



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



A Pathway to Integration:

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

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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)

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 people displaced 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.

The two countries participating in this study, Bulgaria and Montenegro, have been greatly impacted by changing migration patterns over the past four years.

The International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC) along with other components of the Red 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 populations⁴. In addition, both Bulgaria and Montenegro are 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,**

¹ Statistics. UNHCR, 2023.

² *Situation Ukraine Refugee Situation*, UNHCR, 2024.

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

⁴ Internal Operational Review (2022), IFRC's Response to Ukraine and Surrounding Countries.

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.

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 applications⁵, 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 25000 refugees entered Bulgaria from Syria and more than 1000 from Iraq. People from Syria, Afghanistan and Morocco were the top three asylum seekers accounted for more than 8000 people⁶. Additionally, on the 31 March 2024, Bulgaria eliminated air and maritime internal border controls marking their partial integration into the Schengen area⁷, which could potentially mean changes in routes to Europe affecting the country as a transit one.

Since **Montenegro** restored its independence in 2006, refugees from former Yugoslavia in Montenegro needed regular legal status and housing. Since 2006, out of 16,727 asylum applications, 105 people have been granted international protection, with most applications closed as asylum seekers left before a decision was made. The UNHCR identified 459 persons at risk of statelessness, and nine individuals had been officially granted

stateless status in Montenegro⁸. Though not much current data is available about other migrants and asylum seekers in Montenegro, there is some recent statistics about Ukrainian refugees. Since 2022, more than 40 thousand people displaced have arrived from Ukraine, while the country has also received refugees from the neighbouring countries of Russia and Belarus⁹.

Methodology:

At the initial phase of the study design, the IFRC CEA Europe teams engage a few National Societies within the region to participate in the study. Due to the workload of the contacted National Societies, only two of them – Bulgaria and Montenegro – agreed to participate in this study.

Data collection and sampling: The research team identified a sample size, and location of the study, 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 identified 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 researches hired for this study 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.

⁵ Eurostat - Asylum Statistics, 2020.

⁶ UNHCR Bulgaria Fact Sheet, 2023. <https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/bi-annual-fact-sheet-2024-02-bulgaria.pdf>

⁷ <https://euclid.eu/news/bulgaria-and-romania-join-schengen-area/>

⁸ Universal Periodic Review: Fourth Cycle, 43rd Session, UNHCR Montenegro, 2022.

⁹ [Montenegro Fact Sheet](#), UNHCR, 2023.

A total of 66 participants from Bulgaria, comprising of 37 data collection activities were conducted in Bulgaria, and a total of 54 participants comprising of 32 data collection activities were conducted in Montenegro.

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 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.

Montenegro:

People displaced from Ukraine were generally grateful and content with their experience in Montenegro. Many noted the similarities between their cultures and noted the slower and more tranquil way of life in Montenegro. The respondents cited some frustration, like bureaucracy and their perception of corruption that led to lower economic opportunities, restrictions around banking and entrepreneurship and housing access. Generally, however, the respondents planned to stay in the country and felt affinity to the host community. **Language was cited as a large barrier to integration by both communities surveyed.** The respondents also touched on **difficulties in finding employment**, particularly for older individuals, and mentioned limited opportunities in sectors like information technology (IT). Respondents proposed creating exchange programs for employment and providing more support to the IT sector to attract skilled workers. Additionally, the respondents reflected on the migration patterns of people displaced from Ukraine due to war-related factors. Respondents noted that some individuals stayed in Montenegro and integrated well, while other people displaced from Ukraine moved on to other countries if they

didn't find sustainable work or a community. **People displaced from Ukraine noted that the integration of their children into the education system went far to help them feel integrated into society.** The population was also very grateful to the support from humanitarian organizations, including the Red Cross, for the assistance they received upon arrival and throughout their experience in Montenegro.

The **host community** expressed deep belief in humanitarian principles and the community responsibility to help people displaced from Ukraine. The consensus was their country was doing the right thing in their assistance programs. **There was some economic stress felt by this population, and people perceived "rich" Ukrainians to be causing difficulties in the housing market.** Some respondents went so far as to say landlords would only rent to Ukrainians and regular Montenegrins were suffering from housing insecurity because of that. **The host community also noted that misinformation and bias in the media was counterproductive to assisting the two communities to live healthily together.** They noted work by the Red Cross and other NGOs were instrumental in assisting with integration and community development.

Key Takeaways:



Language identified by all parties as a barrier for integration.



Consensus of acceptance on principle by host communities.



Host community felt welcoming but noted tension with economic challenges across the country they attributed to migrant populations.



Host community perceived displaced people as driving up cost of living and treated with preference.



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



Education a great way to integrate the children.



Consensus of safety in the country and high quality of life living in Montenegro.



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



Humanitarian organisations services acknowledged and appreciated.

Conclusion:

The refugee and migrant situation in Bulgaria and Montenegro is a good example of 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. Host communities in Montenegro were most concerned by migrant populations potentially overtaxing the state resources and reducing their ability to access housing and government services.

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, Humanitarian actors 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 (see Recommendations section for a comprehensive list):

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 migrants 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 houses or jobs. 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 migrants and refugees to access these 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.

Research potential discriminatory housing practices: In Montenegro, host community members detailed discrimination in the housing market, with landlords only wanting to rent to people displaced from Ukraine as they perceive them able to pay more for rent. A housing market study is recommended in both countries, as migrants and refugees in Bulgaria also consistently complained of high rent and landlord exploitation. This research could act as an advocacy tool for the government and help the NS/IFRC identify further support needed.

Top Recommendations:

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. The goal would be 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.).



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