

Public attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers in Bulgaria 2017

Refugee integration is possible

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

- Almost half of the country's adult population agree that refugee integration in Bulgarian society could happen successfully.
- The difference in cultural and religious traditions generate the strongest fears and non-acceptance.
- Decrease of direct contacts between local population and refugees and asylum seekers in comparison with 2013.
- Television is by far the dominant media source of information that shapes people's perceptions and attitudes towards refugees.

ATTITUDE TOWARDS REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

The direct contacts and awareness with refugees and asylum seekers are decreasing in comparison with 2013. In 2017, 93,2% of Bulgarians say they **have never met a refugee** in Bulgaria, while **in 2013 they were 81%**. There is also significant decrease (from 84% in 2013 to 54% in 2017) in the share of people who have heard any news or stories about refugees.

Having in mind the lack of personal contacts with refugees and asylum seekers **the main source of information and a considerable influencing factor for people's perceptions and attitudes towards refugees are the media. Television is with 94%** the main source of information, followed by the **Internet (20%), friends/acquaintances (19%), press 11%, social networks (7%) and radio (7%)**.

There is a general lack of understanding about the people who seek asylum. Bulgarians perceive everybody who comes to the country outside the EU as an irregular migrant and there is no clear understanding of the distinction between migrants and asylum seekers.

The current survey confirms other common stereotypes towards the refugees which were observed during the last four years. These stereotypes could be divided in the following groups:

- **Refugee focused stereotypes:** 51% have the opinion that **Bulgaria should accept refugees from countries in war like Syria and Iraq** (and only **15%** believe that **people fleeing persecution and human rights violations in their home countries should be granted asylum**. According to **53,5%** of the respondents **most of those who apply for refugee status are not under real danger of persecution or war in their homeland**.
- **Stereotypes focused on the fears of the local population:** this group includes attitudes that represent the **people's concerns regarding the difference in cultural and religious traditions** - these differences generate the strongest fears and non-acceptance in Bulgarian society. The main fears are that the **refugees will bring crime (60%), will spread their cultural and religious beliefs (48%)** and **might spread disease (39%)**. In the beginning of the migrants' flow (in 2013) the strongest were the fears regarding the **security, jobs losses and danger of bringing diseases to the country**. In 2017 leading fears are the concerns about **security, difference in culture and religion**.

The majority of the population (**55,5%**) believe that **during the asylum process the asylum seekers should only be provided with shelter and food** while **46,5%** believe they should not be accorded **more rights and financial support**. In comparison to 2013 **the share of supporters to the detention of asylum-seekers during the asylum process has increased – from 59% in 2013 to 76,8% in 2017**. There is a decrease in the support to giving benefits like the opportunity for work and financial support from the government – from 77% in 2013 to 62,5% in 2017.

INTEGRATION

Almost half of the respondents (**45,4%**) agree that the integration of **refugees in Bulgarian society could happen successfully**. 36,4% believe that refugees can integrate in Bulgarian society only with the help of local people. 9% think that refugees can integrate alone without any help. Two groups of preconditions with respect to the profile of asylum seekers who could be integrated could be identified:

- The first group includes the expectations of the population that the refugees **should be self-reliant (88%), must accept the local way of living (85%) and must have professional skills (74%)**.
- The second group includes expectations that the refugees **must speak Bulgarian language (59%) and must have a good education (50%)**.

There are **two attributes that polarized the public opinion on this question: the religion and the color of the skin as prerequisite to integration**. 45% of all respondents insist that they should be Christian and 32% insist that they must have white skin.

With regards to the personal contribution, **Bulgarians are willing to support the integration of refugees through helping them to better understand the local way of living, to support them in the communication at local environment and learning the Bulgarian language**. **55,2%** would engage with activities for integration of refugees in the local community. **30,6%** would help

refugees learn the local language, 24,6% would **employ them** in order to help them make a living. However there is a strong belief that the refugees are not interested in integrating into Bulgarian society.

Although there were several examples of non-acceptance of refugees in Bulgaria in 2017, there is a relatively low share of Bulgarians who would try to prevent the settlement process of refugees in their town. 16,4% would organize a protest against refugees, 10,4% would try to expel them. 8,3% would seek the support of parties and groups which would help them prevent the settlement of refugees and 4,2% would turn to so called “refugee hunters”.

Regarding the contribution of the government to the integration of the refugees into the society the survey clearly outlines that:

- **The role and contribution of the government is expected to be minimal and limited to services covering basic necessities such** as shelter, food, health services, Bulgarian language classes and in exceptional cases – jobs.
- **There is strong disapproval of the provision of financial support to asylum-seekers and refugees by the government.**

Meanwhile 88,6% of respondents state that refugees should be self-reliant if they would like to integrate and be well accepted by the local communities. 85% of Bulgarians believes successful integration of refugees requires also acceptance of the local way of living (85%).`

ABOUT THE SURVEY

The survey commissioned by UNHCR aims to examine the attitudes of Bulgarian society and the motivations of people’s behaviour, action and interactions towards refugees and asylum seekers. It was conducted for UNHCR Bulgaria in December 2017. The methodology – a quantitative survey among 1000+ respondents at the age between 18 and 61 with different socio-demographic characteristics and focus group discussions in Sofia, Plovdiv, Haskovo and Vidin.

ABOUT UNHCR BULGARIA

Over the last 25 years UNHCR has assisted and advised the Government of Bulgaria and non-governmental organizations on refugee matters and advocated for enhanced respect of the fundamental human rights of refugees, asylum seekers and stateless persons. UNHCR maintains Project Partnership Agreements with the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, Bulgarian Red Cross, Council of Refugee Women in Bulgaria, Bulgarian Council for Refugees and Migrants, and Nadya Center in the field of legal protection, social mediation, psychosocial support and refugee integration.