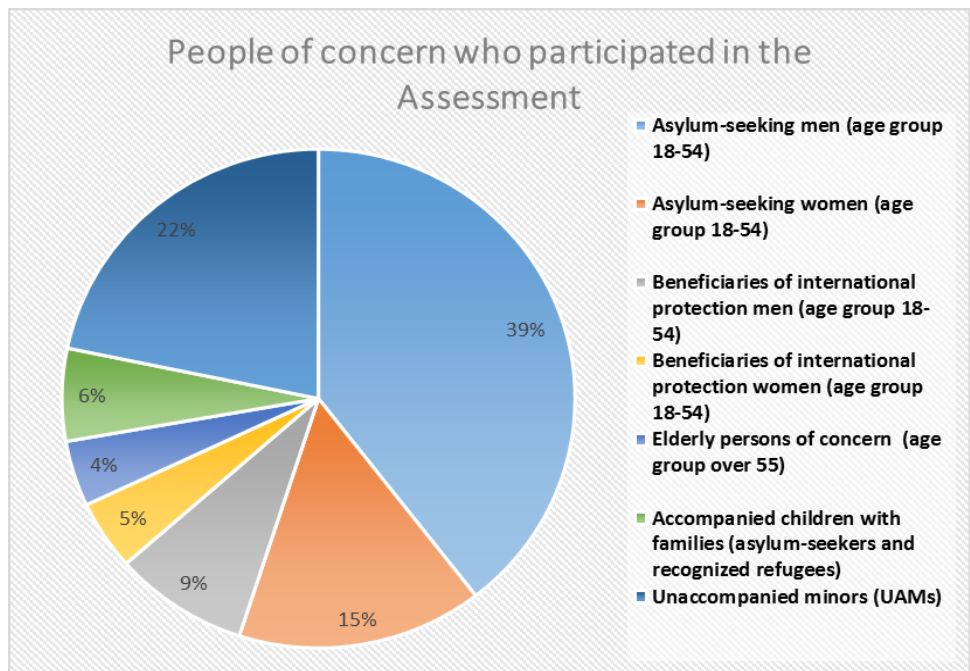


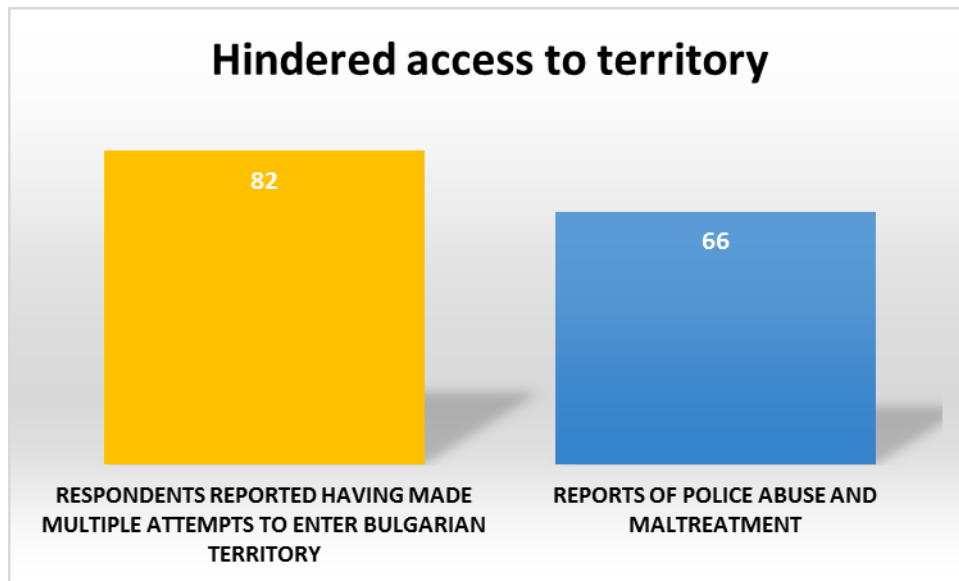
2016 Age, Gender and Diversity Participatory Assessment (AGD PA) Report

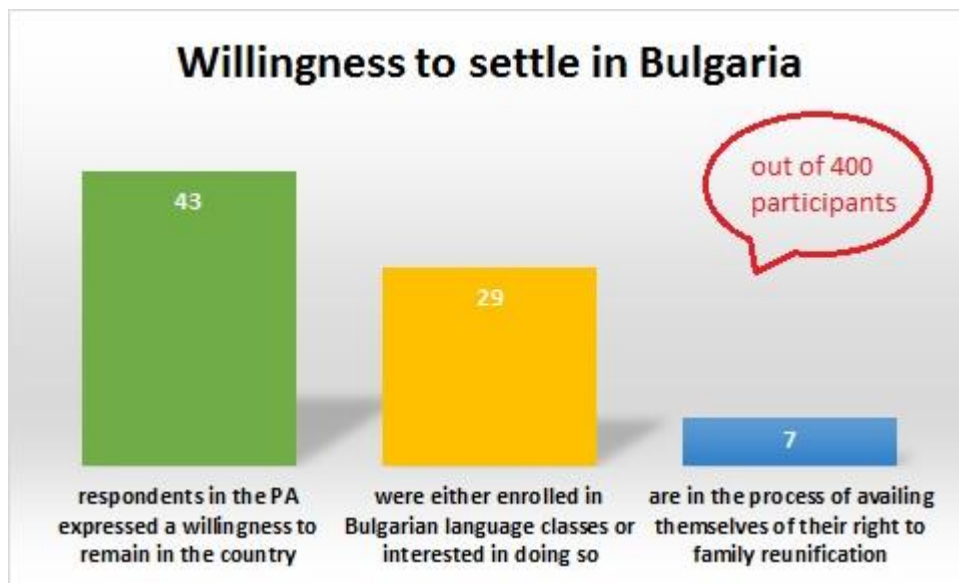
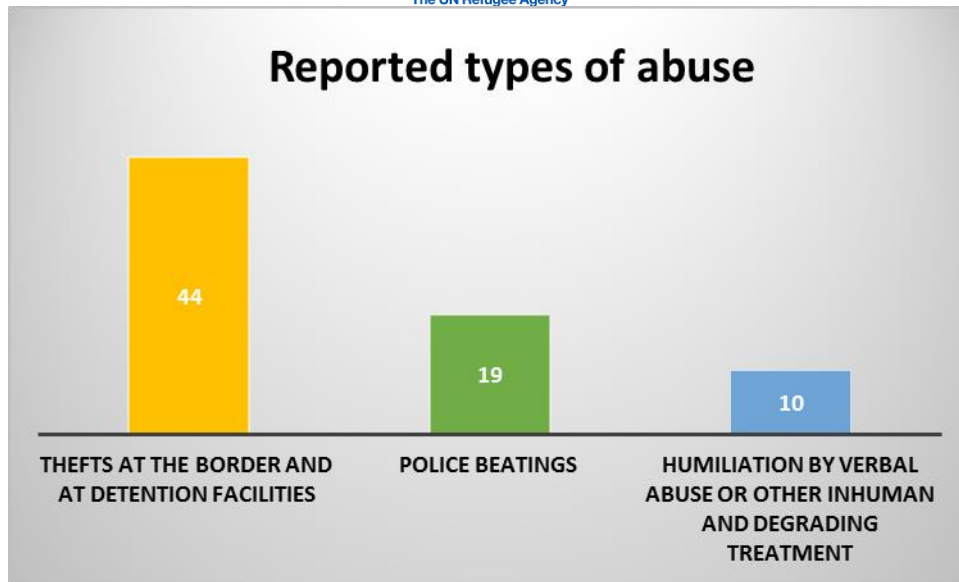
UNHCR Representation in Bulgaria



“I would just like you to come see how we live here. Hygiene is very important to us, we walk barefoot in the toilet and then in our rooms. You call us savages, but how could we be any different? We don’t even have soap. When we came here, the only thing we were given was a beating and a pillow.”

man, 21, Afghanistan (SCTAF Lyubimets)





„If nothing changes and people keep treating refugees the way they do now, everybody will want to run away and nobody will stay. I was attacked by Bulgarians close to a supermarket in the vicinity of an accommodation center. I’m afraid to go out after 9 pm.”

man, 31, Iraq (RSDP Ovcha kupel, RRC Sofia)

„One can neither die, nor live on the food we get.“

UAM, 14, Afghanistan (RRC Harmanli)



Main issues:

- *hindered access to territory*
- *cases of reported violence, maltreatment and abuse*
- *inadequate and at times deplorable reception conditions*
- *no financial support for asylum-seekers, even vulnerable ones*
- *lack of sufficient information on rights and responsibilities and available support*
- *poor or lack of medical services at reception facilities*
- *inefficient system for protection and care of unaccompanied and separated children*
- *no targeted integration measures for beneficiaries of international protection*
- *high risk of homelessness*
- *limited possibilities for vocational training and employment opportunities*
- *negative attitudes towards refugees and xenophobic environment*

Recommendations:

- *Continue the provision of training to border guards and migration staff with regard to traumatic experiences and cultural specificities*
- *Improve the provision of information materials to the people of concern*
- *Continue the monitoring of the refugee status determination procedure*
- *Keep monitoring the reception conditions at all stages of the protection*
- *Introduce the organization of info sessions on various topics, including RSD, rights and obligations, internal rules, SGBV prevention, integration opportunities*
- *Reintroduce the financial assistance to asylum-seekers, especially for the vulnerable ones*
- *Ensure the provision of adequate and well-resourced medical care services for all asylum-seekers at reception facilities*
- *Establish a best interest determination procedure for unaccompanied minors and ensure their representation at the earliest possible stage*
- *Raise awareness of existing mainstream services for beneficiaries of international protection*
- *Provide and implement targeted integration support for beneficiaries of international protection, including housing*
- *Provide Bulgarian language classes and vocational training to asylum-seekers and beneficiaries of international protection*
- *Train journalists and disseminate positive refugee-related stories, myth debunking sessions at schools and in municipalities*



I. Population of Concern

The number of globally displaced people remains the highest in human history with various ongoing conflicts, notably Syria, but also Iraq and Afghanistan, and protracted refugee situations.¹ After the refugee influx to Bulgaria of the end of 2013, the number of asylum-seekers kept growing in both 2014 and 2015, marking a marginal decrease of 5% of asylum-applications in 2016.² While the global situation of the past few years does not indicate signs of attenuation, the scale of mixed migration flows to Bulgaria marks significant changes in terms of composition and number of the caseload in the course of 2016. In the absence of legal pathways for admission of refugees, most asylum-seekers keep entering the Bulgarian territory in an irregular manner. Only 9 cases of asylum-seekers with visas to enter Bulgaria became known to UNHCR throughout the AGD PA in 2016.³

The State Agency for Refugees (SAR) maintained the number of its open centres as in 2015 (in total 6)⁴, opening up 2 closed-type facilities, respectively in September and November 2016, implementing the amendments in the Law on Asylum and Refugees (LAR) of December 2015, which introduced the legal grounds for running a closed-type facilities for detaining asylum-seekers, provided that some explicit legal safeguards are met.⁵ The total capacity of the SAR territorial units (including the capacity of the closed-type facilities) as of the end of December 2016 is 5490 with an occupancy rate of 79%.⁶ In the first half of 2016 the occupancy rate of the SAR facilities remained at about 30% and lower, reaching 14% at the end of March 2016, and abruptly increasing to 67% at the end of August and 105% at the end of September.⁷ The reason for the change is the domino effect caused by the sealing of the Serbian border with Bulgaria in the beginning of August 2016, following the closure of the borders of Hungary and Croatia.

As of the beginning of 2016, the top countries of origin of asylum-seekers became Afghanistan (8827 applications); Iraq (5348 applications), and Syria (2639 applications). This composition remained stable throughout the year. Despite the migration management measures taken by each country along the mixed migratory flow routes, the rate of abandoned refugee status determination procedures reached 89% in 2016 (8267 suspended and 8932 terminated procedures). This, together with the above mentioned composition of the asylum-seekers, resulted in the lowest number of positive decisions since the end of 2013: 764 refugee statuses and 587 humanitarian statuses (or in total 1351: comparison to 2015: 5597; 2014: 7000). The number of unaccompanied and separated children kept growing in the past 3 years, from 940 asylum applications in 2014, to 1816 in 2015 and 2768 in 2016. In addition, 2016 saw the highest number of inquiries for transfers under the Dublin III Regulation in the past 3 years: 10 377 inquiries and a highest number of returns: 624. For the first time Bulgaria started receiving relocated asylum-seekers under the European relocation scheme of September 2015.⁸ Out of the 1302 relocation places for 2016-2017, in 2016 Bulgaria received 29 Syrian, Iraqi and stateless persons relocated from Greece and none from Italy.

II. Methodology of the 2016 AGD Participatory Assessment

The AGD is an inclusive strategy “ensuring that all diverse people have equal access to their rights, services, protection and resources as well as being able to fully participate in the decisions that affect their

¹ UNHCR, *Global Trends. Forced Displacement in 2015* (2016), <http://www.unhcr.org/576408cd7.pdf>

² 11081 in 2014; 20391 in 2015; 19418 in 2016, SAR data, <http://www.aref.government.bg/?cat=8> (last accessed on 12/02/2017)

³ These are cases of people who either have family links to Bulgaria or had previously owned businesses in Bulgaria.

⁴ 1 Registration and Reception Centre (RRC) in Sofia, with three subunits called Refugee Status Determination Procedure, 1 Transit Centre in Pastrogor and 2 more RRCs in Banya and Harmanli.

⁵ Law on Asylum and Refugees, Chapter V. Measures imposed on foreigners, seeking international protection, SG issue 80 of 2015, in force as of 01/01/2016.

⁶ Ministry of Interior, Monthly Migration Statistics for December 2016, https://www.mvr.bg/NR/rdonlyres/022CB329-08B3-42C4-AEDD-64D6C47D48CC/0/Mesechna_spravka_dekemvri_2016.pdf (last accessed on 12/01/2017)

⁷ State Agency for Refugees, monthly coordination meetings statistics for March, August and September 2016.

⁸ Council Decisions 2015/1523 of 14 September and 2015/1601, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32015D1523&from=EN>, of 22 September 2015, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32015D1601&from=EN>



lives.”⁹ It is an approach which promotes gender equality and respect for human rights, particularly women’s and children’s rights, and to enhance the protection of all refugees, regardless of their ethnic, social or religious background. In light of this guiding principle, the 2016 participatory assessment aimed at including as many and as varied people of concern as possible in terms of the abovementioned categories and their locations. The data collection method uses structured (focus) group interviews, following standardized questionnaires for asylum-seekers, beneficiaries of international protection and children, which were completely updated in 2013, and are additionally adapted to every year’s operational context. On average, one focus group was attended by 10 persons of concern.

Accordingly, focus group discussions were conducted not only at all accommodation (reception/transit) centres, but also with people of concern living at external addresses. The sampling method, deemed best reflecting the AGD approach, is stratification sampling, which ensures proportional representation of all categories of interest, such as age, gender, ethnicity, nationality and status.¹⁰ The stratification sampling method remained similar as in the previous three years and was applied at two points in time in the preparation of the AGD PA process: once in May-June 2016 and a second time in October 2016. A concluding workshop on the AGD PA exercise took place on 3-4 November 2016. Members of the multi-functional teams participated in the event and shared their observations and data collected throughout the participatory assessment, outlining the areas of improvement, prioritizing areas of concern and suggesting recommendations for further actions. This report is based on the data collected in the PA process and reflects the final discussions which took place during the concluding meeting.

III. Overview of the 2016 AGD Participatory Assessment

In 2016 the total number of the focus group discussions conducted was 38, encompassing 400 persons of concern (or about 2% of the population of concern¹¹) and involving multi-functional teams, consisting of 39 representatives of 14 state and non-governmental entities, namely the State Agency for Refugees, Employment Agency, UNHCR, UNICEF, Bulgarian Red Cross, Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, Council of Refugee Women, Bulgarian Council on Refugees and Migrants, Caritas, Foundation Centre Nadya, “Access to Rights” Foundation, Centre for Legal Aid “Voice in Bulgaria”, CVS-Bulgaria, and Multi Kulti Collective.

27 focus groups with persons of concern in all 6 SAR accommodation centres, including one in the SAR closed-type facility in Busmantsi, and one with relocated asylum-seekers, 4 focus groups in the 2 Special Centres for Temporary Accommodation of Foreigners (SCTAFs) under the Ministry of Interior (MoI)¹², and 7 focus groups with asylum-seekers and beneficiaries of international protection living at external addresses in Sofia (5), Saedinie and Plovdiv were conducted in the period of May-June and October 2016. 30 group discussions with asylum-seekers and 8 groups with beneficiaries of international protection were held.

By categories:

1. Asylum-seeking men (age group 18-54) – 158 persons interviewed in total;
2. Asylum-seeking women (age group 18-54) – 62 persons interviewed in total;

⁹ UNHCR, *UNHCR Age, Gender and Diversity Accountability Report 2015* (2016), p 4, <http://www.unhcr.org/5769092c7.pdf>

¹⁰ The principle of division taking precedence in the determination of the composition of the focus groups was the language spoken (in view of the practical provision of interpretation from Arabic, Farsi, and English), followed by the legal status of the persons of concern (asylum-seekers or beneficiaries of international protection).

¹¹ The percentage is an estimate based on the total number of accommodated persons at the SAR facilities in 2016 (17197, MoI data). However, it excludes the asylum-seekers who resided at external addresses whose number is marginal (482 as of December 2016, MoI data) and the beneficiaries of international protection from previous years. There is no stock or flow data on the number of PoCs present in Bulgaria, due to the lack of exit data and the irregularity of their movements.

¹² Persons irregularly crossing the Bulgarian border who are not seeking or did not have a possibility to seek asylum at the Bulgarian border are detained at the SCTAFs, which are accommodation facilities of closed type. Once they apply for asylum, the respective persons are to be transferred to SAR accommodation centres of open type within 6 days from the application for international protection, where they are registered as asylum-seekers and their refugee status determination procedures are initiated.



3. Beneficiaries of international protection¹³ men (age group 18-54) – 34 persons interviewed in total;
4. Beneficiaries of international protection women (age group 18-54) – 18 persons interviewed;
5. Elderly persons of concern (age group over 55) – 17 persons interviewed;
6. Accompanied children with families (asylum-seekers and recognized refugees) – 24 children interviewed;
7. Unaccompanied minors (UAMs) – 87 children interviewed.¹⁴

IV. Main issues related to Asylum-Seekers

The 2016 AGD PA identified various new and still ongoing issues related to the protection of asylum-seekers in Bulgaria. It should be noted that substantial differences are observed on the basis of country of origin. In general, asylum-seekers from Syria and Iraq face fewer problems in addressing their protection needs than those from Afghanistan and Pakistan. As explained in the first section, significant differences in the protection situation were observed between the two phases of the PA, noting that the protection situation was more favourable when the occupancy rate was lower and marked a significant decrease in protection standards as of August 2016, due to the high number of accommodated persons in the SAR facilities.

„We were treated like footballs. We were beaten so hard. While we were being taken to the border, they made us take our clothes off, only keep our underwear on. I was the only one who was allowed to keep my clothes on, as I was the youngest.”
UAM, 11, Afghanistan, (RRC Harmanli)

1. **Hindered access to territory:** During the focus groups, 82 respondents reported having made multiple attempts to enter Bulgarian territory, with a record number of 13 (in 2015 the record number was 23). It should be noted that in rare cases the persons reported being pushed back which took place on Turkish territory while in other cases persons decided to return to Turkey of their own accord. However, in the highest number of cases, respondents reported having experienced push backs from the hands of Bulgarian Border Police staff. 66 reports of police abuse and maltreatment, including violence, were recorded, of them 45 by Afghan asylum-seekers. More concretely the reported types of abuse include: police beatings (both at the border and at detention facilities) in 19 cases (including the use of police dogs and electric batons), thefts at the border and at detention facilities in 44 cases (mobile phones, money, valuables, but also food, clothes and shoes), humiliation by verbal abuse or other inhuman and degrading treatment in 10 cases. None of these complaints from violence were officially reported and investigated due to fear of retaliation. It should be noted that the number of reported cases of physical violence had decreased since August 2016. The decrease could be attributed to higher sensitivity among border and migration police staff to relevant asylum legislation subsequent to capacity building activities organized by UNHCR and UNICEF, as well as to more FRONTEX staff present at the Bulgarian-Turkey border and the Bulgarian-Serbian border in the same period.

“We get treated like savages here. Our countries are not safe, but I haven’t seen policemen beating people like that. We are not fleeing poverty. We have financial means.”
man, 38, Iraq, (SCTAF Lyubimets)

2. While the periods of detention remained generally lower compared to previous years and within the legal timeframe of 6 days in the first half of 2016, in the period August-October 2016 people of concern of nationalities other than Syrian experience **longer periods of detention** in the Special Centres for Temporary Accommodation of Foreigners (SCTAFs). The average period of stay in detention for all respondents in both phases of the study is 6 days. However, for Afghans, Pakistanis and Iranians it is 9

¹³ Beneficiaries of international protection include refugee and humanitarian status holders.

¹⁴ For more information see Annex 1 *Composition of focus groups by age, gender, nationality and place of residence.*



days or 1/3 longer. A noteworthy example is the case of an Iranian woman who reported having been in detention for more than eleven months. Asylum-seekers accommodated in a SAR closed-type facility lacked information on the reasons for their detention and expressed a need for legal consultation.

3. **Lack of interpretation services** at the border, inland and at detention facilities was another issue that was brought up by a large part of the respondents marking no change vis-à-vis the situation in previous years. While SAR provides for interpretation in the RSDP interviews, respondents in all centres, but more specifically outside Sofia, pointed out the lack of interpretation and communication with SAR staff on social and reception matters. Many complaints about the quality of the interpretation were lodged by asylum-seekers in the context of their RSDP interviews. These involved cases of people from Kurdish origin being provided with interpretation from Arabic, as well as reports of inappropriate attitude on the part of SAR interpreters discriminating primarily Afghans on the basis of nationality (warning them that they will not be granted status). While such reports were made in the centres in Sofia, the highest number of complaints from SAR interpreters were made in respect to the Registration and Reception Centre (RRC) in Harmanli.

4. General **lack of information** on procedures, internal rules were also reported. While in some reception facilities, regular information sessions with newly-accommodated asylum-seekers were a regular practice in 2015, in 2016 such were shared as a regular good practice only at RSDP Vrazhdebna, RRC Sofia. As much as this issue is related to the availability of interpretation, it involves the largely untapped resources of the community. In all centres, some persons of concern shared their disappointment that they are not supported by the SAR staff to take initiative with regard to the organization of education activities, community mobilization for cleaning the common premises, consultations on the preparation of the food, etc. Such practices were more common in previous years.

5. While in accordance with the Law on Asylum and Refugees (LAR), more than 90% of respondents who had had RSD interviews confirmed that the interviews were audio-recorded (with the exception of RRC Harmanli in the second phase of the PA), respondents still massively report that they are **obliged to sign documents** in Bulgarian language **without** the provision of their (proper) **translation**, including the RSD protocols. These malpractices became more frequent in the context of the growing number of people of concern. Women are generally not asked if they would prefer to be interviewed by an interviewer and in the presence of an interpreter of the same sex.

6. A systematically applied mechanism for **early identification and referral of vulnerable persons** of concern at all stages of the RSDP is still lacking, despite the growing number of vulnerable persons. In rare cases did respondents, especially unaccompanied minors, confirm that they had had a social interview with SAR social workers, only in Sofia. No standardized methods and tools for identification of vulnerability have been adopted and applied.

7. Although, a couple of years ago reception conditions at SAR centres saw major improvements, in 2016, the **conditions** in almost all the reception facilities were reported as **deplorable**. Occasional malfunctioning of basic infrastructure systems such as sewage, as well as, frequent water outages and non-functioning central heating system were reported in various accommodating centres, such as Voenna Rampa, Ovcha Kupel and Harmanli. Bed bugs and infected mattresses and blankets were identified by residents as a health hazard. Overcrowding, which could be observed as of August 2016, is an additional factor for deteriorated hygiene in the common areas. In addition, accommodated persons are not provided with keys to their doors, which further negatively impact their privacy in the accommodation centre. Furthermore, respondents complained that the doors in the toilets and the bathrooms are often broken, and therefore, cannot be locked. Many of the accommodated persons, especially women, reported being afraid when using the abovementioned premises.

“The toilets and bathrooms cannot be locked, how are we supposed to get a shower? There is no hot water in one of the bathrooms which can be locked. In the other one there is hot water, but it can’t be locked. We get soap only at accommodation, very little shampoo, we have not received detergents and cleaning materials.”

woman, 25, Syria (RRC Harmanli)

8. Majority of the respondents, both at detention facilities as well as in SAR centres, shared that they were given **bed sets and hygiene materials** at the very beginning, when they were registered. Some had not received hygiene packs even at registration and MFT’s interventions rectified the omissions. People of concern were reportedly not informed of the possibility to ask for new sets when they run out of provisions. Some respondents, especially at the SCTAFs, had not washed their clothes for weeks on end due to lack of information on laundry schedules and opportunities, wherever such are available. In some reception facilities (RRC Sofia, Ovcha kupel and Voenna rampa), some respondents shared that they are not allowed to use the laundry rooms by responsible SAR staff or other residents tasked with the responsibility to ensure access to the laundry room. Others were even not aware of their existence (especially in RRC Harmanli).

„I would just like you to come see how we live here. Hygiene is very important to us, we walk barefoot in the toilet and then in our rooms. You call us savages, but how could we be any different? We don’t even have soap. When we came here, the only thing we were given was a beating and a pillow.“

man, 21, Afghanistan (SCTAF Lyubimets)

9. Many serious **medical conditions**, including scabies, requiring treatment and medicines, were identified throughout the PA. Some respondents acknowledged the available interpretation at the medical cabinets at SAR facilities in Sofia provided by NGOs under the AMIF, however, they complained of a routine lack of medicines. Respondents are generally not familiar with the health care system in Bulgaria, leading to instances where they covered the medical costs for out-patient care which could be covered by the health insurance for free. **Access to medical services** in RRC Harmanli remained hindered throughout the 2 phases of the PA due to the lack of a GP willing to register them in the town. Such was identified in October 2016. Due to financial constraints, respondents cannot afford to pay the patient fee when visiting the GP.

„There is only Panadol and Paracetamol available at the doctor’s office, there are no other medicines. I had a sore throat, I asked for a medicine, but there wasn’t any. I was just told to go get it myself from the pharmacy.“

man, 25, Syria (RSDP Ovcha kupel, RRC Sofia)

10. Respondents mainly from RRC Sofia, Voenna rampa and RRC Harmanli shared wide-spread concerns over their **safety and security** in the centres. They complained from the poor and inadequate provision of security services by elderly guards (in some cases with mobility difficulties). This created a general feeling of impunity and disarray among residents from different ethnicities, but also sometimes between community leaders and other residents. In this context, some respondents shared concerns of corruption practices (such as extortion and bribes) perpetrated by both community members and SCTAF or SAR staff.

„There is only one guard, and at some point he falls asleep.“

boy, 16, Iraq (RSDP Ovcha kupel, RRC Sofia)



11. Complaints were unanimously raised that insufficient quantity of food was provided and quality was **poor** in all SAR centres. In fact, many of the respondents at SAR centres both in and outside Sofia shared that they have found **worms in their food** and showed pictures to corroborate their statements. Special dietary needs remain to a large extent unmet due to lack of capacity for their provision.

„The problem is that we don't have any money. The food we get is not enough. There is nothing to eat. The bread ration has been greatly reduced in the past two weeks and we are having a very hard time. The little children are not getting food, milk or diapers.“
man, Syria, 88 (RRC Harmanli)

12. **Lack of financial support** to cover basic needs, combined with lack of access to legal employment during the first three months of the RSDP continues to be a problem. It should be noted that in May 2016, the LAR was amended, and asylum-seekers were not given access to legal employment during the first nine months of their RSDP. However, in the end of the year, the previous arrangement of a 3-month limit was restored. Vulnerable people who cannot work are left to fend for themselves, often exacerbating their vulnerability.

13. In the beginning of the year, **lack of recreational or learning activities** during the RSDP such as sports/leisure facilities and professional courses were reported in different accommodation centres, especially for children aged 14 and above and adults.

V. Gender-related Issues Concerning Asylum-Seeking Women

In addition to the general problems relevant for all asylum-seekers irrespective of their gender (described above), women seeking asylum in Bulgaria who were interviewed during the 2016 AGD PA exercises shared a number of specific issues relating to them and their families. The main problems identified by women are as follows:

1. Lack of arrangements for supplementary in-kind (food and diapers) assistance for babies and children (especially for children above 1 year of age), unless from irregular donations. As a result, there were cases in which one meal was supposed to be shared by the mother and her child.

2. Constrained access to specific health care services for children, such as vaccinations, due to lacking previous medical history, and unwillingness of pediatricians to register asylum-seeking and refugee babies as patients.

3. Concerns were voiced and unofficial information was shared that domestic violence may be occurring in some asylum-seeking families. A few signals and incidents of SGBV were reported. Women acknowledged the need for information sessions on prevention of SGBV for both men and women.

VI. Main Issues Related to Recognized Refugees and Humanitarian Status Holders

„If nothing changes and people keep treating refugees the way they do now, everybody will want to run away and nobody will stay. I was attacked by Bulgarians close to a supermarket in the vicinity of an accommodation centre. I'm afraid to go out after 9 pm.“
man, 31, Iraq (RSDP Ovcha kupel, RRC Sofia)

Since 2014, there are **no targeted integration measures** provided by the state, despite the adoption of a National Strategy in the area of Asylum, Migration and Integration in June 2015, as well as the adoption of an Ordinance on Integration Agreement in August 2016. Since April 2016, UNHCR Representation in Bulgaria is financing a pilot integration programme for 40 beneficiaries of international protection that is implemented by one of its implementing partners, the Bulgarian Red Cross. Yet, that is not



a comprehensive solution, and it only aims at providing some basic support to beneficiaries of international protection, who wish to remain in the country. The Council of Refugee Women, another UNHCR partner, and Caritas also provide consultation support to beneficiaries of international protection. A Centre for Social Rehabilitation and Integration of Adult Delinquents and Refugees in Plovdiv offers consultation support to beneficiaries of international protection in the area of Plovdiv. As of the end of 2016, refugees in Plovdiv are largely unaware of this opportunity. While refugee integration became a local policy, no municipality has agreed to welcome even a small number of refugees on its territory. In addition to the political reasons behind such decisions, many municipalities still lack expertise and capacity to deal with refugee integration.

The majority of the asylum-seekers and beneficiaries of international protection still perceive Bulgaria as a **transit country** for various reasons, one being the lack of existing support for integration. However, 43 (or about 10%) of the respondents in the PA expressed a willingness to remain in the country, and 29, including children, were either enrolled in Bulgarian language classes or interested in doing so, and 7 had already or are in the process of availing themselves of their right to family reunification. Others stated some prerequisites for settlement support as a condition for their stay in Bulgaria. Some suggested that if the state could provide them with housing for a period ranging between 6 and 12 months, as well as employment assistance, they would consider staying in the country.

With regard to **employment** opportunities, there were few cases of status holders who had registered with the respective Labour Desks with the help of the NGO sector. Even if registered, beneficiaries of protection shared that without the knowledge of the local language, finding a job becomes an almost impossible task. Most of those willing to work are able to find jobs in the local market, reportedly earning the minimum wage, which is insufficient to cover their monthly expenses. Beneficiaries of international protection are usually hired in call centres with Arabic language or in the manufacturing industry, where they perform low-skilled labour. Most of the interviewed beneficiaries of international protection were unemployed. Without any financial means, most of them reportedly live on remittances sent by their relatives residing in other European countries.

Access to **affordable housing** is a major problem for beneficiaries of international protection. There is a tiny social housing fund in Bulgaria. With the lack of targeted support in the area of housing, status holders have to find their own housing through real estate agencies, compatriots, lawyers and volunteers. The intermediaries often take advantage of the beneficiaries' unfamiliarity with the local context, their lack of Bulgarian language knowledge and their desperate need for housing, charging them higher commissions or rents for spaces lacking basic facilities. Finding a landlord willing to rent out an apartment to families of 4 or more is often challenging. In addition, access to housing does not guarantee the possibility to register at the address of residence. As an interim measure SAR has been exceptionally allowing beneficiaries of international protection, especially those who are vulnerable, to remain at the accommodation centres for a period of up to 6 months after obtaining the status. Once they leave the centres, they face the same problems which led to the establishment of this palliative measure in the first place. As a result, their access to social assistance, contingent upon a social interview taking place at their (no-longer-valid) permanent address, is severely hampered. However, no sustainable solution with regard to housing exists, resulting in especially the most vulnerable beneficiaries being at **risk of homelessness** in Bulgaria.

Access to **Bulgarian language classes** is seriously hampered. It is provided only by NGOs to a limited number of beneficiaries of international protection, and only in Sofia. Various courses were funded by UNHCR, through the BRC, and under the AMIF, provided by Caritas and IOM, jointly with BRC. The number of interested participants by far exceeded the number of available spots.

The **relocated refugees** shared their deep disappointment with their reception in Bulgaria. They had higher expectations of the support that would be available after their transfer from Greece, allegedly due to misinformation before departure. Despite the availability of EU funds for the integration of relocated refugees, it is not happening as there is no interest on the part of municipalities to receive funds for integration of refugees on their territory, and no effective mechanism to solicit funds. As a result, relocated refugees face a serious risk of homelessness, just as all beneficiaries of international protection recognized in Bulgaria.

In addition, the following issues were identified:



1. **Lack of awareness of information** on the rights and obligations of beneficiaries of international protection was reported. Despite the presence of NGOs such as the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, the Bulgarian Red Cross, the Council of Refugee Women, and volunteers providing such information, it was established that in many cases status holders lack awareness about where to turn for information on mainstream educational, employment and social assistance services available to them (e.g. the NGOs, SAR social workers, etc.). The problem is worse for those living at external addresses, especially outside Sofia. They receive information from compatriots, friends and volunteers.

2. **Access to medical services** is problematic owing to various factors: beneficiaries of international protection are not informed about the health care system in Bulgaria, including the possibility for registration with GPs and their obligation to cover their monthly medical insurance installments; GPs rarely agree to register status holders because of lack of interpretation services and medical history of the individual cases, the high mobility and no-show of the persons of concern, heavy administrative inter-institutional procedures, their stereotypes against this group; reportedly status holders rarely pay the examination fee compulsory for every patient and chargeable upon each visit to the medical office. Some of them cannot afford it; others cannot understand that they have to pay, because of lacking interpretation services.

3. Even though limited possibilities for **vocational training** were available in 2016 thanks to the UNHCR pilot integration programme, they were only available to a handful of beneficiaries of international protection. Thus, there is still a **lack of available up-scaling opportunities**, leaving beneficiaries of international protection who do not possess any diploma or document for qualification in a very difficult situation in terms of accessing the job market. A functional procedure for the validation of skills for persons lacking educational and qualification certificates of adults is still missing.

4. 28 of the respondents were in possession of educational or vocational certificates. However, **recognition of diplomas** remains a very difficult procedure, due to the need to legalize the available certificates with the diplomatic representation of the country of origin of the beneficiary of international protection, especially when it comes to higher education certificates.

5. A surge in **negative attitudes towards the refugees** was registered in 2016 compared to previous years. The public opinion is largely shaped by the negative rhetoric in the media, as well as by the negative and misleading political discourse on the topic. The lack of welcoming communities is another factor that hampers the successful integration and adaptation process of the beneficiaries of international protection in Bulgaria. A few cases of discrimination and violence against refugees perpetrated by the host community were registered, resulting in heightened fear among asylum-seekers and beneficiaries of international protection to move freely beyond the vicinity of their homes.

VII. Gender-related Issues Concerning Refugee and Humanitarian Status Holding Women

Some specific gender-related issues pertaining to refugee women include: the lack of understanding on their part of the specificities of gender roles in Bulgaria and the need for both men and women to work in order to sustain the family; lack of work experience in their countries of origin which negatively impacts their subsequent attempts to enter the labour market in Bulgaria; actual and perceived xenophobic and negative attitudes on the part of the local community which cause women to stay at home and limit their contacts with the locals; arising conflicts within the family due to the changing behavior of some women (who experienced the gender roles in their respective countries of origin as oppressive) and the wish of some husbands to restrain their wives from work; lack of information on registration procedures for crèches and kindergartens, where such possibilities exist.

VIII. Age-related Issues Concerning Men and Women over the Age of 55 (Asylum-Seekers and Refugees and Humanitarian Status Holders)

The number of vulnerable asylum-seekers and beneficiaries of international protection has increased in the past months. 17 elderly people participated in the 2016 PA. The relatively low number of elderly persons of concern included in the focus groups renders the specific issues of this group to a large extent invisible.



However, the main identified problem was the lack of information on the application procedure for social pension (for persons aged 70 and above) and hindered access to medical services for the reasons outlined in the previous section. Elderly people are provided for by their accompanying family members. No unaccompanied elderly persons of concern were identified.

IX. Age-related Issues Concerning Children at the Age of 6-17 (Asylum-Seekers and Refugees and Humanitarian Status Holders)

*„I do not wash my clothes, because I don't have any extra. I need shoes.“
UAM, 12, Afghanistan (TC Pastrogor)*

The specific issues raised during the interviews with both adults and children include: lack of access to pediatric help and free immunizations for the new-born babies, lack of awareness among mothers of their right to choose and register their children with GPs with pediatric specialization, insufficient means to meet the nutritional, material and educational needs of children during the reception and integration phases, poor material reception conditions non-conducive to the fulfillment of the health and developmental needs of children (e.g. poor sanitation and insufficient or lacking formula milk corresponding to the children's specific needs). Lack of social and educational activities for children under 7 or above 14 years old were reported in most of the accommodation centres.

*„One can neither die, nor live on the food we get.“
UAM, 14, Afghanistan (RRC Harmanli)*

With regard to **education**, it was observed that asylum-seekers were not always willing to enroll their children in school because of many of the difficulties outlined above, including their wish to continue with their secondary movements. Additional reasons for such decisions include fear to let their children go to school without specialized transportation and no financial possibility to meet the costs related to their children's education (proper clothing, educational materials, meals). Despite the general lack of interest and hardships, as of the end of 2016, 67 children were enrolled in state and municipal schools, the large majority of them in Sofia (based on SAR data). Among beneficiaries of international protection, the rate of enrollment in both kindergarten and schools, with the assistance of NGOs, is much higher compared to previous years. The Ministry of Education and Science adopted two Ordinances bearing a direct link to asylum-seeking and refugee children, entitling them to additional free Bulgarian language classes provided at schools. Schools still encounter difficulties implementing the new policies.

*„The problem is that the adults get drunk and become aggressive. They start breaking doors and fight. This is why we go outside and find a place to hide.“
UAM, 16, Afghanistan (RRC Harmanli)*

Of particular concern remains the treatment of **unaccompanied minors** who do not receive adequate protection and specialized care, owing to the lack of a safe space for their accommodation and dedicated staff to cater for their needs, including related to their security. Unaccompanied minors share their concerns that they are often accommodated with single males with whom they may not feel safe. They request to be accommodated with families. Those who have some relatives accompanying them asked to be accommodated with them. An assessment of children's needs and their best interests is required before taking decisions which affect the well-being of children. These are done in exceptional cases due to lack of capacity.

Despite the amendments in the LAR of 2015 introducing the function of a representative, municipal authorities face great difficulties to meet their responsibilities under the new provisions. As a result, the large majority of UAMs have not been represented in administrative procedures and their best interests have remained unidentified and not taken into consideration. In this regard, two opposite worrying trends



from previous years were reported to persist: some UAMs were reportedly assigned to other unrelated adults or registered as adults due to difficulties of the respective field staff to ensure the application of the special safeguards for UAMs stipulated by law, such as the provision of special protection and care by the respective Child Protection Units in accordance with the child's best interests (lack of interpretation and incurred transportation costs, among others). Various representatives of state institutions (border guards, police officers, child protection social workers and SAR staff) reportedly contest the age of some minors, despite the principle of giving the UAMs the benefit of the doubt with regard to age, unless solid evidence to the contrary is presented (e.g. an ID document from the country of origin). No continuous support, guidance, supervision and counseling are provided to most of the interviewed UAMs, including on their motivation to enroll in school. A lack of a coordination mechanism and an accountable body for the protection of this group of children are additional problems posing real threats to UAM's wellbeing and safety. As a result, most UAMs go missing, as the child protection system does not have sufficient capacity to provide the due care, as per the relevant international standards and national legislation.

X. Positive Developments in 2016:

1. Reduction in the number of cases of reported abuse and violence at the border in the second half of 2016.
2. Systematic audio-recording of RSD interviews.
3. Stronger presence of NGOs both at the Turkish-Bulgarian border, as well as at SAR facilities, resulting in an enhanced monitoring of the protection situation by NGOs and in higher visibility of support providers among persons of concern.
4. Few cases of penalization of irregular entry to the territory of Bulgaria of asylum-seekers;
5. Provision of psychological assistance and social mediation by NGOs under AMIF, in most accommodation centres;
6. Shorter time frame allowing access to work for asylum-seekers;
7. Provision of limited integration support by NGOs and higher interest among beneficiaries of international protection to benefit from this;
8. More asylum-seeking and refugee children enrolled in kindergarten and schools;
9. Continuation of coordination mechanisms between state institutions, NGOs and volunteers.

XI. Recommendations for Further Action:

1. UNHCR to include new partners in the 2017 AGD PA, like the International Projects Directorate, Mol, and the Network of Health Mediators; AGD PA methodology to be adapted to the dynamic asylum context;
2. UNHCR to continue the provision of training to border guards and Migration Directorate staff with regard to traumatic experiences and cultural specificities of persons of concern (with an emphasis on the needs of women and children);
3. Border Police, Migration Directorate, SAR, UNHCR, NGOs to continue the provision of information materials to the people of concern, irrespective of their location across the country, including the contact details of BHC and other legal aid providers; Special information sets to be developed for children and vulnerable groups with pictures;
4. Border Police, Migration Directorate, SAR to provide interpretation services from qualified interpreters, including female ones;
5. Border Police, Migration Directorate, SAR to establish functioning complaints mechanisms;
6. Bulgarian Government to introduce legal pathways, including resettlement, to Bulgaria in order to reduce irregular movements and ensure proper migration control, including improvement of the working conditions of border guards; To seek and establish alternatives to detention with UNHCR and NGO support;
7. Bulgarian Government to have a contingency plan in case of an influx, guaranteeing sufficient reception capacity and human resources;
8. SAR to continue ensuring the quality of the RSD procedure, including reading out the RSD protocols before signing, UNHCR and NGOs to continue monitoring and share recommendations with SAR;



9. SAR to provide a dedicated fund for specialized examinations for the purposes of RSDP (age assessment, medical/psychological tests) under AMIF;
10. EASO, SAR, UNHCR and NGOs to conduct trainings for interpreters, SAR staff, judges on RSD and vulnerability (with a focus on victims of torture);
11. UNHCR and partners to keep monitoring the reception conditions at all stages of the protection of people of concern (incl. at the border, Allocation Centre Elhovo, SCTAFs and SAR reception facilities); monitoring the integration situation of status holders, with a special emphasis on UAMs and SGBV response;
12. SAR to introduce the organization of info sessions on various topics, including RSD, rights and obligations, internal rules, SGBV prevention, integration opportunities, for both asylum-seekers and beneficiaries of international protection as a regular and systematic practice in all reception facilities; UNHCR and NGOs to actively participate and support with their provision;
13. SAR and relevant institutions to inspect the material base and conditions, identifying and ensuring quality refurbishments, also taking into consideration the special needs of vulnerable persons of concern; A fund for regular repairs to be established, AMIF funds to be considered;
14. SAR to ensure that the mechanism for early identification of vulnerable persons of concern is functioning and UNHCR and partners to monitor;
15. SAR to reintroduce the financial assistance to asylum-seekers, especially for the vulnerable ones;
16. Migration Directorate and SAR to ensure provision of adequate and well-resourced medical care services for all asylum-seekers at SAR centres; The establishment of the position of social mediator is recommended, in order to ensure sustainability of good practices;
17. SAR and NGOs to facilitate the registration with GPs and seek assistance from the Ministry of Health for overcoming of existing resistance on the part of GPs to register them. SAR to consider a more systematic usage of the Ex-officio registration with GPs;
18. Migration Directorate and SAR to ensure regular provision and sufficient quantities of quality food;
19. SAR to ensure quality security services at all facilities, with a focus on vulnerable groups, incl. UAMs and SGBV survivors;
20. SAR to establish safe spaces for UAMs, ensuring strengthened security and dedicated social work with them. All activities should be sustainable and not dependent on availability of external funds;
21. SAR, State Agency for Child Protection, Agency for Social Assistance to regularly conduct best interest assessment and to ensure protection and care to UAMs;
22. Municipalities to ensure quality representations of UAMs at all stages of their reception and protection; UNHCR and NGOs to assist;
23. SAR to promote community mobilization with the help of NGOs and UNHCR, ensuring monitoring of the work of community leaders and the necessary provisions (e.g. cleaning materials);
24. SAR with the assistance of NGOs to organize recreational and sports activities both for children and adolescents but also for young adults, especially in RRC Harmanli;
25. SAR and SCTAF, together with NGOs, to facilitate volunteering activities for all accommodated persons, focusing on women and children;
26. SAR, UNHCR and NGOs to widen the awareness of existing mainstream services for beneficiaries of international protection;
27. Ministry of Interior to envision funding of housing opportunities under AMIF, as a part of a comprehensive integration support;
28. UNHCR, NGOs, Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and other relevant stakeholders to facilitate the establishment of a network of integration providers (e.g. employers), including a platform where concentrated information on integration opportunities can be found;
29. UNHCR, SAR, NGOs and other relevant institutions to train journalists and disseminate positive refugee-related stories, myth debunking sessions at schools and in municipalities;
30. SAR and competent institutions, with the support of UNHCR and partners, to provide sensitization and capacity building activities to all relevant stakeholders working with persons of concern, including on working with UAMs; elaboration and implementation of information campaigns and awareness-raising sessions, especially for municipalities on a local level;
31. SAR, jointly with NGOs, to provide Bulgarian language classes and vocational training to asylum-seekers and beneficiaries of international protection;
32. Ministry of Health to facilitate the adoption of a procedure for deregistration of beneficiaries of international protection with GPs;



33. Ministry of Regional Development to facilitate the adoption of a special procedure for registration and deregistration of beneficiaries of international protection;
34. SAR, UNHCR and NGOs to maintain the existing coordination mechanisms between various stakeholders and to motivate state institutions to take ownership of them; UNHCR and relevant stakeholders to reestablish the media and the integration working groups.

The UNHCR Representation in Bulgaria would like to express its gratitude to all asylum-seekers and beneficiaries of international protection for their participation in the 2016 AGD Participatory Assessment, as well as to the experts from various state institutions, and SAR in particular, NGOs and volunteers who supported and contributed to its implementation.

Reproduction of this report is permitted, except for commercial purposes, provided an explicit reference to the source.

Annex 1

Composition of Focus Groups by Age, Gender and Nationality and Place of Residence

	AS men (18-54)	AS Women (18-54)	BIP¹⁵ men (18-54)	BIP women (18-54)	Elderly (above 55)	Accompanied children (under 18)	UAMs¹⁶	TOTAL by centre
<i>RRC¹⁷ Sofia (RSDP Ovcha kupel)</i>	6 Syrians 5 Iraqi 5 Afghans 4 Iranians 1 Pakistani	4 Syrians		1 Syrian	2 Syrians (M)	2 Syrian (F) 7 Iraqi (F) 1 Iran (M)	22 Afghans (M) 2 Syrians (M) 1 Pakistani (M) 4 Syrians (F) 1 Iraqi (F)	68
<i>RSDP¹⁸ Voenna rampa</i>	20 Afghans 6 Iraqi 2 Syrians 2 Iranians 1 Pakistani	8 Syrians 2 Afghans 1 Iranian			1 Afghan (F)	1 Afghan (M) 1 Syrian (F)	17 Afghans (M) 6 Pakistani (M) 1 Syrian (M) 1 Afghan (F) 1 Somali (F)	71
<i>RSDP Vrazhdebna</i>	12 Syrians	6 Syrians 1 Iraqi			4 Syrians (M) 1 Syrian (F)		1 Syrian (M) 1 Syrian (F)	26
<i>RRC Harmanli</i>	15 Syrians 13 Afghans 5 Iraqis 3 Iranians	12 Syrians 2 Afghans 2 Iraqis	6 Syrians	3 Syrians	2 Syrians (M) 1 Syrian (F)	3 Syrians (M) 1 Afghan (M) 4 Syrians (F) 2 Iraqis (F)	12 Afghans (M) 4 Syrian (M) 1 Iraqi (M)	91
<i>TC¹⁹ Pastrogor</i>	9 Afghans 4 Syrians 3 Iraqis	1 Iraqi	1 Syrian				7 Afghans (M)	25
<i>RRC Banya</i>	2 Syrians	13 Syrians	1 Syrians	2 Syrians				18
<i>SAR closed-tyoe facility (Busmantsi)</i>	6 Afghans						1 Afghan (M)	7
<i>SCTAF Sofia (Busmantsi)</i>	7 Afghans 6 Syrians 3 Iraqis 1 Lebanese						2 Afghans (M)	19
<i>SCTAF Lyubimets</i>	11 Afghans 3 Syrians	6 Syrians 4 Afghans			1 Afghan (M) 1 Syrian (M)			26
<i>Sofia, external addresses</i>	1 Iraqi 1 Somali 1 Afghan	2 stateless 1 Syrian	12 Syrians 6 Iraqis 1 Somali 2 stateless	9 Syrians 1 Iraqi 1 stateless	1 Syrian (M) 1 Iraqi (M) 1 stateless (M) 1 Syrian (F)	1 Syrian (M) 1 Syrian (F)	2 Syrians (M)	43
<i>Plovdiv, external addresses</i>			2 Syrians	1 Syrian				3

¹⁵ Beneficiaries of International Protection.

¹⁶ Unaccompanied minors.

¹⁷ Registration and Reception Centre (RRC).

¹⁸ Refugee Status Determination Procedure Unit within RRC Sofia.

¹⁹ Transit Centre.



<i>Saedinenie, external addresses</i>			3 Syrians					<u>3</u>
TOTAL by category	<u>158</u>	<u>62</u>	<u>34</u>	<u>18</u>	<u>17</u>	<u>24</u>	<u>87</u>	<u>400</u>