

Age, Gender and Diversity Report Bulgaria, 2020

Summary

Due to the COVID-19 measures in place, the regular Age, Gender, and Diversity (AGD) Participatory Assessment methodology had to be adapted to meet the social distancing requirements. As a result, it included an online needs assessment, followed-up by telephone interviews, separate telephone interviews, and (online) focus groups with asylum-seekers, refugees, and stateless people who did not participate in the online survey. In total, 149 persons of concern participated in the AGD, 112 of them in the online survey, and 37 in telephone interviews and focus groups. Of them, 61 women, 86 men; 7 children, 110 adults, and 11 persons above 55. Most of the respondents, 54 are from Syria, 37 from Afghanistan, 14 from Iraq, 14 stateless, 11 from Iran, 6 from Yemen, and individual cases from Somalia, Pakistan, Russia, Kazakhstan, Algeria, and Nigeria. 81 of the respondents are asylum-seekers, 28 refugees, and 31 humanitarian status holders living mostly in Sofia and Harmanli, Plovdiv, and Nova Zagora.

The online survey's main focus was the impact of COVID-19 on the lives of refugees in Bulgaria. Several topics were of interest: access to information, barriers to services, and further support needed. While 52 of the respondents feel informed about the COVID-19 situation, the top topics where they still need further employment information (46 respondents), integration (40), and financial assistance (30). Although 52 of the respondents say they have not experienced any barriers in accessing services, the same topics with slight changes have been identified as areas where refugees have encountered obstacles, namely in access to employment (37), financial assistance (30), and education and schooling (19). The areas of further support add additional nuance to refugees' needs: 54 require support with employment, 51 in need of financial assistance, 34 in need of food and clothing, and 31 in need of health care and education.

According to the survey's findings, almost 50% of respondents say their work was negatively affected by the pandemic. 16 of 28 who had a job and 5 of 9 who were self-employed lost it due to the pandemic. As a consequence, 67 of the respondents say that they cannot meet their basic needs. NGOs remain the primary source of support for refugees at external addresses, with 38 of them satisfied with the received support and 27 at the opposite end of the spectrum. Only 26 respondents have not sought support. Online education is not the best form of education for refugees due to the language barrier, lack of additional education support, technical issues (lack of devices and Internet), and parents' mental state. More than half (60) of the respondents reported that they did not feel a negative impact of the pandemic on their well-being, and 27 reported having experienced psycho-social issues, issues related to freedom of movement, and family unity (13). Lesser numbers reported having experienced emotional abuse, neglect, and physical violence.

Information on access to territory is limited, and accounts about detention centers' reception conditions are also scarce. However, the COVID-19 related quarantine has led to increased reports of negligence and occasional incidents of power abuse by the Migration Directorate and Border Police staff. When it comes to reception conditions, asylum-seekers report a lack of

communication with staff, again due to COVID-19 measures and restricted access to the NGOs' service providers. The refugee status determination (RSD) quality has seen some improvements, but there are more complaints from the quality of interpretation and formal evidence assessment. Due to interviews held in quarantine, some respondents report being unable to provide proof. Refugees at external addresses find it extremely difficult to find housing, need support with health care coverage, and meeting some basic needs. More than half of the respondents (34 out of 51) express a willingness to stay in Bulgaria. Refugees express a need for support with access to family benefits, access to bank accounts and financial services, more Bulgarian language classes, and cultural orientation classes.

I. Overall Context

In the first half of 2020, mostly due to COVID-19, the number of applications lodged has drastically decreased – in the first quarter of 2020, only 185 applications for international protection have been lodged in Bulgaria (49% Syria, 14 % Iraq, and 11% Afghanistan) (SAR data) and 390 up until 30 June 2020. However, starting in July, the opposite trend of a sharp increase in the number of asylum applications could be seen, which has been ongoing. From one month to the next, the occupancy rate of SAR centres doubled and now stands at about 20%. By the end of 2020, 3525 asylum applications have been lodged, which marks a 64% increase in comparison to the same number in 2019 (2152). Of them 49% are Afghans, 31% Syrians, and 7% Iraqis. The number of unaccompanied minors has also increased, at the end of 2020 standing at 799 asylum applications submitted by unaccompanied minors, of them 659 from Afghanistan.

During the COVID-19 pandemic and the travel restrictions, the occupancy rate of reception centers increased from the usual 8% to 20%. With social distancing measures in place and no access granted to NGOs in the reception facilities, a deterioration in the access to information, interpretation, and essential services for the accommodated persons was observed. The identification and referral of persons with specific needs require further improvement.

UNHCR Partners have regularly reported a significant increase in the number of requests for assistance during the pandemic. A new trend that has occurred is the recourse to NGOs of some long-term settled refugees who have stayed under the humanitarian radar for several years are turning to partners for support. The most common requests pertain to support with rent, food vouchers, financial assistance, humanitarian assistance (disinfectants, hygiene materials, clothes).

When the restrictions were eased in summer, the requests for assistance slightly dropped, and the type of requested support shifted. From humanitarian assistance provision, NGO partners started receiving requests to assist with access to health care for complicated medical and psychological cases. More and more refugees started seeking assistance with finding employment and enrollment at school. The type of social work changed and required enhanced access to social, employment, and health care systems.

Due to COVID-19 and some legislative changes, the access to social services has been significantly hampered with social service providers and social assistance directorates interpreting the law differently in a context of lacking bylaws and a suspension of accommodation of people

in need in social services as a COVID-19 prevention measure. The health care system is also under tremendous pressure, with reports of people dying in hospitals' footsteps due to lack of accommodation capacity. The same is valid for mental health hospitals.

On 1 April, the Bulgarian Red Cross launched a hotline to provide timely and accurate information to persons of concern (PoCs) during the COVID-19 emergency and to identify their needs during the extraordinary situation to facilitate communication with communities. By the end of 2020, 2,048 calls were received in Arabic, Farsi, Pashto, Turkish, English, and French. Many of the received queries pertain to the COVID-19 situation and family reunification, available support, incl financial, requests to assist access to employment, health care, and the easing of the restrictions in summer about possibilities to leave the country.

II. Overview of the Participatory assessment exercise in 2020

In the pandemic of COVID-19, in total 149 persons of concern participated in the AGD, 112 of them in the online survey, and 37 in telephone interviews and focus groups. Of them, 61 women, 86 men; 7 children, 110 adults, and 11 persons above 55. Most of the respondents, 54 are from Syria, 37 from Afghanistan, 14 from Iraq, 14 stateless, 11 from Iran, 6 from Yemen, and individual cases from Somalia, Pakistan, Russia, Kazakhstan, Algeria, and Nigeria. 81 of the respondents are asylum-seekers, 28 refugees, and 31 humanitarian status holders living mostly in Sofia and Harmanli, Plovdiv, and Nova Zagora. Due to social distancing requirements, this year's MFTs were quite limited in terms of numbers. Unlike previous years, the MFT consisted of 3 people: an interviewer, an interpreter, and a note-taker. These three constituted the bare minimum of an MFT in compliance with the COVID-19 measures. In total 16 MFT members (5 male and 11 female) from UNHCR, BRC, CRW, Caritas, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Refugee Advisory Board, and Foundation Mission Wings took part in the AGD PA.

III. Methodology

1. Online Needs Assessment Survey

An online Needs Assessment Survey focusing on 5 priority areas has been elaborated by UNHCR Bulgaria for the first year due to the COVID-restrictions and the need to ensure constant communication with persons of concern. The survey has been consulted and tested with the Refugee Advisory Board (RAB). All the suggestions of the RAB members have been incorporated in the proposed final version of the survey. 112 persons of concern took part in it.

The survey focuses on the following priority areas:

- ✓ Access to information
- ✓ Access to services
- ✓ Employment
- ✓ Education
- ✓ Risks and Concerns related to COVID-19

These areas have been selected due to their relevance to the COVID-19 pandemic. UNHCR and partners have identified these topics as the main areas of concern in the past year. The survey was

translated into Arabic, Farsi, French, Pashto, and Kurdish and will be disseminated using some communication channels:

- ✓ UNHCR partners via their databases and during in-person visits to their offices;
- ✓ RAB members through their personal networks and communication channels;
- ✓ State Agency for Refugees (SAR) through info posters with QR codes;
- ✓ UNHCR via its various communication channels.

The online survey is anonymous and is meant for persons above 18 due to child and data protection concerns.

The data collection period started in August and lasted until the end of October. The survey offers an option for a follow-up telephone conversation. To make it as inclusive as possible, the online survey was printed out and disseminated in hard copy in the SAR reception facilities, as well as at the offices of UNHCR implementing and operational partners.

2. Phone Needs Assessment Survey

2.1. Follow-up on the Online Needs Assessment Survey

The respondents to the online Needs Assessment Survey who have agreed to hold a follow-up telephone conversation were approached by a multifunctional team consisting of a lead interviewer (UNHCR staff member or partner staff), an interpreter (UNHCR contractor), and a note-taker (UNHCR staff member or partner staff). The multifunctional team would gather in one physical space to ensure coordination and a safe and quiet environment for the phone interview. The phone interview lasted on average of 1 hour. 23 such interviews took place in the period September – December.

The areas of data collection include:

- ✓ Reception conditions/Accommodation
- ✓ Health care
- ✓ Education and Bulgarian language training
- ✓ Employment
- ✓ Access to territory and detention
- ✓ RSD (asylum-seekers only)
- ✓ Integration and future intentions.

The phone survey is anonymous. The questions for the telephone interview have been tested and amended as necessary.

2.2. Phone Survey with interested respondents

In addition to the follow-up online survey, UNHCR and its operational partners agreed to reach out to their beneficiaries and inform them about the possibility of participating in a telephone survey or an (online) focus group. This is a stand-alone survey that uses a separate questionnaire that combines the Online Needs Assessment Survey and the follow-up telephone Needs Assessment Survey. 10 such interviews were organized.

3. Face-to-face focus groups

In the period August-October, multifunctional teams carried out 4 face-to-face focus groups (3 online and 1 in person) with 27 asylum-seekers and refugees accommodated in SAR reception facilities, as well as with refugees living at external addresses.

Like any research, the methodology of the AGD PA has its limitations. Due to the fact that the main source of information are the interviewed asylum-seekers and beneficiaries of international protection, the identified positive developments, gaps and recommendations are limited to the information available to them as part of their lived experience. Although the sampling method is strictly speaking not statistically representative, the PA has aimed to include a wide variety of participants in terms of age, gender, legal status, place of residence, vulnerability, country of origin and other demographic indicators which allows space for multiple viewpoints and renders the identified findings valid and reliable. Furthermore, the PA does not fully reflect the development of procedural, policy or legislative changes unless these are experienced directly and in practice by the participants in the focus group discussions. At the same time, the results of the PA aim to improve the existing legal framework, procedures, policies and practices through active advocacy on the part of all members of the multi-functional teams that conducted the PA.

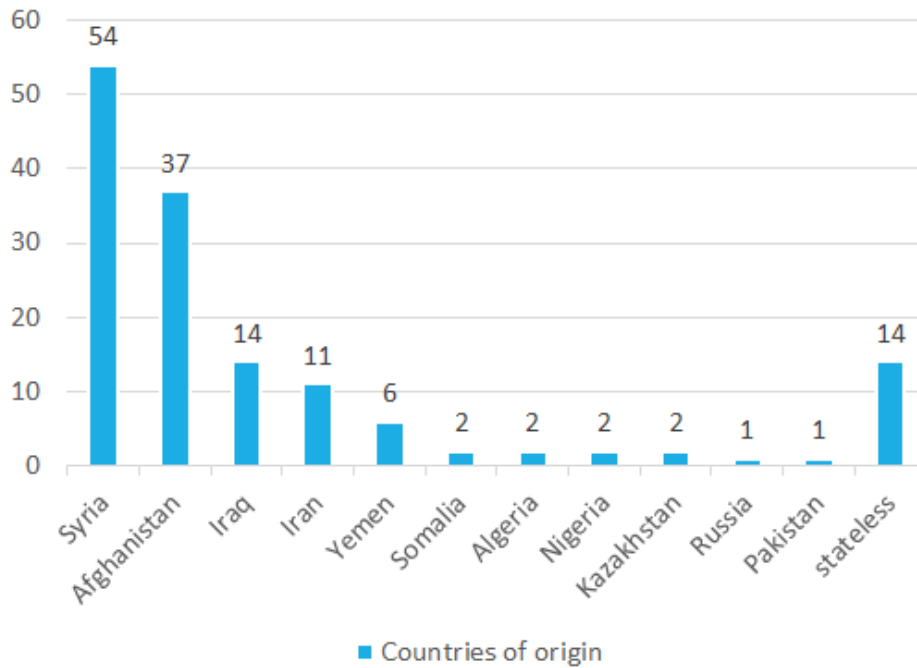
IV. Main Findings Online Survey

1. Demographic overview of participants

This year's PA was quite balanced in terms of various demographic characteristics. 61 women and 84 men participated in the exercise, 7 children, 110 adults (aged 18-54), and 11 above 55. Keeping in mind that the online survey target group excluded children who constitute traditionally 30% of the refugee population, this is the only underrepresented group. Elderly people are relatively scarce in the overall refugee population in general. In terms of legal status, 81 are asylum-seekers, 28 refugees, and 31 humanitarian status holders (or 40% beneficiaries of international protection), which has been so far the best ratio as far as this indicator is concerned. Most refugees are located in Sofia, so it is no surprise that 55 live at external addresses in Sofia, and only 7 in Harmanli, Plovdiv, and Nova Zagora.

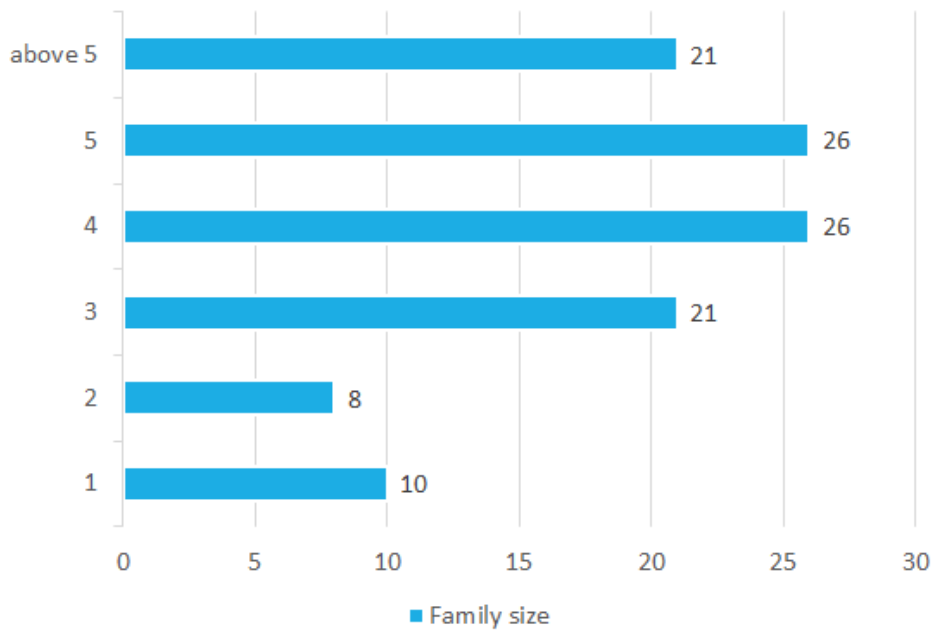
In terms of countries of origin, 54 of the respondents are from Syria, 37 from Afghanistan, 14 from Iraq, 14 stateless, 11 from Iran, 6 from Yemen, and individual cases from Somalia, Pakistan, Russia, Kazakhstan, Algeria, and Nigeria.

Countries of origin



Most of the households are large, with more than 3 family members. The most common vulnerabilities include children and people with chronic diseases.

Family size

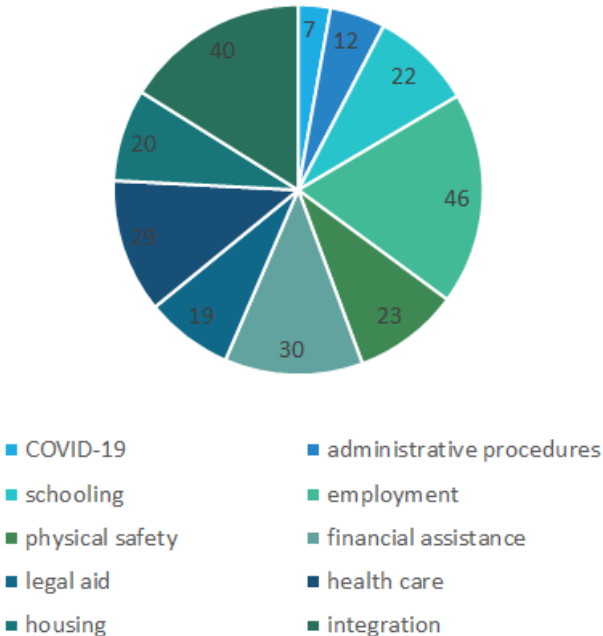


A cross table between family size and ability to meet basic needs shows that the larger the family, the larger the need for support is, the higher risk that families cannot meet their basic needs. This finding further supports the argument to have targeted integration support for refugees in the absence of policies to assist families (as the family benefits system practically excludes refugees due to exclusive interpretation of legislation), as is Bulgaria's case.

2. Impact of COVID-19

62 (out of 112) respondents report that they are well informed about COVID-19, and 24 others believe they do not have sufficient information about the virus. As a further confirmation of the above, 52 know where to seek help if they or a family member get contaminated with COVID-19 against 34 who do not know. Interestingly enough, when we compare the data for those accommodated in SAR facilities where NGOs do not have access to conduct regular information sessions, it shows that the share of those who do not feel informed about the virus is higher there. The top three areas of life where further information is needed are employment (46), integration (40), and financial assistance (30).

Areas of additional information needs

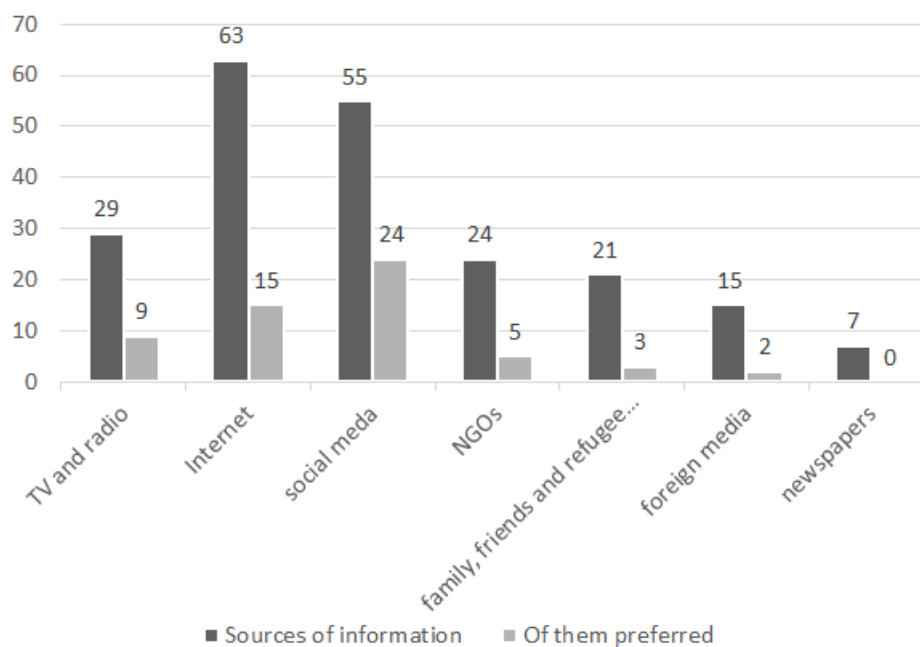


52 of the respondents have not experienced barriers in their access to different services against 14 who have. The areas where refugees face the most significant barriers are quite similar to those where additional information is needed: namely, employment (37), financial assistance (30), and schooling (19). COVID-19 has caused psycho-social distress to 27 of the respondents, 13 have experienced distress related to limited freedom of movement and family unity issues, 5 have become victims to emotional and psychological abuse, 4 to lack of care, and 1 to physical violence. Most of the respondents (60) have not experienced adverse effects from the COVID-19.

These results point to the heightened risks of disinformation among those accommodated in the SAR reception facilities, mostly due to the absence of NGOs, but also because of the limited capacities of SAR staff to hold regular information meetings, especially when interpreters for social issues are lacking, as reported in some of the reception facilities. It is reassuring that most respondents know where they should seek help if they experience COVID-19 related symptoms and that most have not encountered barriers to services. However, it is telling that there is consistency between the areas where there is no sufficient information and where there have been some access barriers: employment and financial assistance. These remain further in focus when one looks at the areas of further support needed.

3. Sources of information and information needs

The top source of information is the Internet, with 63 respondents having said this is their source of information, followed by 55 informing themselves from social media, 29 from TV and radio, 24 from NGOs, and 21 from family and friends. However, the most preferred source of information is social media (24), followed by the Internet (15), TV (9), and only 5 prefer to receive information from NGOs.

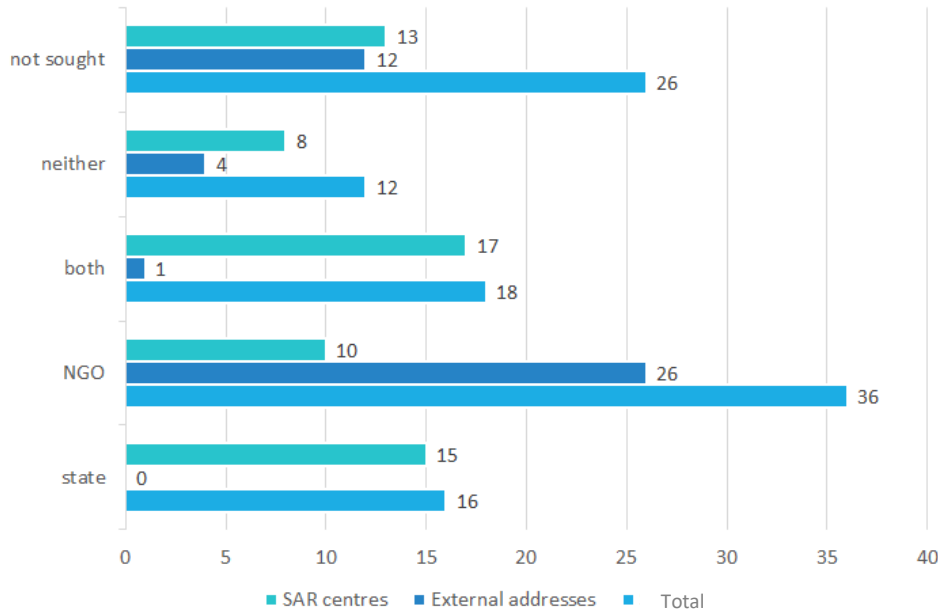


4. Sources and areas of support, and levels of satisfaction

36 of the respondents have received assistance from NGOs, and 15 of them have received some support from the state, all of them accommodated in the reception facilities. On a good note, 26 have not sought any assistance, possibly not needing any.

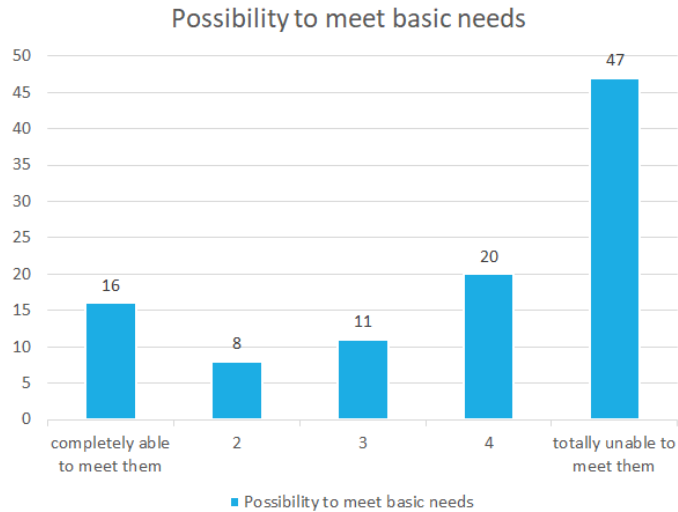
There are some 12 who presumably have sought support but have not received any. The majority of them are accommodated in SAR centres. It is also to be noted that those refugees living at external addresses rely entirely on NGO support. Multiple reasons are explaining this finding. In addition to lack of information and language barrier, the state's available support (social, financial)

is extremely limited, difficult to get in terms of administration, and not timely in particular in view of the pandemic situation. For example, one-off financial assistance meant for meeting emergency needs is provided with a 1-month delay.



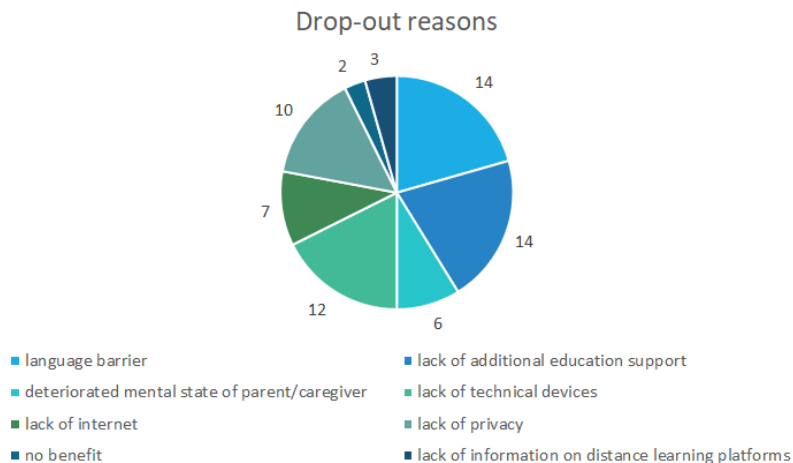
The measurement of the level of satisfaction shows an interesting division of two groups of respondents. On one end of the spectrum are those who are fully satisfied (30), against those who are completely dissatisfied who are almost the same number (24). A smaller group of 17 in the middle is undecided. Those who are satisfied have mostly received non-financial support, e.g., with accompaniment, translation/interpretation, assistance with access to medicines, and medical care. In contrast, the dissatisfied are complaining about the insufficient financial and house rental support.

While most respondents claim they do not face barriers in access to services, almost the same majority (47) says they are entirely unable to meet their basic needs, against 16 who are completely able to cover them. Most respondents rely on NGOs (39), UNHCR (33), and family and friends (30) for support. 21 from health centres, 17 would turn to police and other institutions, and 8 do not know where to seek support.



4. Education in COVID-19

The majority of children were enrolled in school and most of them switched to online training mode. Out of 49 households with children, in 39 all children were enrolled in schools. However, the higher the issues with school attendance (such as irregular attendance, difficulties with progressing with the school material) in the past, the higher the risk of drop-out in online training forms. In terms of education of refugee children during the pandemic, 25 respondents experienced a language barrier, followed by lack of additional education support (15), with 8 there was a deteriorated mental state of caregiver, and 7 did not experience the online learning forms as problematic. These are children who are usually motivated to study and have been in Bulgarian schools for more extended periods. Those who experienced any difficulties or were lacking motivation are at a higher risk of drop-out. Reasons for such developments can be sought again in the deficient Bulgarian language knowledge (14) and lack of additional education support (14), which has been highlighted as a crucial element in the learning process – the human touch and the personal attitude and attention on the part of the teacher. Lack of technical devices (12) and lack of privacy rank next (10). Lack of Internet (7) and deteriorated mental state of parents/caregivers, (6) follow the other reasons.

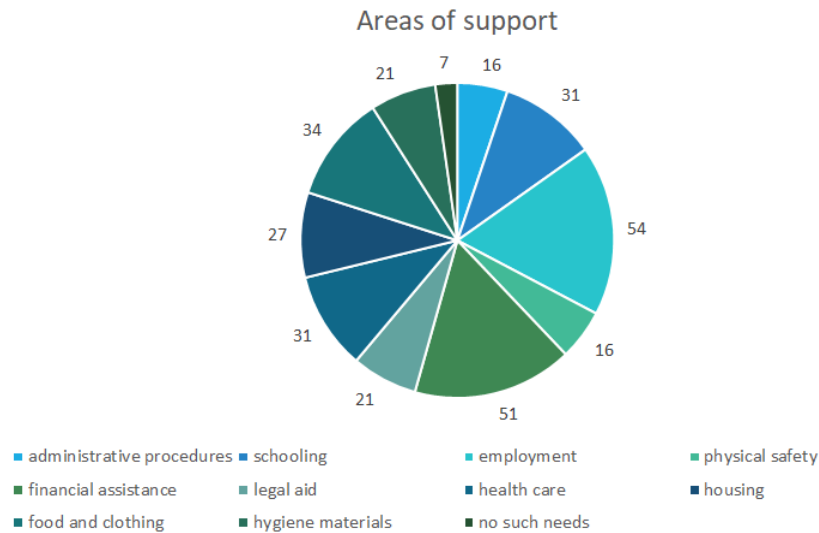


5. Employment in COVID-19

52 out of 112 respondents stated that the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted their employment status. Out of 28 who were working before the pandemic, 16 lost their jobs. A very similar situation can be seen with those who are self-employed – out of 9, five lost the opportunity to work (mostly in construction, retail, and IT). 33 were looking for a job when the pandemic broke out, and they still find it extremely difficult to find a job. At the same time, 38 were not working and not interested in employment (most of them not being heads of households). Only 2 respondents are self-employed. For many respondents, the pandemic changed their work situation significantly, with most who were working had to leave work due to household obligations and health care concerns. People were engaged in tailoring, horeca, teaching and IT call centers.

6. Unmet needs

When it comes to supporting the needs further, again and this time to a higher extent, employment (54) and financial assistance (51) come to the fore, followed by food and clothing (34), and schooling and housing (31 each). These results point to the importance of stable employment, the lack of which pushes people to the margins of existence and results in heightened humanitarian assistance needs.



7. Conclusions

As evident from the processed data, even though most refugees feel informed about COVID-19, their situation has deteriorated, judging by the level of financial support and employment needed. Many have shared that it is a significant issue that they have previous unpaid periods of health insurance, which cannot be covered by them or by any other source. For another considerable number, financial support is needed to cover rental costs and utilities and provide food and hygiene materials. NGOs remain the primary source of support for all types of services. Recourse to the state's financial support is rare due to many rejections, especially of requests for family benefits. Registration with Labour Bureaux is not common either, although there has been some slight progress due to the pandemic. Psychological support, as well as educational support, should be a

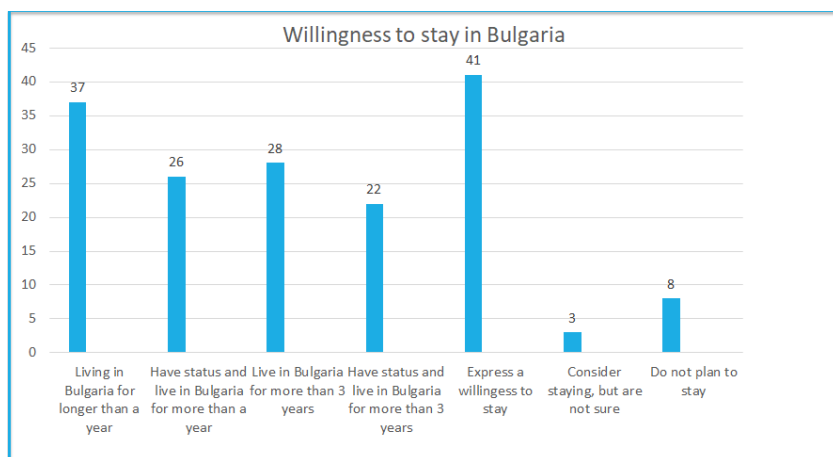
priority under the current circumstances. Those residing in reception facilities (especially Harmanli) inform that the lack of NGO staff is tangible, and as a result, communication on important issues with SAR staff is lacking, also due to ongoing issues with lack of interpretation. Additional educational support has also been identified as the main gap for people residing in reception facilities and those at external addresses, besides the lack of technical devices, especially for refugees living on external addresses.

V. Main Findings Telephone Interviews and Focus Groups

1. Demographic overview of participants

The analysis of the telephone interviews and focus groups comprises 60 persons participating in 33 telephone interviews and 4 focus groups (27). 27 of them are female and 33 men. 37 of them have been living in Bulgaria for longer than a year, 11 of them being asylum-seekers; of them, 28 have been living in Bulgaria for longer than 3 years, 22 of them having been granted international protection; and 41 express a willingness to remain in the country. Information the length of residence in Bulgaria is available on 32 of the 41 persons who have expressed an interest to stay in Bulgaria. Of them the majority have lived in Bulgaria for longer than 3 years (23 cases), in 3 cases between 1 and 3 years, and in 6 cases for a period shorter than a year. These findings resonate with the above information that more persons of concern living in Bulgaria long-term are seeking support from NGOs during the pandemic. They also point to a relation between the length of residence and the interest to stay in Bulgaria.

The profile of the participants in terms of education differs from the data about education levels of asylum-seekers accommodated in the SAR reception facilities, as the profile of respondents encompasses people with higher levels of education: 19 with higher education, 13 with high education, 15 with basic, 9 with primary and 2 without education. 14 of them are in possession of original diplomas, and 8 have them in their countries of origin and could provide them, if needed. The areas of education are quite varied: computers and IT, engineering, law, philology, business administration and finances, pedagogy, international relations, music, journalism. In their countries of origin 8 were engaged in the education sphere, 3 in hairstyling, 3 in construction, 2 in retail, and 10 have not worked at all (women and students).



2. Access to Territory and Detention

21 of the respondents came legally (with a visa for a family reunion, business, or tourism). One respondent came with a student visa. 3 entered from the second attempt and 28 - from the first. Two reported being pushed away from the border, and two reported being abused by border police. These are a lower number of multiple attempts than previous years, but the small number of persons who entered illegally does not allow to conclude that access to the territory has become easier. Access to territory has also been heavily affected by the COVID-19 pandemic which calls for further caution when interpreting the data on this particular issue.

14 respondents report periods of detention of more than 6 days, of which 11 for a period longer than 2 weeks; 2 of them were accommodated in the Special Centres for Temporary Accommodation of Foreigners (SCTAF) for a period of 4 and 7 months, respectively. 3 of the detainees are unaccompanied children registered as adults. 3 of the persons accommodated in the SCTAF reported bad or humiliating treatment. The COVID-19 context further exacerbates the period of detention, as there is a 2-week mandatory quarantine, upon the end of which foreigners may apply for international protection.

"I spent one month in SCTAF Busmantsi, two weeks in quarantine, and two weeks until my application for international protection was processed. During the quarantine period, I was confined in a room with two other individuals from Syria. Other accommodated individuals brought us food." (man, Somalia, asylum-seeker, 21, reception-registration centre (RRC) Sofia-Ovcha Kupel)

The conditions in the detention facilities remain substandard with reports of poor hygiene, poor quality of food, provided by the SCTAF, too strict restrictions of freedom of movement to the extent that detainees cannot visit the toilet at night. There have been some reports of bad treatment on the part of some SCTAF staff, mostly in Lyubiments, but also in Busmantsi.

"To go to the toilet while in quarantine, you have to press the button at least 10 times, and it's a blessing if anyone is willing to open it." (man, Iran, asylum-seeker, 23, RRC Harmanli)

3 cases out of 8 respondents who are unaccompanied minors have reported being detained in SCTAF for a period of up to 25 days and registered as adults. Such mistakes still occur due to the lack of interpreters at SCTAFs, among others, (except hired under voluntary return projects) while detainees do not have access to the UNHCR video on the status determination procedure and access to asylum.

3. Quality of the Refugee Status Determination procedure

The standard of recording the interviews and reading the protocol back to asylum-seekers before they sign it has been maintained in 2020, with incidental exceptions in various centers where the protocol is retold instead of translated. However, in 2020 more respondents share reports of inaccurate interpretation.

"The Afghan who was translating for me took it personally when I said that he did not speak proper Persian. He interrupted me several times: "Just say what they ask." He asked me if I wanted to

stay in Bulgaria - I said "yes" - he told me, "There is no money here, you will always be a foreigner." (man, Iran, asylum-seeker, 23, RRC Harmanli)

Furthermore, there have been reports of RSD interviews having been conducted during the quarantine. At the same time, some procedures have been delayed due to the quarantine, such as access to education, for example. These incidents point to the fact that quarantine leads to the facilitation or hampering of certain procedures, leading to arbitrariness and impeded access to rights of the accommodated persons.

"My interview took place while I was still under quarantine, and I did not have the opportunity to gather the necessary evidence. I said that I wanted to provide documents - I was told "later", but this "later" never came." (man, Iran, asylum-seeker, 32, RRC Harmanli)

Non-Syrians point to the low quality of the status determination procedure. The assessment of evidence and circumstances that have led to the flight is just a formality, and there is no individual examination of the facts.

"There was no pressure on me exerted by the interviewer, I was calm. But the problem comes after that. If you are a victim of the actions of your government, this is not taken into consideration. I wish the interviewers did not treat refugees' problems as a formality." (woman, asylum-seeker, 50, RRC Sofia-Ovcha Kupel)

Dublin transfers were halted for several months due to the COVID-related restrictions of movement, prompting unaccompanied minors to undertake irregular secondary movements. The lack of information about their procedure still results in them reporting having no information on the role of all persons present at their RSD. Representation remains formal (interviews were done before the amendment of the Law on Asylum and Refugees introducing a new representation mechanism for unaccompanied minors by lawyers from the National Bureau for Legal Aid, of 16 October 2020).

"There were a few people at the interview, but I don't know them." (unaccompanied boy, Afghanistan, asylum-seeker, 15, RRC Sofia-Voenna Rampa)

4. Reception Conditions

The occupancy rate of the SAR reception facilities in August-October has been varying around 20%, rapidly increasing from the average of 8-9% until July 2020. SAR has used the travel restrictions and the low occupancy rate to keep doing renovation works in RRC Harmanli and RRC Sofia-Ovcha Kupel, organizing transfers of people from one centre to another. While respondents who are accommodated in separate rooms are satisfied with their space, they share about consistent issues with bedbugs, cockroaches, broken bathrooms, low hygiene in bathrooms, insufficient provision of hygiene materials, and low quality of food. Unfortunately, these issues have persisted throughout the years.

"There are insects, cockroaches, they disinfect everywhere, but the hygiene is not good. They give us shampoo and soap, but once a month is not enough, so when the Afghans leave, we distribute what is left behind." (man, Iran, asylum-seeker, 39, RRC Sofia-Voenna Rampa)

However, the COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbates the situation of the accommodated persons. Some complain that it is worse than the quarantine in SCTAFs because it feels like solitary confinement. Others experience it as a reason to live in a void without any activities. However, the most severe impact of COVID-19 is the absence of NGOs and, therefore, to a large extent, interpreters for social issues. The accommodated persons have felt this gap. In October, SAR granted access to Caritas to provide in-person educational support to refugee children enrolled at schools. Still, other organizations can only access the facilities upon SAR's request only.

"[The quarantine in Vrazhdebna] was a much more difficult period [than in SCTAF], as I was alone in my room, the security guard brought me food, but I did not have internet or any other means to distract myself." (man, Somalia, asylum-seeker, 21, RRC Sofia-Ovcha Kupel)

"Even if I want to ask something very simple, like a human being, the security guards tell me to leave. They see us as criminals." (man, Iran, asylum-seeker, 32, RRC Harmanli)

"The coronavirus is depressing us: we stay closed all day and have nothing to do, the time has stopped." (unaccompanied boy, Afghanistan, asylum-seeker, 16, RRC Sofia-Voenna Rampa)

"They give us food, there is a schedule for cleaning, wi-fi, everything is wonderful. There is also shampoo and soap, but we don't have clothes and shoes, and we don't know the employees." (man, Pakistan, asylum-seeker, 32, TC Pastrogor)

"We are already a lot of people, now we are with two people in a room. It's not clean in the toilets, they are all broken, and there is almost no communication with the staff." (man, Syria, humanitarian status holder, 40, RRC Sofia-Vrazhdebna)

5. Housing

Finding housing for newly-recognized refugees remains the most significant integration challenge. All beneficiaries of international protection share that they have found their place with great difficulty. 8 of 13 have found their accommodation using the services of real estate agencies. The process is lengthy and takes about 2 months, if not longer. While the average rent of refugees in Sofia amounts to 580 BGN, with the majority of them residing in Nadezhda and Borovo districts, the rents in Harmanli cost about 200 – 250 BGN. However, refugees in Harmanli report that it is extremely difficult to find a place in Harmanli, as locals are not willing to rent out to foreigners. Moreover, registration at the actual address is a rare commodity.

"Landlords do not rent out apartments to people like us. After a lot of searching, we found one: but first they told us it would cost 500 BGN, but then the broker said that it would be BGN 800 for us." (woman, Iraq, asylum-seeker, 27, Sofia)

To overcome these difficulties, refugees have to buy addresses on the black market or have the apartments being rented out to related persons who are Bulgarians. In some cases, these are employers. Previous landlords and friends also help find accommodation. However, such practices result in no access to social assistance, so needed in times of pandemic.

"We live in Harmanli but are registered in Simeonovgrad. I bought an address from the market because it is not possible to register here. I submitted a request for one-off financial assistance in

Simeonovgrad, but they told me I am not eligible because I don't live at the address on my ID card." (man, Syria, humanitarian status holder, 57, Harmanli)

In general, refugees have a good relationship with their landlords, who in most cases show understanding and support during difficult moments, such as the COVID-19 situation. Such relationships of trust between refugees and landlords are often reasons for refugees to stay in one place for years.

"Our rent was 950 BGN, but because of COVID they reduced it to 750 BGN. The landlords are good people, and they know that we are in trouble." (woman, Iraq, humanitarian status holder, 32, Sofia)

6. Health care

Access to health care in a pandemic situation is of utmost importance to save the lives of refugees and to protect the public health. With an increasing number of refugees, including at external addresses, having COVID-19, being part of the health care system should be ensured. Most respondents were registered with GPs and had found a way to communicate with them. This is not the case with refugees at external addresses in Harmanli, where their GP remains in the RRC, and reportedly no GPs are willing to register them in town.

"I have diabetes, but I have not heard about a GP. I don't have a prescription booklet, either. I go every Tuesday to Mission Wings, and they take us to doctors and dentists." (man, Syria, humanitarian status holder, 57, Harmanli)

A serious problem for those who are not in employment (which is the majority in COVID-19) is a considerable number of outstanding payments for previous periods of health insurance. There is neither state, nor NGO mechanism to support such cases. One of the respondents had chronic diseases, high blood pressure. At some point, she contracted COVID-19 and had to pay her health insurance for 5 years back. An amount exceeding 1000 BGN is not affordable for an elderly lady with several children. The sum was collected via a personal initiative of one of the RAB members to raise money. However, there are many such cases, and one cannot and should not rely on *ad hoc* donation campaigns to address potentially life-threatening situations.

7. Bulgarian Language Classes and Schooling

The provision of Bulgarian language classes remains an area where further support is needed. While SAR used to provide Bulgarian language classes in its reception facility, due to COVID-19, all classes except for RRC, Harmanli stopped. For persons accommodated in SAR facilities, any activities would improve their overall well-being. Furthermore, persons of concern started being accommodated in TC Pastrogor and RRC Banya, where such a provision has not been in place. There are explicit requests from refugees residing in these centres for Bulgarian language classes to be organized for them, as well. At the same time, there is no provision of Bulgarian language classes by the state for refugees at external addresses. NGOs provide such online, but not all needs can be met.

"I would like to learn Bulgarian. I know this is the only way I will find a good job and I will be able to do many things." (male, Syria, refugee, 30, Sofia)

The findings on the education of refugee children in online learning modes reconfirm the survey results, pointing to the many difficulties refugee children face in the absence of teachers to provide individual support. Several families and children have been identified who still lack technical devices. Some did not have textbooks and did not know the online platform details to get in touch with their teachers. In general, parents report having a good connection with teachers, with a few exceptions. The majority of parents highly appreciate the opportunity for their children to be part of the education system. However, online training exacerbated existing issues with regular attendance and educational attainment. Those children who had an appetite for learning and managed well at school can still do it online, whereas others who have arrived recently and do not have much motivation often stop attending school online. The latter is the majority.

"I saw that in distance learning my children stopped progressing. Their physical presence at school was much more effective. I felt that they were learning and taking the learning process seriously. Not so much anymore. The teacher goes online in the morning and, without explaining, gives homework." (woman, Iraq, asylum-seeker, 27, Sofia)

The situation with inclusion in the education system of unaccompanied minors remains precarious, as many lack initial motivation to go to school, related to their age (most are 16-17 years old), some have never attended school, others are more interested in working. Still, others have no plans to remain in the country. However, experience shows that in-person attendance allows for forming a bond that may motivate learning and stay in Bulgaria.

"My classmates welcomed me to my new school and gave me chocolate, notebooks, and pens. I was touched." (unaccompanied boy, Afghanistan, asylum-seeker, 16, RRC Sofia-Voenna Rampa)

8. Livelihoods

Employment remains the area where refugees need additional support. As most refugees are traditionally engaged in economic sectors, such as horeca, which are hit hardest by the pandemic, they are disproportionately affected by the crisis. Furthermore, due to many businesses reducing their operational capacity and rising unemployment, companies that are still hiring, have increased their requirements. It has become extremely difficult to find jobs for people who do not know the Bulgarian language. Finding employers in the area of Harmanli has proved an arduous task due to limited demand and lack of employment opportunities for refugees. In some cases, the precarious situation results in discrimination (in payment), abuse, and exploitation on the part of some unscrupulous employers.

"At my last job, I was treated like a slave. They drank alcohol while I cleaned the whole kitchen. I didn't dare say anything because of COVID-19." (man, Afghanistan, humanitarian status holder, 42, Sofia)

The situation of asylum-seekers is complicated even further as many companies do not want to hire asylum-seekers due to higher uncertainty and some additional administrative burden (e.g., the need to conclude the contract for the period of validity of the registration card and then extend it with every next extension of the card).

As finding employment remains a challenge, self-employment could also be an option. However, refugees face another administrative barrier that would open the door to entrepreneurship. Access to bank accounts remains extremely difficult, if not impossible, as refugees can rarely pass the know-your-customer due diligence tests, coming from conflict-torn countries where money-laundering and terrorist financing risks are higher than in other countries. Lack of access to bank accounts turns into an impasse for those refugees who lost their jobs and would be eligible for unemployment benefits, which are due only by the bank following the Social Security Code.

"We need to work on how Bulgarian institutions and banks treat us. They look at the refugee card and cannot do anything anymore. You need a Bulgarian person to register at an address. You can't take a loan." (man, Iraq, refugee, 30, Sofia)

Employment has a vital self-asserting function for each person. For refugees even more, as they have gone through trauma, there are also many uncertainties related to their status determination procedure and its outcome. Lack of employment may unleash the reliving of traumatic moments, leading to the deterioration of the mental health and subsequent risk of homelessness, ending up in a catch-22 situation where housing is difficult enough to find, as it is.

"When you're out of work, you have no roof over your head, and you have nothing to eat: you feel useless, and you have no place in this world." (man, Afghanistan, humanitarian status holder, 42, Sofia)

In addition to the above, refugees call for the availability of a more flexible type of work from home or part-time. This would be extremely helpful for single mothers or people with disabilities, not only refugees.

9. Integration

While Bulgaria remains a transit country for most asylum-seekers and refugees, there is a significant number in the current sample (41 out of 60) of those who wish to stay, as evidenced above, and put a lot of effort in overcoming all of the above difficulties. In the past year, the number of refugees residing in Harmanli has increased, pointing to a need to provide targeted integration support for those who wish to settle there.

In general, this year's results confirm the findings from previous years that those who stay in Bulgaria like the culture, the people, the friendliness, the nature, and many other elements of communication and lifestyle patterns that remind them of their home countries. Additional factors leading to refugees choosing Bulgaria as their new home is safety and security, access to education, and employment. Many share that if they can find a job, they will willingly stay.

"I am happy in Bulgaria. We are finding it financially difficult. The children are growing up and have their own needs. Sofia is beautiful, and everything is quiet. Nobody from the government comes to knock on my door or stops me on the street to ask for my ID card." (man, Iraq, refugee, 30, Sofia)

"If I did not like Bulgaria, I would never have endured all the difficulties and challenges on the way to getting my status here. I want to be here. In my country, no one has helped me as much as

here I have been helped by Caritas, the Bulgarian Red Cross, UNHCR. I will never forget this." (woman, Palestine, humanitarian status holder, 39, Sofia)

Most refugees have a good understanding of Bulgarian traditions and holidays, which the majority has gained from neighbours and Bulgarian friends. However, this is not the situation with their access to information about their rights and obligations in Bulgaria. On rare occasions, the respondents would manifest a good understanding of available support mechanisms from the state or on their RSD procedure. They also understand the question with difficulty, as they are not used to receiving state support.

"Refugee lives would be much better if someone took the time to explain to us all the procedures. If I had the information, I have now, the outcome of my asylum procedure would probably have been different." (man, Iran, asylum-seeker, 52, Sofia)

Refugees who arrived before the refugee influx of 2013 do not have information about available support and NGOs that provide it. When they were part of the asylum system, the level of provided support was not as developed as it is today.

"When we came [11 years ago], we could not establish contact with locals. We received help from the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, but that was about the procedure, not about other things. At that time, there was no support for refugees living at external addresses." (man, Iran, humanitarian status holder, 61, Sofia)

Cases of discrimination and poor treatment in general social settings (on the street, in public transportation) are rare. However, women wearing veils still complain of having had a negative experience with some locals who have made remarks or have entered into an argument.

"I have never felt bad treatment, no one has offended me. Bulgarians are very well-meaning people, I don't think that's the case in all countries." (woman, Iraq, humanitarian status holder, 27, Sofia)

"People get annoyed when they see me and my daughter wearing a hijab. Once a boy pulled and forcibly removed the towel from my daughter's head at school. Another time, a man on her bus shouted for her to return to where she came from." (woman, Syria, refugee, 50, Syria)

Girls at schools encounter a negative attitude when wearing hijab by teachers and headmasters, rather than from other students, even though there is no legal restriction to wear a veil at school in Bulgaria. However, the more contact there is between new-comers and the local population, the fewer prejudices survive.

"There are no people in Plovdiv who walk around with a veil on their heads, and the society is not used to accepting it as normal. Neighbours are used to it and accept it, but others don't." (woman, Syria, humanitarian status holder, 46, Plovdiv)

"The world is such that everyone is afraid of the unknown. When people get to know us, they understand us and are ready to help." (man, Afghanistan, refugee, 48, Sofia)

10. Conclusions

2020 has brought severe challenges for refugees due to many factors that reinforce one another. First and foremost, the COVID-19 pandemic has meant for refugees profound loss of employment and risks of homelessness, and restrictions of movement and family unity. As a result, the access of NGOs in SAR reception facilities and at SCTAFs has been restricted, further ensuing in a lack of information on available support and interpretation on social issues. For some refugees, NGOs provide the only human connection they need, and that function should not be underestimated because it serves to prevent deteriorated mental health manifestations.

"I am completely alone. The people from the organizations listen to me, they are like a family to me. I feel responsible to them, and that makes me keep fighting." (man, Afghanistan, humanitarian status holder, 42, Sofia)

However, an additional element that has led to a decrease in the progress achieved in the overall situation of refugees in Bulgaria in 2020 is the increased number of arrivals, which combined with a reduced capacity of SAR staff (due to a focus on anti-epidemic measures and staff on sick leave) and lack of NGOs logically leads to the situation described above.

Regardless of these difficulties, Bulgaria remains a welcoming country with its general attitude and lifestyle to those refugees who have the capacity, network, and willingness to make Bulgaria their new home.

VI. Recommendations

The AGD PA allows refugee voices to be heard. This makes it indispensable to present the recommendations provided by the participants in the assessment.

- As one of the main issues is related to address registration and finding **housing**, the main recommendation is for the state to provide housing support where address registration is possible for a specific time.
- Refugees identify the need for timely **financial assistance**, including support for parents to take care of their children.
- As in previous years, refugees recommend that there is **targeted integration support** for 6 months to 1 year, including monthly financial assistance of 500 BGN per household.
- Refugees request for possibilities to cover previous outstanding amounts of **health insurance** installments.
- Another request is for more opportunities to learn the Bulgarian language, especially outside of the capital. There should also be a possibility for refugees in need of higher levels of mastery of the language to take specialized courses in Bulgaria for tertiary education.
- Refugees further identify the need for **cultural and social orientation courses** to facilitate their inclusion in Bulgarian society.
- They recommend facilitated access to financial assistance and **bank accounts**.

In addition to the above, UNHCR addresses the following recommendations which have resulted from the regular participatory assessments of the needs of asylum-seekers and refugees in Bulgaria:

To government institutions:

- The Government to ensure protection sensitive entry systems that take into account the protection needs of individuals seeking access to State territory and the duty of States to respect their obligations under international human rights and refugee law, including the principle of *non-refoulement*. This is needed especially in a situation of COVID-19 with heightened travel restrictions and quarantine.
- SAR to carry out the refugee status determination proceedings on the premises of their territorial units and prevent their implementation in the SCTAF, as well as to provide quality interpretation at all stages of the procedure.
- SAR and Migration Directorate to provide access to NGOs to its centres in compliance with COVID-19 measures in order to ensure access to information and psycho-social support.
- Migration Directorate and SAR and to provide interpretation for psycho-social work in the SCTAFs and SAR reception facilities, respectively.
- While complying with the restriction measures due to the COVID-19, SAR and Migration Directorate, and in coordination with the respective EU member-state, to facilitate Dublin transfers of UASCs in a timely manner taking into account the specific vulnerability of children for the purpose of maintaining their good mental health and well-being.
- SAR and Ministry of Education and Science to ensure educational support for refugee children especially in the context of online learning modalities.
- The Agency of Social Assistance to receive support to ensure sufficient capacity and practical access for asylum-seekers and refugees at risk to appropriate social services, such as centres for temporary accommodation, with the necessary expertise and available interpretation, to avoid homelessness in a situation of COVID-19.
- SAR to suggest amendments introducing a possibility for vulnerable refugees to remain in SAR registration and reception facilities for a limited, but longer than two weeks period of time in the Law on Asylum and Refugees and liaise with Social Assistance Directorates to facilitate access to social services.
- SAR to ensure psychological assistance for asylum-seekers accommodated in the reception facilities.
- SAR to provide opportunities for Bulgarian language training and cultural and social orientation sessions in all reception facilities.

To local authorities:

- Local authorities to build new partnerships with the private sector and financial institutions to enhance refugee employment and entrepreneurship.
- Local authorities to organize joint awareness-raising cultural activities between refugees and local population to counter prejudice and discrimination.

- Local authorities to aim to enhance their capacity on refugee integration-related issues, including through seeking funding to pilot or continue refugee integration activities.
- Local authorities to introduce innovative information sharing practices to avoid misinformation and stimulate access to reliable information and referral to available support.

To international organizations and NGOs:

- UNHCR to continue training Migration Directorate and GD Border Police staff on fundamental human rights principles and submit reports on violence and abuse of power, as well as jointly discuss ways to prevent them.
- UNHCR and NGOs to build new partnerships with the private sector and financial institutions to enhance refugee employment and entrepreneurship.
- UNHCR and NGOs to advocate with BNB, SANS and banks for specialized guidelines on servicing refugees in order to enable them to benefit from basic financial services such as bank accounts.
- UNHCR and NGOs to keep advocating for the development of tools for the better identification of vulnerability, including mechanisms for proper identification of UASCs when apprehended by border or national police.
- NGOs to keep providing complementary psychological assistance for asylum-seekers in the reception facilities and for those PoCs at external addresses.
- NGOs to keep assisting and, in limited cases, providing complementary financial assistance to vulnerable refugees especially in the context of COVID-19.
- IOM and NGOs to keep providing opportunities for Bulgarian language training and cultural and social orientation sessions for asylum-seekers and refugees mostly at external addresses.
- NGOs to keep organizing joint awareness-raising cultural activities between refugees and local population to counter prejudice and discrimination.
- UNHCR, IOM and NGOs to keep enhancing the capacity of local authorities on refugee integration-related issues, including through informing them on possibilities for access to funds.
- UNHCR and NGOs to introduce innovative information sharing practices to avoid misinformation and stimulate access to reliable information and referral to available support.

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