was exposed to this due to the fact that she was veiled and looked like an Iraqi of a different complexion, but for me, I was never exposed to this thing, ever, ever. But perhaps I feel some change in treatment once anyone knows that I am not Bulgarian because of a change in features or appearance. I mean, I feel this thing, but for me, it is normal.” (refugee woman)

Despite these challenges, the respondent maintained a pragmatic outlook, recognizing that acceptance and rejection are common societal experiences. They reflected on their own experiences, with some respondents recognizing the advantage of not being visibly identifiable in a way that could lead to discrimination, while still showing empathy towards those who faced prejudice based on their appearance or cultural identity.

Host Communities

Efforts to build trust in both communities:

Trust was identified as a pivotal element that underpins effective collaboration and

successful outcomes in refugee integration efforts by host respondents. Conversations dove into the intricate dynamics of trust within the framework of refugee support, encompassing various stakeholders like volunteers, NGOs, healthcare workers, and national authorities.

One of the key points raised by host respondents was the importance of openness, organisation, clear commitment, and communication among the involved parties. These aspects were noted to be essential for establishing and nurturing trust among the various stakeholders. The respondents also underscored the economic benefits migrants bring, particularly in sectors where there's a demand for workers that locals may not prefer. Host community members noted they believed that wages and work conditions were better in Bulgaria compared to the Middle East, offering significant advantages for refugees in terms of work contracts and health insurance. However, they noted that with Bulgaria's high unemployment rates, migrants often struggle to find jobs and access essential services, posing integration challenges.



"I personally think that the benefits for them are great - they come to a peaceful country, in the European Union, they have security, and they get a roof over their heads. About them specifically, from my point of view, I am in awe of Ukrainian refugees, because there are many people over 70 years old, and they've left everything behind and have come here, in Sofia, in Bulgaria, it doesn't matter which city. They're trying to integrate, they're getting jobs, they find housing, and they just have my admiration, because at that age it's not easy to part with your homeland and start a new life." (host community member)



"First for them, I think wages here are far better than the wages in the Arab world. I also think the work conditions here are quite guaranteed, there are work contracts, health insurance, which is not of small importance for the refugees... As far as the Bulgarian work market, we have a niche, a demand in construction and the need of such workers, it would make a difference." (host community member)

Based on the data from migrants from outside of Ukraine, these assumptions by the host community may be inaccurate, as it was not clear if the migrants had consistent work contracts or health insurance from their jobs. Host community respondents believed migrants/refugees accepted jobs in various sectors like trade, construction, and food businesses, which not only benefit the economy but also create employment opportunities for both Bulgarians and migrants. Host community members shared examples of successful businesses owned by Middle Eastern migrants, such as fast food and doner places, highlighting their role as significant employers and contributors to Bulgaria's economy, while also acknowledging the complexities and challenges associated with immigration, integration, and access to resources.



"They help the economy that way, they take up jobs that the local population, for example, doesn't want to take up. In different areas. From trade to construction [...]" (host community member)



“Yes, they are definitely creating jobs for hundreds of people when they open businesses.” (host community member)

Acknowledging their positive impact, concerns were raised by host respondents about migrants' intentions and their potential effects on national identity and social cohesion. Host respondents noted that it was essential to avoid generalising migrants based on individual actions, as this could lead to discrimination and perpetuate negative stereotypes. Negative incidents or abuses of resources by some individuals was noted as possibly leading to tensions and impacted trust between the host community and immigrants. The need to avoid generalisations and understand individual circumstances was also emphasised to prevent worsening relationships.



“For example, a refugee is not acting in good faith, he is not acting right, he is not grateful, or for example, he receives aid, which, from our subjective point of view, maybe he doesn't need hugely... and with this point of view, the whole refugee community gets generalised.” (host community member)

Further discussions revolved around the impact of political agendas and negative portrayals on immigrant communities, with concerns raised about politicians influencing public perception, potentially leading to harm or stereotyping certain groups of people. One respondent remarked, “Politicians are dangerous, not everyday people.” However, host community respondents generally believed that cultural and religious differences could impede integration, with a consensus that full integration might not be achievable. Concerns were also raised about cultural impositions

as migrant communities expand and the challenges, they face in integrating into the host society.



“If the given community grows from a minority into more, then they start to impose their own culture and that behaviour of theirs, which is foreign to our society, could be where the problem is hiding.” (host community member)

The significance of education, social courses, and language learning programs was emphasized as vital for successful integration. There was a focus on teaching working habits and language skills to facilitate better adaptation to the new environment.

Stereotypical perceptions of migrants

Some host community respondents made generalisations about people from non-European countries, assuming they lack knowledge about health insurance and perpetuating negative stereotypes. Some assumed ignorance among non-European migrants, blaming them for not understanding healthcare systems, and overlooking potential systemic barriers.



“The issue with health insurance there, they don't even know what it means to have health insurance. Because these countries don't have that there. When the free health insurance stops, you need to pay for it yourself.” (host community member)

However, this study revealed that some host community members used terms like ‘negroes’ or ‘mulattoes’ to refer to people of African descent, and they grouped together individuals from different ethnic backgrounds

in a derogatory manner, based on their origins or perceived characteristics. This behaviour not only showed insensitivity but also reinforced negative stereotypes and prejudices existing within Bulgarian society, though Bulgarian cultural experts are better positioned to assess the nature of these statements.

For example, one respondent mentioned, “I don't think about the ones from Ukraine. I think about those who came through the border fence: ‘negroes’, Arabs, so on...Afghans, Balkans...”

Another comment observed, “Hey, you can see the daughters of the former students in the 70s the ‘negroes’, their daughters are sympathetic mulattoes, so I personally don't mind as far as behind this.” (host community member)

These quotes appear to highlight the usage of derogatory language and the categorization of people based on ethnic backgrounds, perpetuating harmful stereotypes and attitudes towards marginalized groups within Bulgarian society.

Theme Three: Integration Challenges and Solutions

Ukrainians

Frustrations regarding housing:

People displaced from Ukraine noted challenges in securing suitable housing, including discrimination by landlords against Ukrainian tenants and the difficulty in finding affordable accommodation. Some respondents recounted their difficult experiences when looking to rent apartments, acknowledging the financial burden, particularly for those dependent on pensions. They stated that having jobs enabled them to sustain themselves, highlighting the economic dimension of resettlement.



“I can tell you honestly that in Ukraine we were pensioners and in principle our pension was enough for a normal life, but once we came here it became a bit difficult, a bit difficult. And it is very uncomfortable to go and ask for things, very uncomfortable.” (person displaced from Ukraine)

When asked about experiences living with Bulgarians or in state accommodation, respondents acknowledged receiving significant help upon arriving in Bulgaria, particularly with basic necessities and advice. However, they recount a negative encounter when seeking financial assistance for rent, including poor treatment at the government offices, derogatory remarks, and negative behaviours. Despite a few minor incidents, the respondent generally felt well-treated by the community, though this particular situation was exceptionally unpleasant and unique.



“Well, we are different at the end of the day and there is a feeling that we are outsiders here.” (person displaced from Ukraine)

However, they also acknowledged the challenges of adapting to a new country. For example, some respondents shared their concerns regarding their continued university schooling while being displaced due to the conflict in Ukraine. They mention the high

financial stress of covering the costs of their studies and having temporary protection in their current residence. They expressed that their sense of belonging to the host community was mixed, describing it as 50/50. While society generally accepted them, they noted a sense of neutrality and didn't have close relationships with everyone.



“Well, I think it is 50/50 and it doesn't just depend on the hosting side, but on us as well. Just like any community, there are different people, different opinions and different personalities. One person might be used to having everything brought to them on a platter and demands the same here and what right do they have to that? Of course not. Yes, this is why as I said, it is a real shame if just because of the behaviour of certain countrymen of ours, and such cases did occur, that there is a poor opinion getting formed of us too.” (person displaced from Ukraine)

Other refugees and migrants

The respondents mentioned sincerely trying to integrate into Bulgarian society but acknowledged the challenges. Cultural differences, language barriers, and obstacles in securing housing and employment were highlighted as the main barriers to integration into Bulgarian society. Respondents admitted that they hadn't fully become a part of the society yet, primarily due to limited resources and opportunities for integration. For example, some Syrian respondents mentioned that their comfort zone remained within communities of fellow refugees or Arabs, where they felt more at ease and understood. Despite their efforts to learn the language and adapt to local customs, they were still hesitant and uncertain when interacting with Bulgarian citizens or

entering spaces predominantly frequented by the locals. However, the respondent remained optimistic about the potential for integration and genuinely desired to become a part of Bulgarian society. They recounted positive encounters with respectful and kind Bulgarians, which instilled hope and a sense of appreciation for their new home.

The respondents' narratives conveyed a mix of hope, uncertainty, and determination amidst their integration in Bulgaria. Several respondents mentioned feeling uncertainty of their situation, especially regarding employment and housing, casts a shadow over their sense of stability and confidence in the future. However, despite the challenges, they recognized Bulgaria as a beautiful and welcoming country, unlike anywhere else they've been.

An Afghan respondent echoed the sentiment and referred to their current residence as “our home” but admits to lacking the same confidence and security in their country of origin. Bulgarians are seen as welcoming and inclusive, especially in everyday interactions like at the hairdresser or in shops. Some respondents viewed their children's experience as integral to feeling a part of Bulgarian society. Their children, having grown up in Bulgaria, identified strongly with the country as their own, and they noted, are more likely to speak the language, and embody a sense of belonging that surpasses their connection to their country of origin. Access to education played a key role in facilitating this experience for them and their children.



“Actually, it's my children who are Bulgarian. They think like Bulgarians because they're children and they were both [brought up] in Bulgaria.” (Afghan refugee)

Language barrier hindered daily life:

Respondents reflected on the difficulties of learning Bulgarian. They acknowledged that mastering Bulgarian was challenging, likening it to English but emphasising its additional complexity. Some mentioned that despite their daily efforts to learn the language and engage with Bulgarians, progress was slow due to work, and survival demands. To some respondents, while they hadn't faced direct hostility or discrimination, they felt frustrated when struggling to communicate or relying on translation apps during social interactions, often making them perceived as outsiders. While there was a desire to learn the language, access to language courses was cited as limited and while English or Turkish could facilitate basic communication, language remained a substantial barrier to full integration.



“When I first came to the country, my main difficulty was not speaking Bulgarian. It made me feel helpless because no one understood me, and I couldn't understand them. I had trouble expressing myself or understanding others.” (refugee)

Finding work in Bulgaria was noted as challenging, particularly for respondents who faced language barriers. While some reported having an easier time securing employment due to their experience or skills, the consensus was that it's a difficult endeavour. Despite efforts to connect job seekers with employers through organisations like Caritas, many still struggled to find opportunities. Language proficiency, especially in Bulgarian, was cited as the most significant obstacle to employment. This resulted in widespread financial struggles that were pervasive among these respondents and families, with high rent prices, insufficient income, and limited job opportunities contributing to significant financial strain.



“Finding work was challenging without any support available. People had to rely on their own resources and networks, such as asking friends, neighbours, or searching independently, to find job opportunities. There wasn't a dedicated agency to assist with job placement or support in this regard.” (refugee)

Even if a person spoke Bulgarian, additional language skills could still be required depending on the workplace's linguistic environment. For example, while someone may work in an Arabic-speaking team within a Bulgarian company, administrative functions often require proficiency in Bulgarian or English. The respondents also emphasised the significant barrier posed by language in their daily interactions, particularly when engaging with government offices or essential services like the municipality or passport offices.

Experiences in the refugee camps

Reflecting on their experience as a refugee, respondents critiqued the lack of support provided upon leaving the refugee camp or collective accommodation centres in Bulgaria. They suggested that refugees should receive financial assistance upon arrival to help them navigate their new environment and prioritise language learning during their stay in the camp.



“Yes. After 15 days they make us leave the camp, we have to leave. Before our families came it was OK. There would be four of us living in an apartment and each pays a small share. Now each of us has to pay a full rent. Before that it was 250 lev or 300. That's why we could manage. But now everything we make is spent on rent. And we have children who want things and have needs, and the worst thing is not to be able to meet their needs. It's very difficult for a parent.” (refugee)



“I personally will honestly speak to you, God willing. The camp situation is very bad. Firstly, there was no cleanliness: the mattresses were old, passed from one to another, and then from one to another again. The food was offered two times a day, and they gave us food that was not as filling as it should be, meaning it was all about quelling hunger and nothing more. But first and foremost, the cleanliness and hygiene situation is very, very bad. There are insects in the mattresses and in the bathrooms, and there are many, many bad conditions.” (refugee)

Regarding accommodation in refugee camps, there were concerns about cleanliness and overcrowding, especially given the presence of families and children. While acknowledging the efforts of the Bulgarian government in providing campsites, there is a call for better organisation and separation of residents. Proposals include segregating singles from families to maintain cleanliness and hygiene standards.

Concerns regarding housing:

Transitioning from a refugee camp to independent living brought forth additional challenges. Securing housing and employment became urgent priorities, especially with those the responsibility of providing for children. Despite receiving residency and governmental support, Bulgaria’s limited resources for refugees compounded the struggle, exacerbating feelings of isolation and helplessness. One parent noted that their experience looking for accommodations without adequate financial means, the prospect of navigating daily life with their three young children in tow became daunting.

While refugees appreciated the hospitality and respect shown by Bulgarians, they also felt a lack of support from government agencies,

particularly regarding housing assistance. However, respondents were thankful for the assistance from organisations like Caritas, who they noted provided crucial support, such as enrolling the children in school and facilitating childcare during the individual’s work hours. Respondents noted that heating expenses could become a considerable sum, particularly in the winter, as reflected in the individual’s experience of paying 2150 lev for heating in the previous year. The transition from monthly to annual billing for hot water and heating further complicates budgeting and financial planning. Furthermore, respondents describe the frustration of landlords who are unwilling to provide the necessary residency addresses, forcing them to rely on costly intermediaries. Complaints about exploitation by landlords and real estate brokers, particularly targeting Syrian refugees, are prevalent. This exploitation includes inflated rent prices, additional fees, and substandard living conditions.



“Not all landlords provide a formal address for residency purposes. While some do, others, like the lady who owned the house I lived in, no longer do because her husband, who used to handle such matters, has passed away. This lack of official address poses a challenge, especially when trying to process passports for the children. It’s unclear whom to approach or where to go for assistance in resolving this issue.” (refugee)

Respondents mentioned finding their new environment difficult due to challenges in finding housing. The process of finding accommodation often required refugees to go through brokers and pay substantial upfront costs, including rent, security deposits, and broker fees, which was reported to be a considerable financial burden. The use of a broker was not reported by people displaced from Ukraine and could be one of the results of the significant language barrier refugees from other countries experienced

in Bulgaria, amongst other reasons. It is worth further research into the use of brokers and if any exploitation is occurring regarding work and housing access.

Many respondents detailed the amount they were paid versus the cost of living and housing. All reported having to work tirelessly for months to cover these initial expenses and housing down payments. Some refugees and migrants recount experiences of exploitation and discriminatory practices, particularly in the housing market, where landlords could refuse to rent to individuals of Arab descent.



“We have had both good and bad experiences. The good one is that the country is peaceful, and our thought is focusing on studies and work. But there are also problems. The problems are homelessness, and no one gives rent to the refugees, and we are facing problems.” (refugee)

Finding employment opportunities was challenging:

Respondents mentioned challenges in finding employment opportunities. Many respondents detailed the amount they were paid versus the cost of living and housing. All reported having to work tirelessly for months to cover these initial expenses and housing down payments. Some refugees and migrants detailed experiences of exploitation by individuals within their own community, such as a Syrian intermediary taking money from them to secure employment opportunities.



‘Interestingly, we found jobs through a Syrian man, but he charged us for it. Though it was technically optional, refusing to pay meant losing the job.’ (refugee)

Further discriminatory practices in the work environment were another frequently mentioned challenge that refugees and migrants encountered. Despite doing the same work, respondents’ expressed frustration with wage disparities between Bulgarians and themselves. They note that Bulgarians earned significantly higher wages and received additional compensation for weekend work, whereas refugees were paid lower wages without extra benefits. While refugees acknowledged that they chose to work for less out of necessity, they also felt trapped, as refusing to comply could mean losing their jobs and jeopardising their livelihoods. They also noted disparities in holiday pay between Syrians and workers from Greece, Turkey, and Bulgaria. This wage discrepancy exacerbated the financial difficulties refugees and migrants faced, making it challenging for them to support themselves and their families.



“A Bulgarian earns 18 lev while we only receive eight, despite working more hours doing the same job. Also, Bulgarians get compensated for Saturdays and Sundays, but we receive nothing for those days.” (refugee)

“During holidays, such as New Year’s, while other workers from Greece, Turkey, and Bulgaria receive their full pay, Syrian refugees like me often receive little to nothing, perhaps only eight Lev. Additionally, while others in the same company are compensated for working Saturdays and Sundays, refugees are not paid for these days.” (Syrian refugee)

Employment posed a significant challenge, especially for individuals with regulated professions such as law or medicine. The process of gaining recognition for one’s qualifications was arduous, involving examinations and financial investment. However,

even with acknowledgment of their degrees from another country, respondents noted there was no guarantee of being able to practise law or medicine in Bulgaria. Respondents who had studied law in their home countries noted that obtaining legal degrees requires additional training, courses, and completing internships, which were inaccessible. The necessity to relearn, change professional profiles, and establish oneself anew adds to the burden of adaptation and integration. For example, despite being grateful for receiving a 30-year valid passport and a travel document from the Bulgarian government, one respondent mentioned facing challenges in finding employment as a medical doctor. He reported diligently seeking opportunities in various medical settings, including general practice, assisting roles, and specialised hospitals like Pirogov or endocrinology centres, but has faced rejection or lack of referrals. Another respondent who was educated as a lawyer in Syria, mentioned that he had to work in various roles to provide for his family, including positions in sales, childcare, and even sewing. Other respondents talked about the day-labourer jobs that they took, which often required long hours and multiple shifts. Another respondent expressed frustration at being unable to pursue education due to time consuming day-labourer jobs.



“The Bulgarian government issued me a travel document instead of a 30-year valid passport, for which I am grateful. However, since last December until now, I have been tirelessly seeking employment, knocking on every door in search of work.” (refugee)

Issues with timely and affordable healthcare:

Access to healthcare presents another challenge, with respondents facing difficulty obtaining affordable medicine and timely medical appointments. Some recounted long wait times and high treatment costs, highlighting

the barriers to accessing adequate healthcare services. Additionally, the respondents highlighted the importance of health insurance for refugees, noting its benefits in accessing medical care and receiving discounts on treatments. While they had yet to obtain health insurance due to financial constraints, they acknowledged its significance for maintaining health and well-being.



“Not having health insurance due to financial constraints is a challenge I’m facing. For refugees in general, having health insurance means registering the family, accessing medical care, and benefiting from discounts. It’s a valuable resource that many of my girlfriends have, and it’s proven beneficial, saving them money on medical treatments.” (refugee)

One respondent’s anecdote about the difficulty in accessing medical care during childbirth due to lack of documentation highlights systemic barriers faced by refugees, exacerbating the already challenging circumstances they endure. Respondents describe the dire consequences of inadequate medical care, such as the inability to obtain essential medication, which can have devastating effects on respondents and families, including children suffering from serious health conditions. They recount instances where families had to resort to desperate measures, such as seeking medication from their home countries or neighbouring countries due to the unavailability of medicine locally.



“When I was in the refugee camp, one family that was also there had six children, and all six of them had skin problems; they couldn’t sleep at night and couldn’t afford medicine. I also know some families who had to call their families back home and they had to get the medicine through Turkey.” (refugee)



“A while back I went to the medical academy to have my teeth fixed. They were students training. I said I had a tooth that I need to remove. The doctor who was training asked the faculty to remove the tooth, but they refused. He said this is for Bulgarians, don’t remove it. The doctor told me there is racism and they’re not allowing me to remove it. I paid 10 Leva so that they would remove it – here’s the tooth, they removed it. That’s the truth. This is the sort of thing we are facing.” (refugee)

Complex administrative and bureaucratic processes:

Migrants and refugees mentioned continued difficulties in obtaining housing or a fixed address, which was necessary for various purposes, including education enrolment. Moreover, respondents also mentioned that some landlords were unwilling to rent to migrants, regardless of having the necessary documents from authorities. This, in turn, complicated administrative processes such as obtaining passports for their children and getting an ID card, known as the Lichna Card, which are essential for refugees, but can only be obtained if one has a verifiable address. This lack of a fixed address also impacts other aspects of daily life, such as opening a bank account. Despite having all the required documents, including a salary slip and passport, some banks, were mentioned to still refuse to open an account for refugees, adding to their frustrations and hindering their ability to access financial services.

Another challenge arose when migrants and refugees attempted to obtain a Bulgarian driving licence. Despite possessing the required qualifications, such as high school or university diplomas, bureaucratic hurdles impede the process. This was mainly because the notary and registry offices sometimes

refuse to certify copies of original documents, complicating the verification process and delaying the issuance of licences.



“I face the challenge of needing a driver’s licence to drive in most European countries. To obtain one, I must speak Bulgarian or English. However, not all Syrian or refugee individuals speak English, and learning Bulgarian within a year is tough.” (Syrian refugee)

“Obtaining a Bulgarian driving licence is tough due to documentation requirements. I need to show my high school diploma or university certificate. But the Notary Registry office won’t accept my original documents or certify copies without a seal or stamp from the Foreign Office. This is hard for refugees like me, as it’s tough to get documents authenticated from our home countries.” (refugee)

Furthermore, frustrations arose regarding access to public transportation, with the respondent questioning why certain benefits, such as free bus tickets, are not extended to Syrian refugees. They highlighted the challenges they face in obtaining residency permits, often resorting to expensive brokers who charge exorbitant fees of €400 to €500 per person. This financial burden extended beyond rent to include basic supplies like sugar, tea, and food, which they struggled to afford without regular assistance from NGOs. This bureaucratic red tape frustrated refugees’ efforts to integrate into Bulgarian society and access essential services, highlighting the need for streamlined procedures and greater flexibility in documentation requirements.

Finally, there were some complaints about enrolling children into school, though others seemed to have a more seamless experience:



“We went to the [unintelligible] organisation. They said do you want your children to go to school? We said we would really like that. They said wait three or four months maybe we’ll find a school for you. But why should it take three or four months, there are many regular schools like government schools. This is why we’re not [unintelligible] to send our children to school.” (refugee)

“My eldest daughter is at school and the younger one hasn’t gone to kindergarten yet because she is less than three years old. Yes, very easy to enroll my daughter.” (refugee)

Host Communities

Religion, culture, and “purity” related beliefs against building trust:

Religion and cultural differences also surface as factors influencing trust and integration. Respondents discussed the challenges posed by differing religions and ways of life, especially when immigrants may not express a willingness to adapt or integrate. The mention of Muslim brotherhoods and potential incidents akin to those seen in France underscored the complexity of religious and cultural diversity within host countries, highlighting the need for careful navigation and understanding to foster trust and harmonious coexistence¹. There were expressions of fear of religious influence, and imposition, with a specific mention of not wanting Bulgaria to follow the example of countries like Germany in allowing the construction of mosques. Another host community respondent expressed concern about immigrants’ intentions to spread their faith and start families in Bulgaria, and they

can be the source of rapid misinformation in the country. These ideologies from the host community portrayed their intolerance for religious diversity, primarily targeting the Muslim communities.



“Because of their religion, the way of life, it is difficult, if not to say impossible. Well, there are such groups which are Muslim brotherhoods, and it is possible to give rise to incidence such as in France, and they wouldn’t want to adapt here. We are a Christian country, and we are just incompatible.” (host community member)

“I just don’t want the religion to be influenced in Bulgaria, I want to stress on that. Yes, the Islamic faith in Bulgaria. I don’t want it to happen like in Germany, where they allowed them to build mosques.” (host community member)

“Purity” also emerged in the responses of a host communities, who expressed a preference for their nation’s “purity”. They favoured those refugees who they believe can better assimilate into Bulgarian society, such as the Syrian refugees. They expressed disapproval for refugees coming primarily for economic reasons, especially from Afghanistan and North African countries, citing concerns about preserving Bulgaria’s religious identity and societal values. Some respondent expressed a somewhat accepting attitude toward certain groups, such as those from Ukraine, while focusing more on those they perceive as coming “through the border fence” like people of African and Arab descent, which again, implies potentially racist assumptions and beliefs.

¹ This is potentially referencing terrorist bombings attributed to Islamic terrorist groups in France, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34818994>



“I am a follower of the Orban system.² I would like our nation to remain pure. I think the closest to us are the Syrian refugees which I welcome, and I think they could be socialised with us. The rest who are here for economic reasons are not welcome. Especially from Afghanistan and African countries like Tunisia, Alger, Morocco.” (host community member)

Some respondent expressed a somewhat accepting attitude toward certain groups, such as those from Ukraine, while focusing more on those they perceive as coming “through the border fence” like people of African and Arab descent, which again, implies potentially racist assumptions and beliefs.

Some respondents mentioned seeing mixed-race descendants of past students from Middle Eastern and African descent and seem to suggest that this diversity is not necessarily a negative thing, implying that it could enrich society. One speaker also touched on broader societal issues, including their feeling of lacking national dignity and personal identity.



“Hey, you can see the daughters of the former students in the 70s the “negroes”, their daughters are sympathetic mulattoes, so I personally don’t mind as far as behind this. There are no goals and tasks which are not being told. As far as if they are enriching us, everything is enriching us. We are in the [bad]shape right now, everything from everywhere is enriching us, because we are lacking the feeling of national dignity. And we have almost lost our personal as well.” (host community member)

Inhibition to integrate due to fear of refugees bringing in risks, radicalization and instability into Bulgaria:

There were conflicting beliefs within the host community respondents as to how to accept and integrate migrants and refugees into their society. On the one hand, there was an expectation to not ignore the potential risks, such as terrorism from the incoming migrants, along with offering compassion and welcoming them. They emphasised the need for certain information and assurances before extending an invitation, such as, the importance of knowing the person’s identity, assessing potential risks, confirming their physical and mental condition, checking for any criminal history, and understanding their intentions.



“I mean, we need to treat them as people, who are fleeing from a disaster, and also to stay wary at the same time, that there aren’t any terrorists amongst them, or people who may harm our community and our country. That’s it. We need to be careful after all, but we need to be humane. They are people fleeing from disaster, from wars, from regimes, and so on.” (host community member)

“Because if anyone wants, they’re welcome and I would invite them to my home. But I need to know who he is. What is their name? Is it risky? Is it really their name? Are they physically and mentally fit? They have any sort of criminal background? What is their intention? Simply this crossing of the border is crossing a street is absolutely absurd.” (host community member)

² A follower of ideologies of the Hungary’s Prime Minister Viktor Orban, a prominent voice against migration into the European Union.



“It’s very rare to hear that some immigrant has done something good, positive and nice. As far as the criminal report being blown out by the media and creates a negative impression, I don’t know what has been done, and also their international documents norms which we need to follow”. (host community member)

There were questions on the motives behind refugees’ journeys from places like Afghanistan and Africa, suggesting hidden agendas and interests. There were also concerns about potential security threats and radicalization among migrants, emphasising the need for observation and caution that may have an impact on Bulgarian safety and stability.



“No, I think this is not a natural process, it is being directed by someone and there are money and interests hidden because nobody would go from Afghanistan and Africa and cross tens of borders... Walk on foot, and with the boats risking their lives... What is the hidden agenda [...] All people who live in poverty and watch TV and see how people live in the rich countries, and they dream to be there, but does it mean that all of the Africa, Asia and Arab peninsula needs to move here.” (host community member)

“Well, there might be terrorists amongst them, and that’s probably the case. We need to be careful; they need to be observed.” (host community member)

However, amongst all the fears, there were expectations that the refugees or migrants understand and abide by the laws of the host

country, which host community members thought were crucial for maintaining order, and they acknowledge the need to treat the refugees humanely. *“But firstly, they need to know our laws and keep order, but I don’t really see any effects. It benefits them more than us.”*



“Look, firstly, we need to protect our borders well enough, and Bulgarian people should not use and engage in these trafficking services... and networks. And secondly, once they arrive here, we need to treat them humanely. There’s nothing more to it. And in terms of a wave, a big wave... A migration wave. These waves exist already!” (host community member)

“So, it is very important how these people present themselves in the Bulgarian community. If they are honest and sincere, the community will accept them. But if they aim to use Bulgaria as a jumpstart to get to other countries, then the authorities need to be very vigilant - to understand who has what kinds of intentions when visiting. But otherwise, for well-intentioned people, there is always room here with us.” (host community member)

Language differences act as integration barriers, and host community’s expectation to learn the language:

There were discussions about the challenges of integration due to language barriers, and the need for refugees to find work and learn the language. Interacting, speaking, and displaying foreign language skills appeared threatening to some hosts, with some mentioning their dislike for the news to be read in various languages, which has echoes of xenophobia or racism within the host community. However,

these sentiments should be analysed in the context of Bulgarian history, with its long history of Bulgarian nationalism in resistance to conquering empires, including the Ottoman Empire as well as the Russian Soviet government.



“[...] I need to tell you that the news in Turkish language sounds a little bit like a provocation to me because the national language in Bulgaria is Bulgarian, so if there is news being read in Turkish language, in a few days, they might start reading in [other] Arab language[s].” (host community member)

As noted in other findings sections, the host respondents also emphasised the importance of learning the local language, which was mentioned several times in almost all conversations, and emerged as what they perceived as a key barrier to integration. Respondents noted that learning the language could also help to secure employment and build community connections. Organising courses on various subjects like history and geography and societal acceptance, emerged as what host respondents perceived as crucial components for achieving successful integration, set against the backdrop of humanitarian considerations and pragmatic strategies. *“To integrate a person, it is important as minimum to study the language for two or three months. This can be combined with the part-time employment, and the most importantly with their desire to be part of the work market in Bulgaria.” (host community member)*

Resource pressure and economic challenges due to influx of migrants:

The situation of integration was also an indirect outcome of the perceived economic pressure on the Bulgarian resources by host community members. Though host community members acknowledged the financial support Bulgaria received from the European Union to

accommodate migrants, they were concerned about the challenges faced by local retirees. This led to discussions on the advantages and contradictions of immigration waves. Further, there were concerns about misuse of Bulgarian resources by certain individuals. While they expressed readiness to offer immediate assistance to incoming refugees, on the other hand, they were concerned about sharing resources. This concern was severe for one of the host respondents, who clearly mentioned, *“I don't think they should be allowed.”* Respondents feared that refugees or immigrants could abuse resources or request aid unjustly. *“When there is blatant abuse, or when aid is requested when it shouldn't be provided, meaning they're not under the category of vulnerability or... when it's obvious that there is no vital need for it, in comparison with individuals of the same profile.” (host community member)*

Integration and acceptance of migrants into a society may be challenging if host community members perceive that the incumbent was receiving more than them. For instance, some host community members mentioned that migrants gain safety and security in Bulgaria, which they likely lack in their countries of origin, while on the contrary, the locals face challenges due to perceived cultural differences and risky migrant behaviours.



“For them, they benefit much more than us, maybe 90-100% more, as we don't have a war happening here. This is the most important thing, there is no war here, they are completely free, and they are in a community where there is peace. Whereas for us, the issue is that they come from a different culture. And their habits, behaviour, and character, for us will make it seem that they are insincere. And from this point of view, we need to consider that. But for them, the benefits are much greater than for us.” (host community member)

Feelings of mistrust, and undesirable behaviours:

The host community respondents expressed discriminatory and biased views regarding the behaviour of migrants. One respondent suggested the need to teach discipline and order to migrants, implying that they lacked these qualities. Another sentiment of bias emerged, assuming incompetence or ignorance among migrants. They also highlighted a tendency for migrants to form separate groups, which contributed to a lack of integration with the wider community. Despite this, there was acknowledgment that individuals within these groups may possess valuable cultural insights and opportunities for meaningful relationships. Some Bulgarians also mentioned the challenges posed by uneducated, “arrogant”, and “ill-behaved” individuals, whether they were Bulgarian or foreign, in creating a pleasant living environment, while there were stories of people who are integrated and were well accepted by Bulgarians, especially when they participate in the workforce.



“Look when people have similar education, morals and culture, there is no problem regardless the colour of the skin or the origin or the language or the nationality. But when they are uneducated, arrogant and bad-behaved people, no matter if they’re Bulgarian or foreigners it’s not nice to live with such people.” (host community member)

Other host community respondents noted that integration was unimportant to some immigrants, as some perceived Bulgaria as a temporary stop. These respondents estimated that 90 to 95% of immigrants viewed their stay in Bulgaria as temporary and did not prioritize integration. Overall discussions during this study highlighted the fragile nature of trust in integration efforts. Negative incidents can easily undermine positive actions from the majority, emphasizing the need for sustained positive

behaviour to foster trust and unity within both communities. Trust is difficult to gain and easy to lose; even if a hundred immigrants show good qualities and engage positively with the local culture and initiatives, a single negative act can undermine the efforts of the many who strive for positive integration and togetherness.



“But the ones, which I would say are 90 to 95% of them, for whom this is just a temporary stop. They do not care, honestly speaking, they also cause damage to the facilities. They bring negativity towards themselves.” (host community member)

The need for roll out and dissemination of the National Integration Strategy:

Multiple respondents mentioned the need for a national integration strategy to provide clear guidelines and consistency in efforts to support refugees. Despite interviewed host communities respondents mentioning the lack of the national integration strategy as a challenge that hampers the effectiveness of NGOs and other support mechanisms, Bulgaria has the National strategy on migration of the Republic of Bulgaria 2021-2025.³ The lack of awareness on the availability of strategy can be mitigated through joint efforts between the government and non-governmental organizations, to ensure that people and relevant entities at all levels are aware of the strategy and its implementation plans.



“And from an integration point of view, we definitely need a strategy on a national level, which would guarantee that integration is possible at some point. Because right now, the country, as the National Agency for Refugees and the Ministry of Social Aid and other formations see it, does not have such a strategy.” (host community member)

³ National strategy on migration of the Republic of Bulgaria 2021-2025 | European Website on Integration (europa.eu)

Schools can play a role in integration:

The importance of civil education in schools was highlighted as crucial for promoting tolerance, understanding, and informed opinions regarding migration and refugees.



“I think that this education can reduce the aggression levels sometimes, from both sides, of any xenophobic activity, whatever other forms of discrimination.” (host community member)

Respondents suggested that more conversations and extracurricular activities related to these topics should be integrated into educational curricula. Additionally, the Ministry of Education and schools were acknowledged as playing a positive role in aiding the integration of younger immigrants, therefore, the host respondents recommended that younger immigrants enrol in schools as a pathway to integration due to the favourable educational conditions provided. However, integration for adults was seen as more challenging, with language barriers identified as a significant obstacle to their integration efforts.



“I would suggest for them to sign up for education in our schools. That is the only way to integrate, because if they are kids below 18 years old, we provide good educational conditions. And for the adults, I cannot say, as for them it would be more difficult to integrate. I think the language would be an obstacle to doing that.” (host community member)

Structured meetings, cultural events and intercultural interactions can play a role in integration:

Respondents discussed ways of fostering trust and bridging the gap between host communities

and refugee populations. Some respondents discussed their desire for structured meetings and interactions between refugees and Bulgarian citizens, which, from their perspective, was best facilitated by influential figures, to explain cultural nuances, habits, and institutions, stressing the importance of consistency and tangible outcomes in building trust and achieving integration goals.



“That will be meetings together between refugees and Bulgarian citizens. Celebrities who can explain the way of life in our country, explanation of our bit of our culture, getting to know the habits of Bulgarians, getting to know the institutions. For me, the trust depends on certain meetings, it can't be established by organising one meeting with the refugees. [...] the actions need to be planned and to be expected, to achieve a certain result.” (host community member)

The importance of cultural events, information sharing, and intercultural interactions was emphasised to promote mutual understanding and integration between immigrants and the host community. Efforts to understand refugees' backgrounds, utilise their skills for societal benefit, and foster a sense of mutual advantage in integration were seen as key to building trust and cooperation. Collaborative initiatives were advocated for, including cultural events, educational programs, and effective communication, to bridge cultural gaps and promote social cohesion among diverse groups.



“I'm thinking more cultural events, more cultural happenings and more hours of cultural information together, inter-cultural information.” (host community member)

Theme Four: Integration Efforts

Ukrainians

Pivotal role played by the Red Cross for adaptation and integration:

The respondents expressed appreciation and overall satisfaction with the support from humanitarian organisations and the government, particularly emphasise the crucial role of food assistance and medical care provided by the Red Cross. The Bulgarian Red Cross was cited as providing significant aid, including covering rent payments, medical assistance during childbirth, and ongoing support with healthcare needs. They commended the Bulgarian Red Cross for their comprehensive services, which extend beyond financial aid to language courses and other forms of assistance.

The respondents elaborated on the active role of the Red Cross in assisting refugees from Ukraine, detailing the various forms of support provided. This includes financial assistance, food packages, hygiene products, informational resources, Bulgarian language courses, and other educational opportunities. They emphasise the Red Cross's dedication to aiding people displaced from Ukraine in integrating into Bulgarian society and providing social protection for those who choose to stay in Bulgaria

temporarily or permanently due to the ongoing conflict. The respondents expressed relief and gratitude for the continued support of the Red Cross, especially given the closure of many other programs. The respondents highlighted the active involvement of the Red Cross in assisting refugees from Ukraine, providing various forms of support including financial assistance, food packages, hygiene products, informational resources, Bulgarian language courses, and educational opportunities.

Role played by the other NGOs in integration:

The respondents recounted their experience seeking support and assistance adjusting to life in Bulgaria, noting a disparity between aid from local organisations and government agencies. While governmental support was notably lacking, organisations like Caritas played a crucial role in providing much-needed assistance. Upon arrival in the country, Caritas offered accommodation and vital support for nearly a year, facilitating access to language courses and assisting in securing employment. They also provided childcare support, enabling the respondents to balance work and language studies effectively. This robust support network was instrumental in the respondents' successful transition into Bulgarian society.



The respondents expressed appreciation and overall satisfaction with the support from humanitarian organisations and the government, including CARITAS, UNHCR, UNICEF, Salvation Army, “Za Dobro” centre, Bulgarian Women, Sawt Bulgaria, Wome’s Coincil and Tarita Office as well and other organisations. The respondents noted that these organisations played a crucial role in their integration process, assisting with practical matters such as registering children in nursery and school. Regarding recommendations for improving the integration process for refugees, one interviewee suggested the possibility of financial assistance, such as vouchers or aid with rent payments, considering the high cost of living and expenses associated with education. Other respondents raised concerns about access to Bulgarian language courses due to the cost and suggested state-level support to address this issue. The respondent emphasised the significant challenges facing many people displaced from Ukraine in Bulgaria, particularly in the areas of employment and healthcare. They expressed worries about potential unemployment and the hardships of navigating life without income or adequate medical coverage. Additionally, the respondent highlighted the difficulties faced by vulnerable groups such as pensioners. They advocate for increased assistance from local organisations or state institutions to address these pressing concerns. While appreciative of the support received thus far, they stress the necessity for additional aid, particularly in ensuring access to basic necessities and stability. Despite encountering challenges, they acknowledge their fortunate inclusion in assistance programs, such as housing schemes, which have been crucial for their survival and adaptation.

Other refugees and migrants

The respondents recount their experience seeking support and assistance adjusting to life in Bulgaria, noting a disparity between aid from local organisations and government agencies. While governmental support was notably lacking, organisations like the Red Cross and Caritas played a crucial role in providing much-needed assistance.

In contrast, the lack of significant support from the state was highlighted, with the respondent’s expressing disappointment in the absence of assistance comparable to that offered in other countries. Examples from neighbouring nations like Romania and Greece were cited as more substantial aid packages for refugees, including financial allowances, housing access, or assistance cards for basic necessities. While acknowledging the potential limitations the Bulgarian state faces and gratitude for allowing them to stay in the country, the respondents underscored the disparity between available support and the essential needs of refugees. The absence of adequate assistance, particularly in housing and employment access were the primary topics addressed.



“In some countries, people receive allowances once they move into camps with their children, which alleviates financial concerns and allows them to focus on supporting their families and studying the language. However, in Bulgaria, the situation is different. If I choose to attend school and not work, I face the challenge of making a living.” (refugee)

“After nearly two years and several months in Bulgaria, we have only obtained refugee residence permits from the refugee council and have not received any other assistance. Some resources are available, such as the Women’s Council office, where we can obtain clothing if necessary, and the Tarita office, which focuses on employability. They assisted us in registering my children for nursery and school.” (refugee)

The respondent’s express gratitude for the support from the Red Cross, detailing the assistance provided in various aspects of their lives in Bulgaria. They received financial aid for rent, which eased their housing burden, and appreciated the opportunity for free language lessons, praising both the quality of teaching and

the respectful environment. Additionally, they received guidance on legal procedures and expressed a desire for occasional assistance, particularly in finding suitable employment that aligns with their skills and personality. The respondents underscored their commitment to integration and becoming Bulgarian nationals, citing Bulgarians' self-reliance and work ethic as examples to emulate. Reflecting on the support received from various social services and organisations upon their arrival in Bulgaria, they acknowledge the assistance provided to all, including themselves, without discrimination. Most respondents noted that despite language barriers, they could access medical care and social assistance, with attention paid to their specific medical needs.

Host communities

Efforts and engagements from the host communities:

Positive experiences play a significant role in building trust between the host community and immigrant populations, contributing significantly to fostering trust, loyalty, and a sense of belonging among refugees. The conversations highlighted instances where refugees received support, assistance, or redirection from various organisations or individuals. Host respondents cited the Red Cross as an institution with substantial trust built over many years within the community. However, the same level of trust was not extended universally, particularly towards volunteers. Host respondents noted a lack of volunteers within nonprofit organisations working with refugees, and the services they provided were described as limited and chaotic. There was a sense that coordination between the government and NGOs was limited but would make services supporting refugees more effective.



“Definitely, there is big trust in the Red Cross for many years in our community, not so much, I would say to the volunteers, volunteerism is not at the level it should be, there are very few nonprofit organisations that work with refugees in general and the services they’re offering are very limited.” (host community member)

“Yes. It’s like their actions are a bit chaotic. Some do one thing, others another, there is no... There is no consistency; it’s missing.” (host community member)

There was also mention of community support initiatives, including various efforts such as providing social assistance, free transportation, and collecting clothes. Despite acknowledging challenges, one respondent highlighted the efforts of local authorities, particularly in Sofia, where initiatives like social support and free transport were implemented. Additionally, neighbourhood initiatives like “Open Doors” were cited, focusing on collecting clothes to aid migrants, particularly during the onset of conflicts. The respondent noted that many acquaintances had accommodated Ukrainian individuals, illustrating a high level of help and empathy within the population. Host community members also actively participated in integrating migrants into the Bulgarian educational system, providing healthcare support, and assisting with decision-making and accommodations for vulnerable communities. They observed migrants’ willingness to learn the language, seek employment, and remain in the country. While supportive of migrant integration efforts, some host community members expected migrants to understand the country’s laws and way of

life, particularly through language acquisition. However, one respondent expressed differing views on migrant integration, distinguishing between refugees fleeing conflict and migrants seeking economic opportunities. They suggested that while those fleeing war should be assisted, economic migrants should be repatriated. There was also mention of providing community support, showcasing various initiatives like providing social help, free transport, and collecting clothes, despite expressing challenges such as, language barriers, as, a respondent mentioned,



“In my neighbourhood, there was an initiative, it was called “Open Doors,” where people would collect clothes. That was from the very beginning of the war. Many of my friends have accommodated Ukrainian people and overall, I think the level of help and empathy of the population is at a good enough level.”
(host community member)

Role of the media in integration and trust:

The host respondents also delved into the influence of media on public perceptions of migrants, criticizing both social media and traditional outlets for their portrayal of these groups. They emphasized the importance of critical thinking, rationality, balanced reporting, and accurate narratives to counter misinformation and promote empathy and understanding. Some respondents highlighted

the media’s inconsistency, noting that they often change their stance over time, diminishing their credibility and role in shaping public opinion.

There was a collective plea for the media, particularly television, to spotlight more positive and uplifting stories about well-integrated individuals and families in Bulgaria. This initiative aimed to challenge negative stereotypes and cultivate a more compassionate society. Respondents also expressed concerns about the proliferation of extremist views and xenophobia on social media, which fuel discriminatory attitudes and behaviours. Furthermore, discussions touched upon the differing attitudes toward older migrants compared to newly arrived migrants, highlighting the changing immigration landscape and contrasting perceptions of entitlement among different migrant waves. The divisive nature of social media was highlighted, with individuals exploiting biases to stir conflict and promote xenophobia for personal gain.



“The more divisive opinions are on social media, where individuals are more biased, or they’re not as biased, but they want to create a bias in other people, so that they can gain something in some way from that. They benefit from conflicts between people and their convictions reach these extremities and xenophobia.”
(host community member)

THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF THE INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT MOVEMENT

Humanity

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, born of a desire to bring assistance without discrimination to the wounded on the battlefield, endeavours, in its international and national capacity, to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found. Its purpose is to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being. It promotes mutual understanding, friendship, cooperation and lasting peace amongst all peoples.

Impartiality

It makes no discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. It endeavours to relieve the suffering of individuals, being guided solely by their needs, and to give priority to the most urgent cases of distress.

Neutrality

In order to enjoy the confidence of all, the Movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.

Independence

The Movement is independent. The National Societies, while auxiliaries in the humanitarian services of their governments and subject to the laws of their respective countries, must always maintain their autonomy so that they may be able at all times to act in accordance with the principles of the Movement.

Voluntary service

It is a voluntary relief movement not prompted in any manner by desire for gain.

Unity

There can be only one Red Cross or Red Crescent Society in any one country. It must be open to all. It must carry on its humanitarian work throughout its territory.

Universality

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, in which all societies have equal status and share equal responsibilities and duties in helping each other, is worldwide.



The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) is the world's largest humanitarian network, with 191 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and around 17 million volunteers. Our volunteers are present in communities before, during and after a crisis or disaster. We work in the most hard to reach and complex settings in the world, saving lives and promoting human dignity. We support communities to become stronger and more resilient places where people can live safe and healthy lives, and have opportunities to thrive.

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