

Public attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers in Bulgaria

2018

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

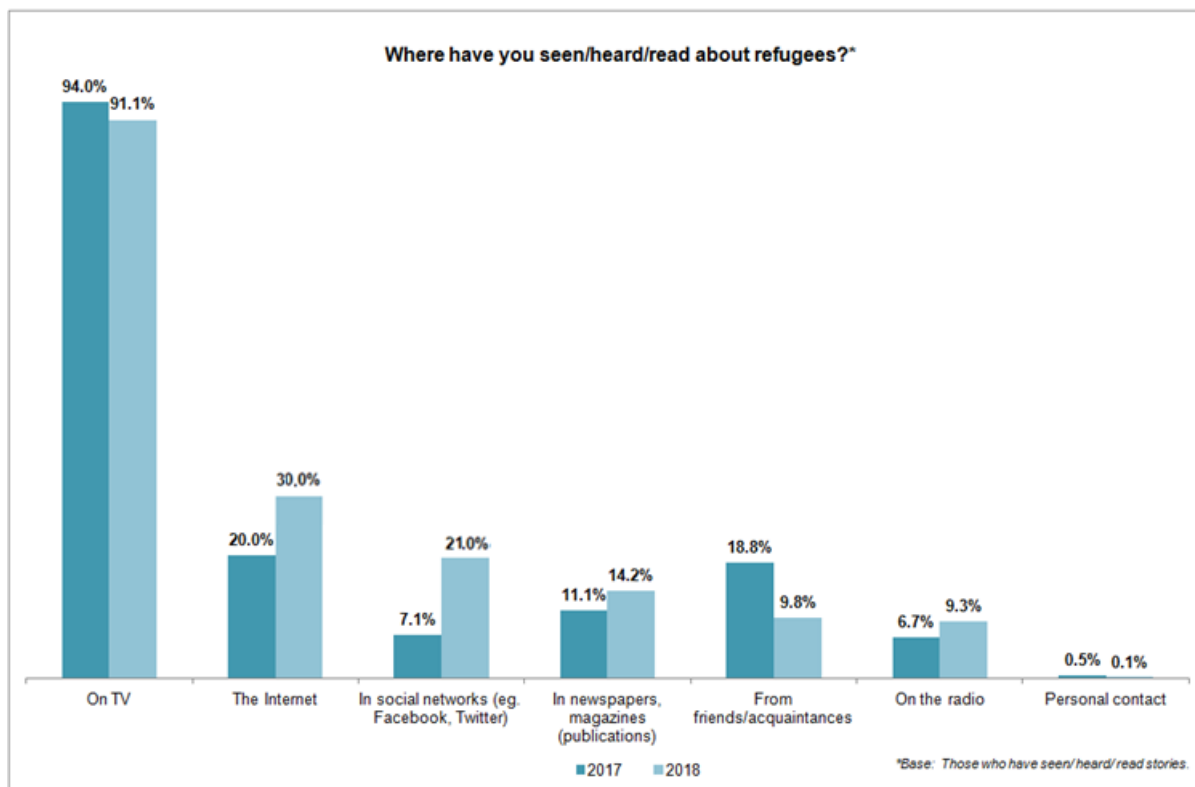
- Due to the lack of intensive refugee flow there is a shift from extreme to more moderate perceptions and decrease in the shared fears in 2018.
- The perception that refugee integration in Bulgarian society could happen successfully shared by almost half of the country's adult population remains unchanged in 2018.
- The difference in cultural and religious traditions generate the strongest fears as well as the suspicion that the refugees bring terrorism to the country.
- Most Bulgarians have never met a refugee.
- There is a significant increase of the impact of internet and social media as a source of information about refugees.

ATTITUDE TOWARDS REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

The 2018 survey identifies a trend towards a decrease in awareness of Bulgarian citizens with issues related to refugees and asylum seekers. There is a significant decrease (from 54% in 2017 to 23% in 2018) in the share of people who have heard any news or stories about refugees. As in **2017, 92,4%** of Bulgarians say they **have never met a refugee** in Bulgaria, while **in 2013 they were 81%**.

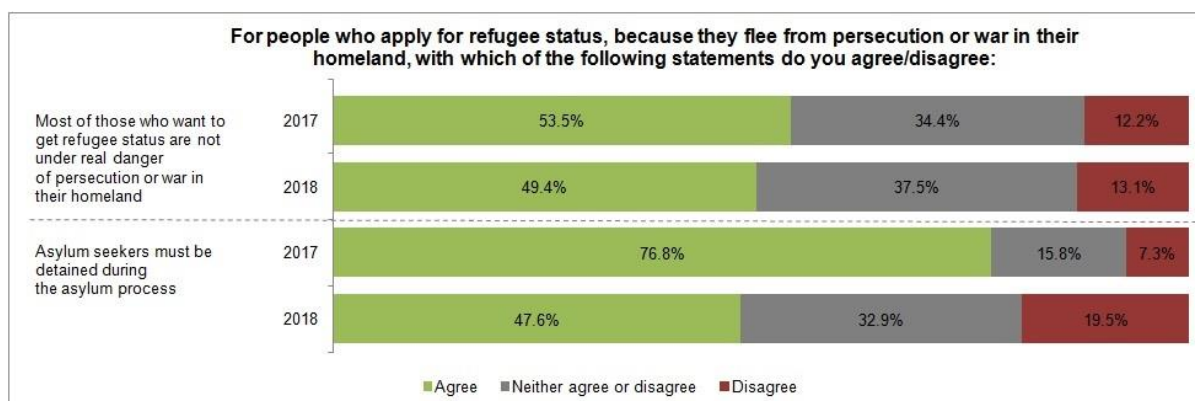
Having in mind the lack of personal contacts with refugees and asylum seekers **the main source of information and a considerable influencing factor for people's perceptions and attitudes towards refugees are the media. Television is with 91%** the main source of information, followed by the **Internet (30%), friends/acquaintances (10%), press 16%, social networks (21%) and radio (11%)**.

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Bulgarians perceive everybody who comes to the country outside the EU as an irregular migrant. Although in theory Bulgarians do make a difference between migrants and refugees **the general lack of understanding about the people who seek asylum is obvious** when they comment the subject.

As in 2017, the same huge majority of 81% support the position that foreigners who enter the country illegally must be detained. At the same time the extreme negative opinions that during the asylum process refugees must be detained and that most of the asylum seekers are not under real danger in their homeland became weaker and shifted towards the neutral position. There is a trend towards decrease of those who believe that **asylum seekers should be detained during the asylum process**. Less than half of the respondents (47,6%) agree with that, while in 2017 they were 76,8%.



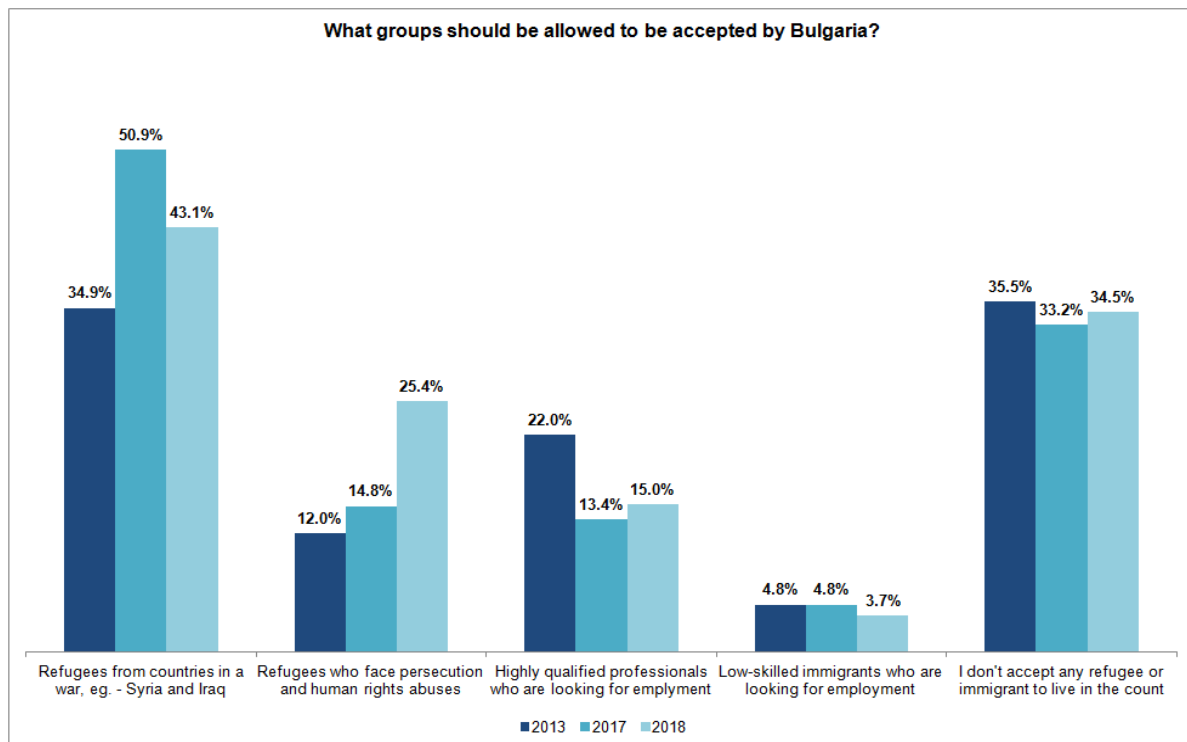
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The survey confirms other common stereotypes towards the refugees which were observed during the last years. Generally the people share the same stereotypes as in 2017 but due to the lack of intensive refugee flow there is a shift from extreme to more moderate perceptions and decrease in the shared fears. These stereotypes could be divided in the following groups:

- **Refugee focused stereotypes**

There is a **decrease from 51% in 2017 to 43% in 2018** of the people who believe that **Bulgaria should accept refugees from countries in war like Syria and Iraq**. In the meantime those who state that **people fleeing persecution and human rights violations in their home countries should be granted asylum increase from 15% in 2017 to 25,4% in 2018**.

There is a commonly shared opinion that Bulgaria could accept refugees from countries in a war but most of those who apply for refugee status are not under real danger of persecution or war in their homeland. However, in 2018 there are less people (49,5%) who share the opinion that **most of those who apply for refugee status are not under real danger of persecution or war in their homeland** in comparison to 2017 when they were 53,5%.



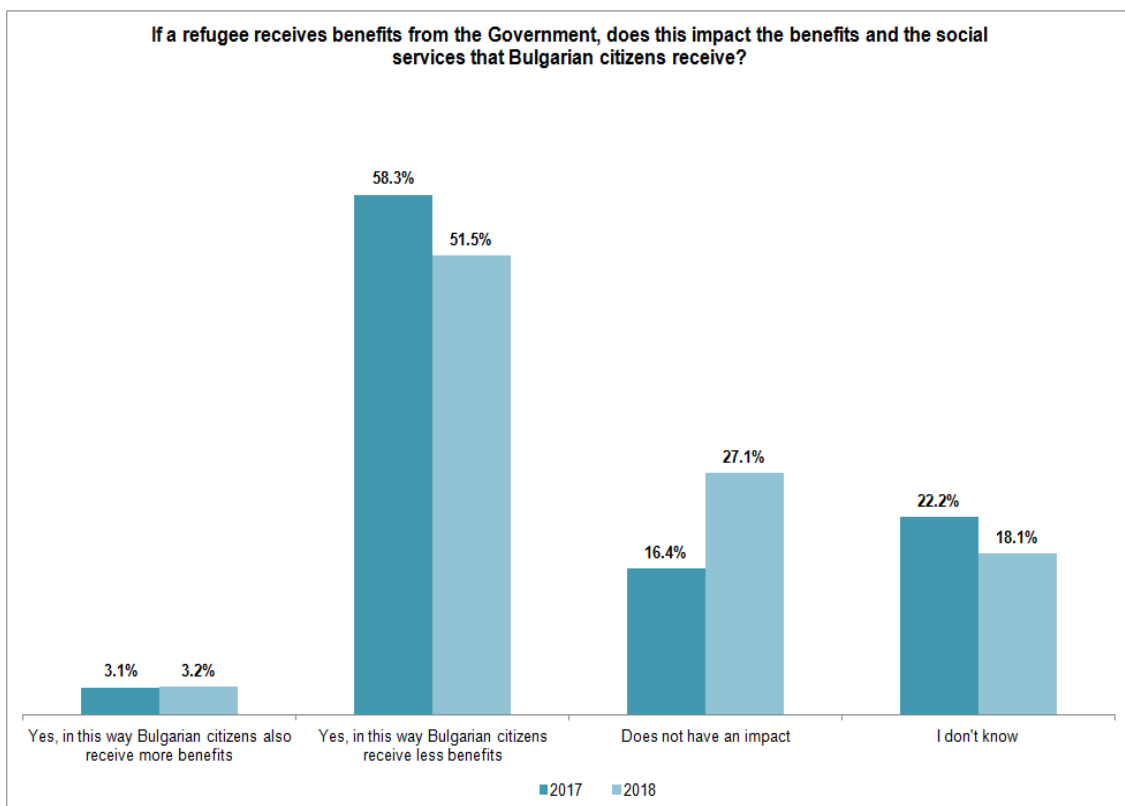
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- Stereotypes focused on the fears of the local population

People’s concerns regarding the difference in cultural and religious traditions generate the strongest fears and non-acceptance in Bulgarian society. However there is **an increase of those who state that doesn’t fear refugees (10% in 2017 and 17% in 2018)** and a decrease in the shared fears in comparison to 2017 as follows:

- refugees might bring crime – the rate of people who have this fear felt from **60% in 2017 to 42,8% in 2018**
- refugees will spread their cultural and religious beliefs – year over year rate decrease from **48% in 2017 to 42,7% in 2018**
- refugees might spread disease - **39% in 2017 to 35,8% in 2018**
- refugees might take our jobs – from **25,7% in 2017 to 13% in 2018**

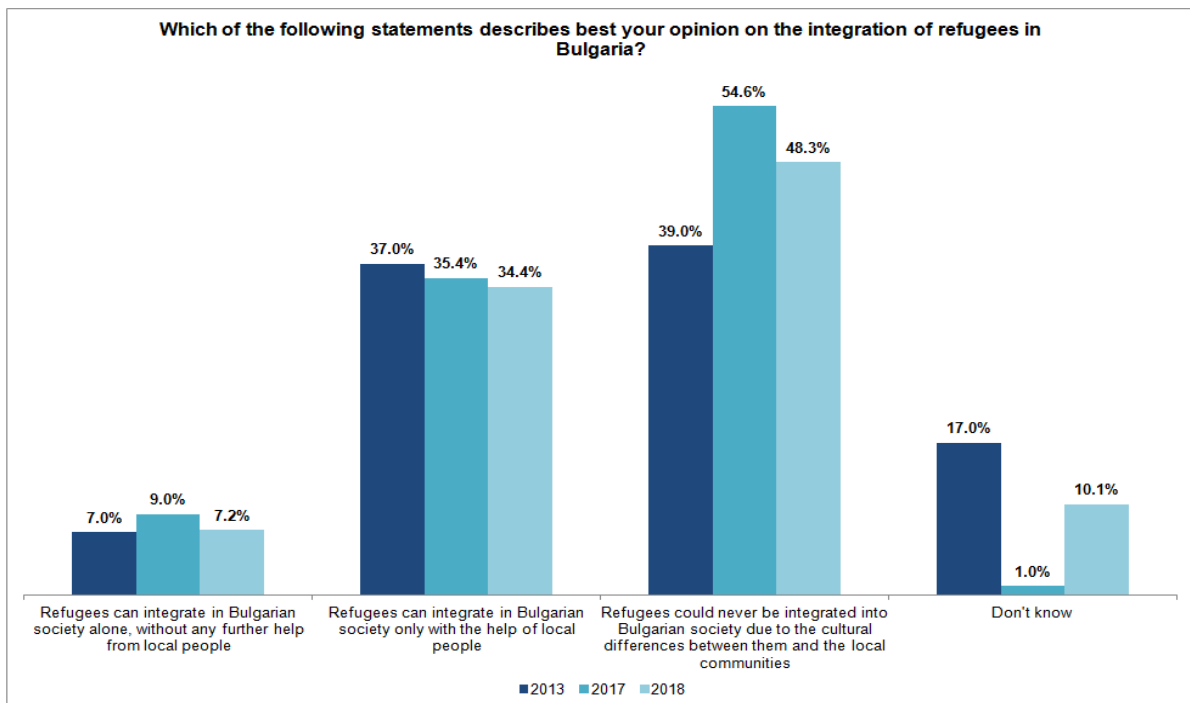
There is a year over year rate decrease of people who think that if the refugees receive state support Bulgarian citizens will receive less benefits – 58% in 2017 and 51,5% in 2018. However, there is a widespread belief that the refugees might take social benefits from the local population and that they receive high social benefits from the state (even higher than the average monthly salary in the country).



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INTEGRATION

Similarly to the end of 2017 and despite the strong belief that the refugees are not interested in integration into the Bulgarian society, **almost half of the country's adult population (41,6%) agrees that integration could happen successfully.** There is a slight decrease of this indicator from 45,5% in 2017 to 41,6% in 2018. As in 2017, 34,4% believe that refugees can integrate in Bulgarian society only with the help of local people. Only 7% 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 (84%), must accept the local way of living (85%) and must have professional skills (78%).**
- The second group includes expectations that the refugees **must speak Bulgarian language (53%) and must have a good education (50%).** These requirements are expressed by the social groups who are relatively more positive and more willing to accept refugees in the country.

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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. These requirements are strongly expressed by the people who have more negative attitudes to refugees, share higher concerns and are not willing to accept them into the society.

With regards to the personal contribution there is **clear decrease of willingness for some personal participation in comparison to 2017**. The share of people who are ready to help refugees to better understand the local way of living decrease from 31% to 18%; to help them to communicate at public place – from 31% to 20%; to help them to learn the local language – from 24% to 14%; to find a job – from 18% to 15%; to find housing – from 17% to 14%. There is **a strong belief that the refugees are not interested in integrating into Bulgarian society**.

There is a relatively low share of Bulgarians who would try to prevent the settlement process of refugees in their town. In 2018 9% would organize a protest against refugees while 16,4% of the people would do that in 2017.

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 a strong disapproval of the provision of financial support to asylum-seekers and refugees by the government.**

There is a trend towards decrease in the number of people don't support the settlement of refugees in areas with demographic problems (from 53% to 40,8%) and an increase of those who support that (from 15,6% to 21,8%).

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 2018. 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

Since its establishment in 1993 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

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maintains Project Partnership Agreements with the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, Bulgarian Red Cross, Council of Refugee Women in Bulgaria, Bulgarian Council for Refugees and Migrants in the field of legal protection, social mediation, psychosocial support and refugee integration.