



PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS IN BULGARIA

(Full report and comparative analysis of surveys 2019 and 2020)

Survey on public attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers in Bulgaria 2019 – 2020

ABOUT THE REPORT AND THE SURVEYS

The present report analyses two separate surveys, aiming to examine Bulgarian society's attitudes towards refugees. A comparative analysis of the 2019 UNHCR survey and the 2020 study of the Bulgarian Academy of Science has been conducted in terms of:

- Investigation on the motivations of people's attitude towards refugees and asylum seekers
- Exploration of perceptions and reasons for fears or concerns of Bulgarians
- Exploration of the influencing factors of the stereotypes towards refugees and asylum seekers
- Assessment of the level of information concerning the situation of the refugees in the country

The survey commissioned by UNHCR Bulgaria in January 2020 aimed to study the motivations of people's behavior, action, and interactions towards refugees and asylum seekers. The survey methodology includes quantitative research covering more than 1000 respondents between 18 and 61 with different socio-demographic characteristics and qualitative study based on the focus group discussions conducted in Sofia, Plovdiv, Haskovo, and Vidin.

The survey of the Bulgarian Academy of Science (BAS) was conducted in August 2020 using the same methodology as the one of UNHCR Bulgaria. It includes a quantitative survey covering more than 1000 respondents between 18 and 61 with different socio-demographic characteristics and a qualitative study with focus group discussions in various Bulgarian cities.

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 for the fundamental human rights of refugees, asylum seekers, and stateless persons. UNHCR maintains Project Partnership Agreements with the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (BHC), Bulgarian Red Cross (BRC), Council of Refugee Women in Bulgaria (CRWB), Bulgarian Council for Refugees and Migrants (BCRM) in the field of legal protection, social mediation, psychosocial support, and refugee integration.

ABOUT BULGARIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCE

The Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the Bulgarian Academy of Science has a leading role in the development of sociological and philosophical knowledge. Among its main activities are the following: conducting fundamental, theoretical, and empirical surveys by providing educational, and consulting activities. IPhS specializes in preparing and implementing basic researches of various kinds in the humanitarian and social science fields. An essential prerequisite for the successful implementation of multiple types of studies is the presence of a professional network of interviewers, which IPhS maintains in all administrative areas of the country.

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

- The awareness among Bulgarians about refugee-related issues decreases significantly
- Most Bulgarians have never communicated with refugees
- The decline in awareness about refugees and the lack of first-hand information leads to attitudes based on well-established stereotypes and information shared by media
- Bulgarians demonstrate higher tolerance towards refugees than towards migrants
- The fear that refugees might spread diseases decreases in 2020 when the entire world is living in a pandemic situation
- Bulgarians does not express xenophobic attitudes towards refugees

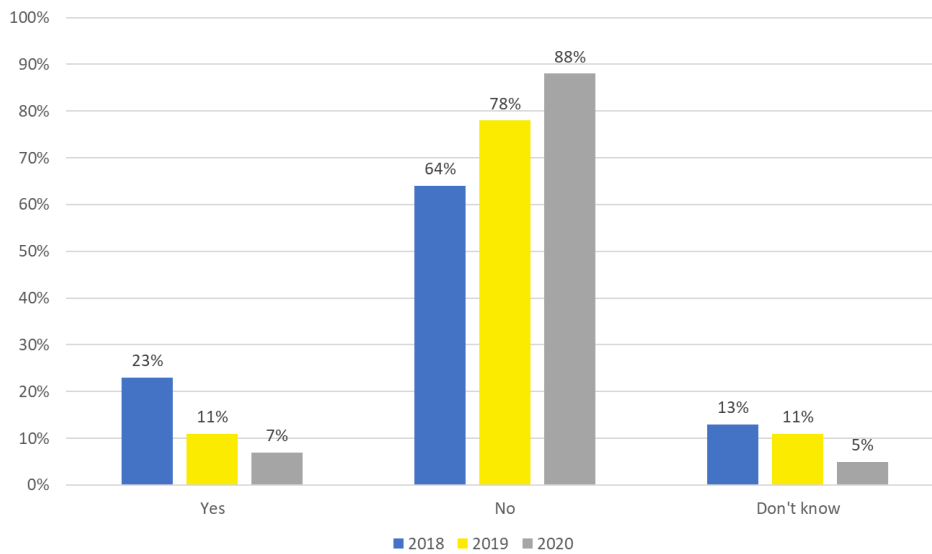
AWARENESS ABOUT REFUGEES

The awareness about refugees is at a deficient level

Both surveys conducted by UNHCR in 2019 and the Bulgarian Academy of Science in 2020 show a steady decrease in Bulgarians' awareness about refugees-related issues. **The awareness about refugees is at a superficial level and decreases further over the years.** If in 2018, 23% of respondents have seen/heard/read the news stories about refugees, in 2019, they are already twice less - 11.3%, and in 2020 they are only 7.2%. On the other hand, in 2020, the population that is completely uninformed about refugees reached 87.9% against 78% in 2019 and 63.7% in 2018. The traditionally better-informed social circles (residents of bigger cities, young and middle-aged generations) have more often encountered media news on the refugee topic.

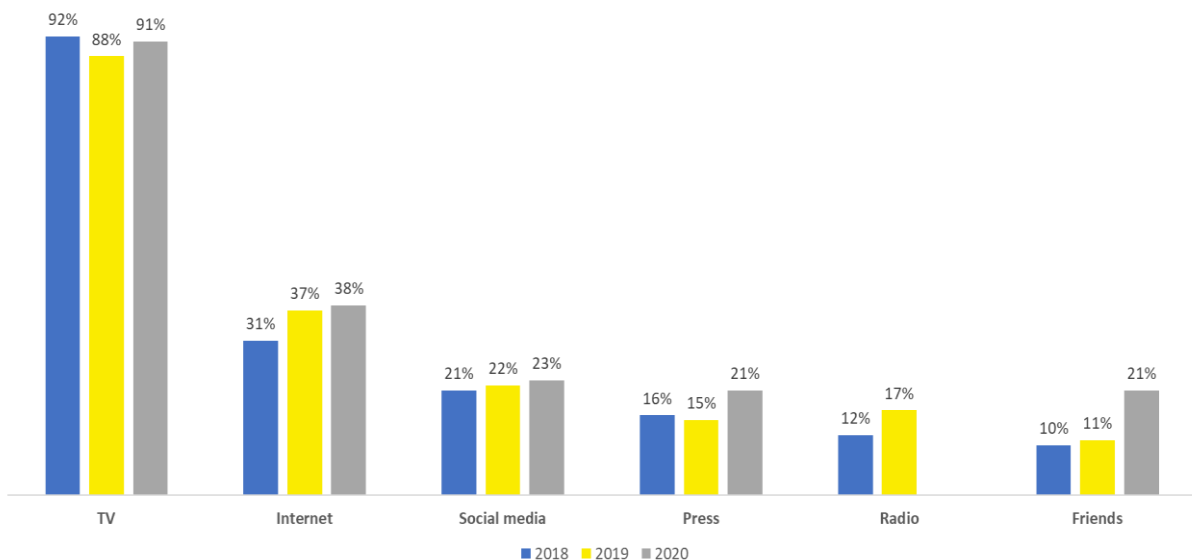
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Over the past few months have you seen/heard/ read any news, stories, documentaries about refugees?



To stay informed about topics related to refugees and migration, Bulgarians use the following information channels: television (91%), Internet and social networks (61%), newspapers and magazines (21%), friends, and acquaintances (21%). The personal contacts and direct impressions of refugees have a negligibly small share of respondents. This structure of the sources of information impacts the perceptions and attitudes of the local population about refugees considerably. Bulgarians are relatively well informed of the countries of origin of refugees over the recent years. 73.6% of respondents mentioned different countries, including Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan. Those who have no idea about this topic are 24.2%.

Where have you seen/ heard/ read news about refugees?



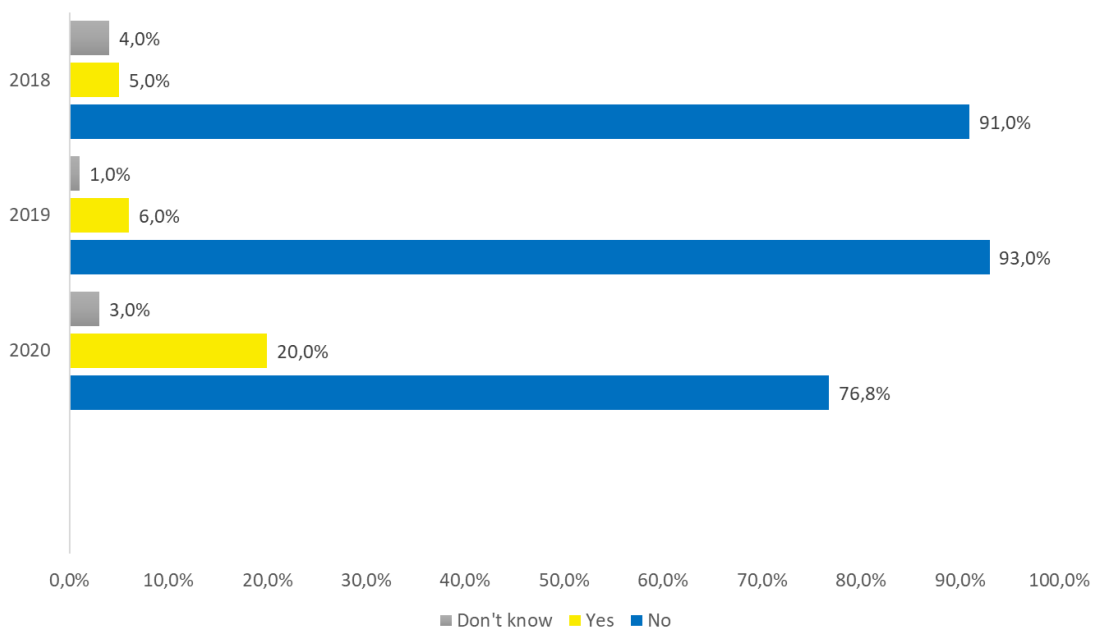
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The majority of Bulgarians have never met a refugee

An emerging trend over the past couple of years is the fact that a **large proportion of Bulgarians have never met a refugee**. 2020 direct contacts with refugees or migrants have increased significantly compared to 2019 (from 6% in 2019 to 20% in 2020) but still a considerable part of Bulgarians have never met a refugee. The majority of Bulgarians (90.9%) do not maintain contacts with refugees, and 76.8% have never met a refugee. The lack of direct contact with refugees also shows a lack of attitudes formed based on personal impressions and perceptions not influenced by other people's opinions and attitudes. The commonly shared perceptions about refugees are formed mainly based on what is spread in the media and social networks.

The share of respondents who have contacts with refugees (5,5%) is represented mainly by people working in the field of migration and asylum since they are: an associate of a state organization that works with refugees; assistant of a local government structure working with refugees; volunteer in a public organization that helps refugees; a person who assists refugees on his initiative; a person who has refugee friends; a person who has a refugee colleague; a person who has refugee relatives; a person who has refugee neighbors (each of those positions holds a minimum share of 0.1% to 1.6%).

Over the past few years, have you talked to a migrant, asylum seeker or refugee?



The low awareness about refugees leads to perceptions based on the way media cover the topics related to refugees

Due to the lack of direct contact with refugees, **the prevalent opinions and attitudes towards refugees are mainly based not on personal impressions but past memories, experiences, established**

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stereotypes, media, and social media information. For this reason, these perceptions and attitudes are refracted through the information and suggestions shared by media.

Opinions of the respondents are quite diverse when it comes to the media's role in shaping perceptions about refugees. According to the IPhS study at BAS from 2020, 34.2% of respondents believe that the media have a neutral position in shaping perceptions about refugees, 21.9% report a negative impact, and 18.3% a positive one. Regarding the image of refugees created by the media, only 23.1% of the respondents believe that the media objectively present the refugee's image. In comparison, 53.6% believe that they create a biased impression of refugees, which includes: "they try to be objective but fail" (29.9%); "create a distorted image of refugees" (13.5%); "create an unreasonably negative image of refugees" (5.4%); "create an unreasonably positive image of refugees" (4.8%). However, most respondents believe that the image of refugees created by the media is not objective.

"That is one of the reasons perhaps for us to form negative attitudes [the role of the media]. Usually, they only show the bad things. The gentleman is right that the bad ones may be the minority, but the media only shows those refugees. It is the opinion that the media are shaping." (Haskovo)

The 2019 UNHCR survey showed the most significant trust as regards the refugee topic in the face of the ordinary people (for 49% of the Bulgarians) – those who have had personal experience with refugees or asylum seekers (no matter whether positive or negative) and who can, share their experience with others. Close to one-third of the surveyed population said they trusted the representatives of the Bulgarian institutions. Every sixth (17%) respondent perceives the civil, including international organizations, as the most reliable source of information on the topic.

Due to the reduced influx of refugees to Bulgaria and other EU countries in the last few years, the topic remains peripheral. Therefore, when providing arguments favoring their position, most Bulgarians rely on clichés, memories of old media reports, or past experiences from when the refugee flow was more intense.

"Those people have a lot of money. I do not know how to explain that. They have a lot of money, and they are heading for Europe. I start thinking they are somehow assisted by structures, most probably Islamic, to help them conquer Europe.

M: Why do you say they have a lot of money? Have you read this anywhere?

It is all over the press, and they said it in various media. Of course, they have money." (Haskovo)

"I watched the news, and they said that a refugee's allowance is 1000 levs or so, while a mother with a child here gets 240 levs. Is that normal?

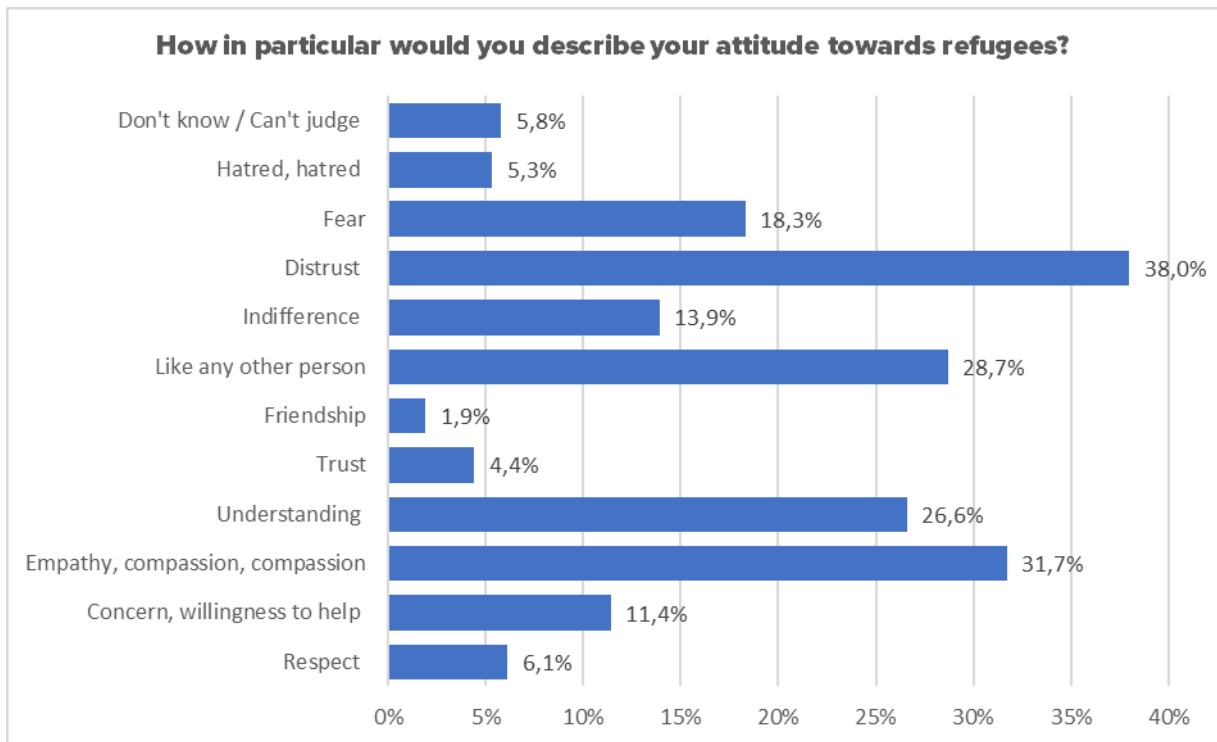
M: All right, but where did you read this?

Nowhere, they said it in the news a while ago." (Vidin)

ATTITUDE TOWARDS REFUGEES

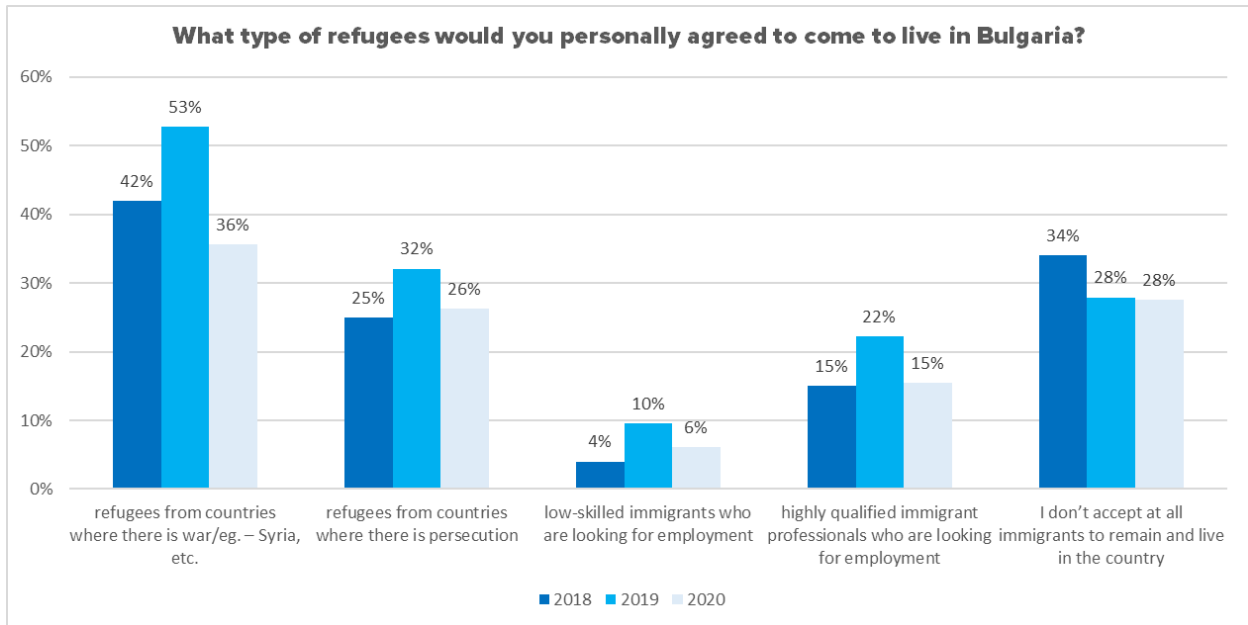
Bulgarians demonstrate an ambivalent attitude towards refugees

The survey of IPhS at BAS from 2020 shows that most respondents have not a clearly expressed attitude towards refugees. 51,5% define their attitude towards refugees as neither positive nor negative, 28,2% say their attitude is "negative," "positive" attitude has expressed 16%, and 4,3% cannot decide. Bulgarians describe their attitude towards refugees mainly as distrust (38%), empathy, and compassion (31,7%), like any other person, 28,7%. The attitude towards refugees goes from sympathy, empathy, compassion, understanding, respect, concern, and willingness to help through indifference, distrust, fear, and hatred.



The surveys' accumulated data show that Bulgarians tend to accept people from countries with ongoing war and persecution. Although these respondents' opinion decreases compared to last year in 2020, they are 62% of all, which confirms that Bulgarians show much tolerance and willingness to accept refugees than economic migrants.

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Bulgarians are much more willing to accept refugees fleeing war and persecution than economic migrants looking for work. However, the shares of respondents who support the reception of refugees in Bulgaria are not high. The attitudes towards the reception of both refugees and economic migrants have decreased over the years.

The factors that influenced Bulgarians' opinion regarding refugees' reception include the declining refugee influx, media reports (showing groups of men entering Bulgaria), and the omnipresent perception that the migrants are only passing through Bulgaria in a search for a better life in Western European countries. Based on these perceptions, **the predominantly negative attitude towards economic migrants is projected on refugees.**

"There are just groups of men everywhere, while on TV, we see families fleeing with their children. However, when they get caught at borders, it is just men. Excuse me, but where are the children here? We are told families with children are fleeing, and at the end of the day, we see groups of some 20 men in the streets of Sofia." (Haskovo)

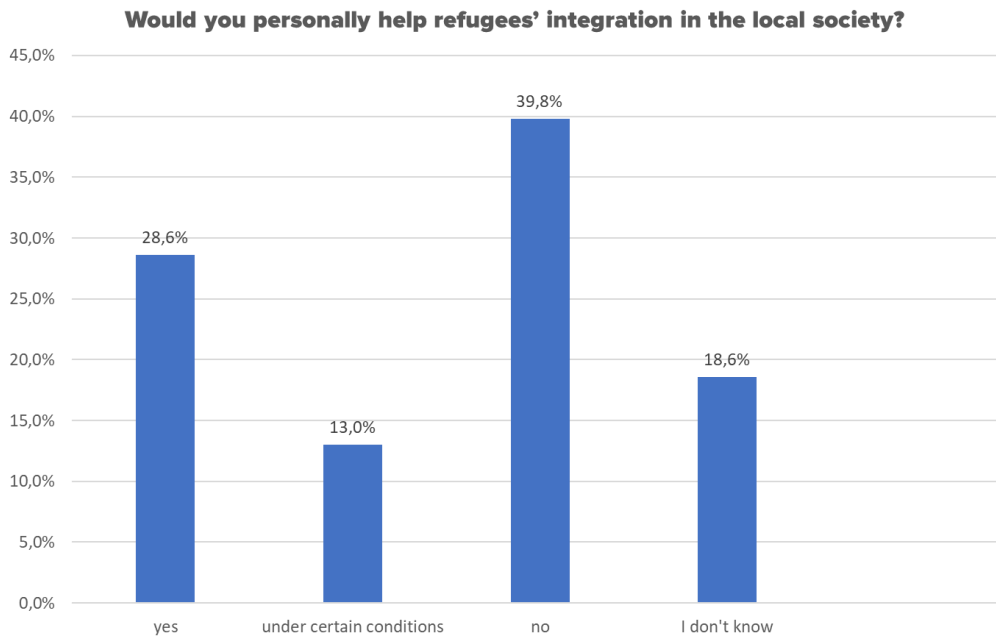
"I believe the most important reason is economic. They flee for financial reasons, and I mean mostly the Africans in Italy ... They flee for financial and not so much for political reasons. Are those refugees? They are, and they are illegal!" (Sofia)

The willingness to support refugees decreases

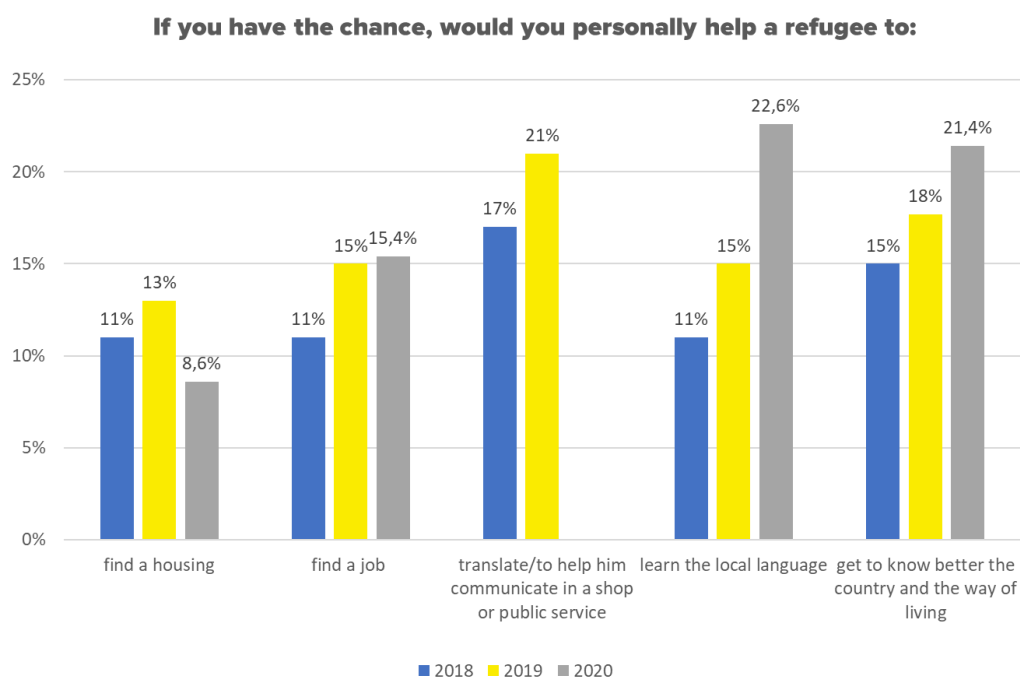
The readiness to support refugees as a whole has remained persistently low over the years. Willingness to get personally involved is limited to inclusion in charity campaigns (for collecting food, clothes, and other items). Only 28.6% of respondents in 2020 are willing to help refugees, while 39.8% are reluctant to do so, and 13.0% would help them under certain conditions. These conditions include: if I

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know them if they have good intentions, if they are really in need; if they flee war and persecution; if they are not economic migrants; if they are educated and looking for a job; if they are not criminally manifested, etc. Bulgarians insist on having evidence that they would help people who need support and are willing to stay and change their lifestyle according to Bulgarian laws and traditions.



On the one hand, the low level of readiness to support refugees is directly related to Bulgarians' low awareness about refugees. On the other hand, the lack of migrant influx has soothed concerns shared in previous years.



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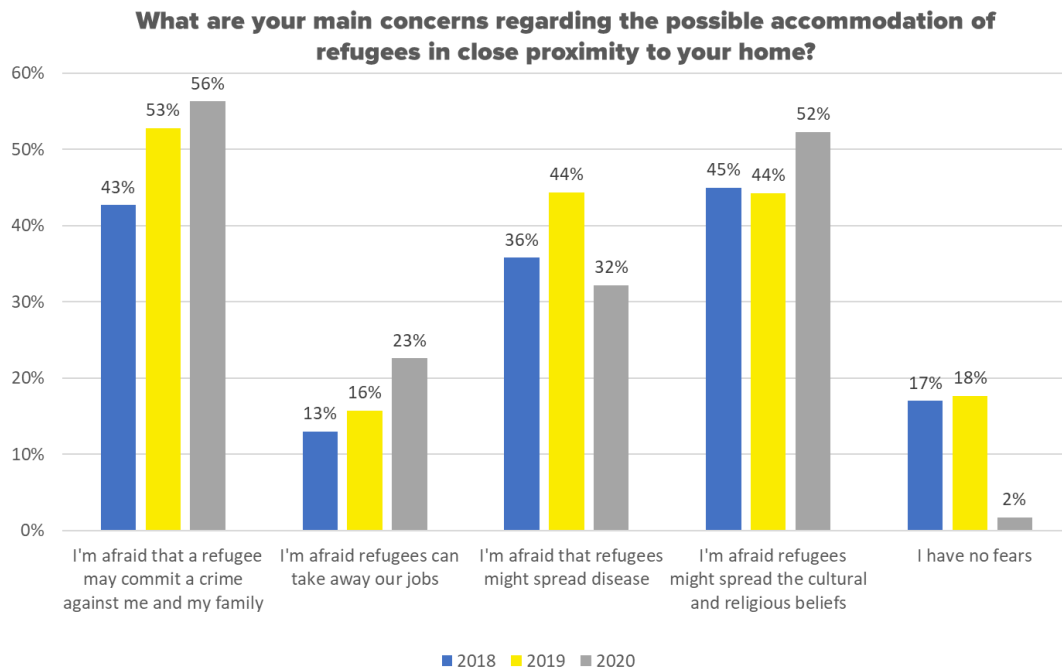
"We can contribute with clothes to clean our wardrobes." (Sofia)

"If someone has fled his country, ask him if he wants a job, and if he doesn't, he should go home. We need workers. We help each other in this way. We help them, and they help us and our economy. That is it." (Plovdiv)

The share of the respondents who confirm their willingness to support refugee integration (42%) slightly exceeds the percentage of those who would not help refugees (40%). This finding shows that Bulgarians would prefer to get involved and provide their support mainly to people in need like refugees and not economic migrants. However, most Bulgarians (54.0%) do not believe in the successful integration of refugees in Bulgarian society. Those who think that integration is possible are only 7.1%, and those who believe in integration to some extent are 32.6%.

The fear that refugees might spread diseases decreases in 2020 when the entire world is living in a pandemic situation

As a result of the low awareness about refugees, **the fears of refugees are high and remain relatively constant over time**. Three main concerns that remain relatively constant over the years could be distinguished. They are as follows: fear that refugees might commit a crime, fear of spreading cultural and religious beliefs, fear of spreading disease, and the fear of taking away jobs.



A comparative analysis of the studies from different years and particularly 2020 study when the world is affected by the pandemic, shows an increase of the fears of spreading cultural and religious beliefs of refugees (from 44% in 2019 to 52% in 2020) and rising unemployment among Bulgarians (from 16% in 2019 to 22,6% in 2020). However, the fear that a refugee may commit a crime has dropped from 53% in 2019 to 45% in 2020. **even during the pandemic, the fear of spreading disease decreases reaching**

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the lowest level compared to the previous two years – 32%. However, the share of those who have no concern dropped significantly in 2020, which confirms that the lack of confidence towards refugees has increased.

"Many terrorist cores and cell, who have long been trained for the purpose penetrate the country through the refugees. It makes it much easier for them to organize terrorist acts." (Haskovo)

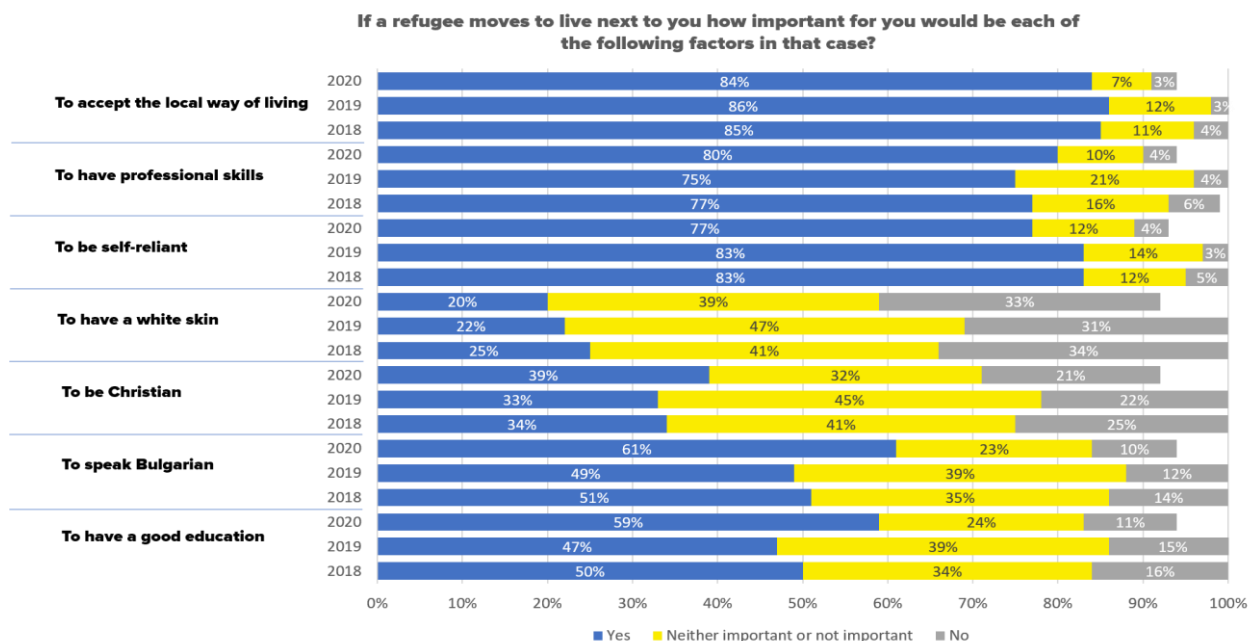
"What happens in Germany is something terrible. A German citizen gets killed every 4 days (that is official statistics). Not to mention raped women and their extremely arrogant behavior towards the local people. How is that the conduct of a refugee who should be grateful to the local people for showing warmth to them? (Sofia)

"What is more, they may spread diseases ... They may wish to impose their religion ... I cannot exclude this option." (Sofia)

Tolerance towards refugees is not high, but in the meantime, Bulgarians do not express xenophobic attitudes

UNHCR surveys conducted in 2018 and 2019 and the one of the IPHS at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences from 2020 show a trend of reduced tolerance towards refugees. At the same time, the surveys confirm the conclusion about the lack of xenophobia towards refugees.

The attitude towards refugees is based mainly on social qualities and not so much on anthropological characteristics. According to the Bulgarians, the **most essential qualities for the successful integration of refugees in the local society are:** professional skills - 80%, self-reliance - 77%, acceptance of Bulgarian way of life - 84%. . Proficiency in Bulgarian language and good education are also part of the necessary social attributes.



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At the same time, characteristics related to physical qualities, such as the color of the skin (to be white) and the presence of disabilities (to be a person with a disability); marital status (family, single young man, single young woman, a mother with children, unaccompanied children) and religion (Christian, Muslim) are much less critical prerequisite for a refugee to be accepted in the local society. Therefore, **if there is a social exclusion of refugees, it is not based on origin, skin color, religion, or marital status.** However, acceptance, in general, remains low.

Also 21.4% agree to have refugee friends (against 44.1% disagree); 26.0% agree to have refugee colleagues (against 39.0% disagree). The greatest social distances are expressed regarding the possibility of marriage with a refugee - only 6.6% of respondents agree that they or their children, grandchildren, close relatives to marry a refugee (against 65.0% disagree).

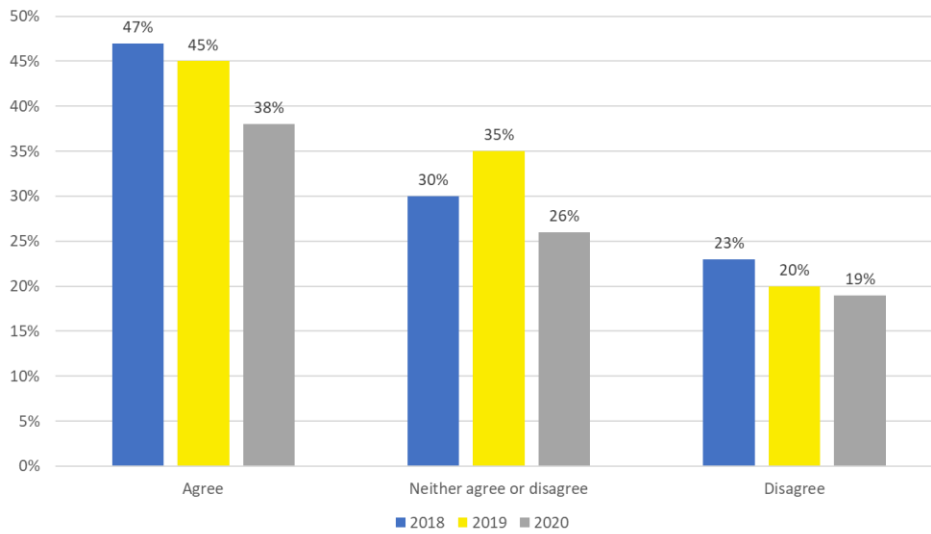
Comparing the results of the UNHCR surveys from 2018 and 2019 and the survey of BAS from 2020 shows a declining tolerance towards refugees. Those who accept cohabitation with refugees in one neighborhood have decreased from 28.2% in 2018 to 22.2% in 2020. On the other hand, those who reject it increased from 34.2% in 2018. to 50.3% in 2020. The most significant change occurs in the attitude towards the possibility of a refugee "to be your colleague." if in 2018, 36.5% accept this opportunity, in 2020, they are 26%. Respondents who would not accept a refugee as a colleague increased from 31% in 2018 to 39% in 2020.

There is an increasing tendency to accept refugees to settle in areas with demographic problems. In 2020, the share of those who support refugees to settle in areas with demographic problems (31%) and those against (31,7%) is almost equal. The share of those in favor of refugees' settlement in areas with demographic problems almost doubled compared to 2019, when only 18% of the respondents approved such an option. This is an expression of a positive attitude towards refugees, which might be influenced by concerns about the numerous Bulgaria regions that are depopulating progressively over the past few years.

There is a trend for a more tolerant attitude regarding access to employment for asylum applicants (those who are in the application reviewing process) and the opportunity to bring their relatives to the country. The surveys' data show that those who support the right to work of asylum seekers are twice as many as those who deny it.

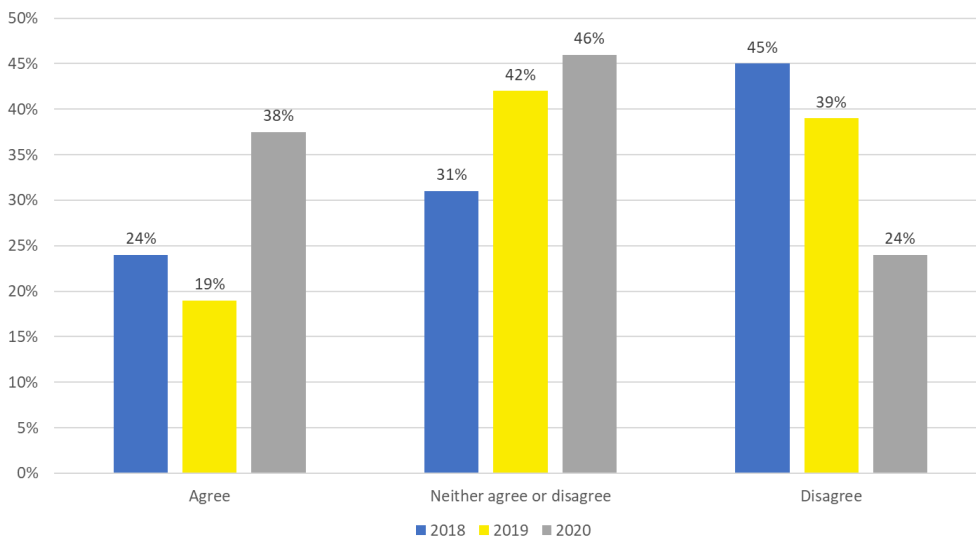
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Should people have the opportunity to work during the refugee status application reviewing process?



The surveys also show a steady increase of tolerance towards refugees' fundamental right to **family reunification**. The share of those against family reunification has been steadily declining over time – from 45% in 2018 to 39% in 2019, going down to 24% in 2020. While the share of those who agree to the family reunification slightly declined in 2019 (19%), the number of those who remain hesitant but not strongly disagree shows a trend to increase from 24% in 2018 to 38% in 2020. This finding is an expression of growing tolerance towards refugees.

Should those who are granted a refugee status be allowed to be able to bring their relatives to the country?



CONCLUSIONS

The comparison of the results of UNHCR survey from 2019 and the survey of IPhS at BAS from 2020 disclosed the following important trends in the public attitudes to refugees and asylum-seekers:

- Reduced awareness of refugee-related issues and the lack of first-hand information, which leads to the formation of opinions and attitudes based on past memories /experience, established stereotypes and information shared by media.
- Media and social media are the main sources of information about refugees and influences significantly public opinion about refugees.
- In Bulgaria the attitude towards refugees is ambivalent and is strongly susceptible to the influence of media. The attitude towards refugees goes from sympathy, empathy, compassion, understanding, respect, concern, and willingness to help through indifference, distrust, fear, and hatred.
- Bulgarians would prefer to get involved and provide their support mainly to people in need like refugees and not economic migrants. Bulgarians insist on having evidence that they would help people who need support and are willing to stay and change their lifestyle according to Bulgarian laws and traditions.
- The pandemic has an insignificant impact on the attitudes of Bulgarians towards refugees. Even during the pandemic, the fear that refugees might spread disease decreases reaching the lowest level compared to the previous two years.
- Although the tolerance towards refugees is not high, Bulgarians doesn't express xenophobic attitudes. The attitude towards refugees is based mainly on social qualities and not so much on anthropological characteristics.