

UKRAINIAN REFUGEES IN BULGARIA

In the Trap of Non-Existent Integration

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Two months after the commencement of the Russian military invasion of Ukraine, Adelina Banakieva, a volunteer from Sofia, does not know the exact number of Ukrainian refugees for whom she has provided shelter and support. „At the moment there are 26 people, adults, without the children. I don't know how many cats and dogs there are,” she said.

For years she has been working to help children with disabilities in Bulgaria and their mothers, which is why she faces some of the most serious cases among those fleeing the war in Ukraine - children with cerebral palsy and epilepsy. She sends these cases abroad, because in Bulgaria there are no mechanisms to ensure adequate treatment for them, nor opportunities for their parents to start work. And she does this alone, without the help of institutions. There is help from donors, volunteers and the media. „I have the feeling that I am driving along a motorway and I don't have time to look at the navigation and I don't know where I am going. That's how it is for all of us volunteers at the moment,” Adelina commented.

As in many other countries, in Bulgaria it was volunteers and civil society organisations that were the first to welcome the unprecedented stream of refugees caused by the war in Ukraine. As fast as lightning, the Bulgarian citizens organised themselves, opened their homes to the Ukrainians and began to provide them with transport to the borders of the country and also from the Ukrainian border regions. With the help of business and the non-governmental sector, they took over the provision of humanitarian and psychological support, child care, cultural and entertainment activities to bring a drop of normality in the new daily life of temporary asylum seekers in our country. And if in the first days of the crisis this could be considered quite normal, bearing in mind the greater flexibility and adaptability of the civil sector, then in the second month after the start of hostilities among volunteers, weariness and dissatisfaction with the cumbersome response of institutions could be observed.

„WE ARE FACING A HUMANITARIAN DISASTER”

According to data from the Council of Ministers, published on the official government portal in support of Ukrainian refugees, as of April 18th, nearly 195,000 Ukrainian citizens had crossed the borders of the country, and just over 91,000 had chosen to stay here, 35,000 of them children. The data published also shows that are over 50,000 Ukrainian citizens accommodated in hotels or state and local departmental buildings under the Program for the Use of Humanitarian Aid for Displaced Persons from Ukraine, which entered into force in mid-March. This means that more than a third of the refugee flow from Ukraine has been taken in by Bulgarian citizens.

The program is in force until the end of May, and at the moment the government has no plans to extend it. It provides the places for accommodation with 40 BGN per day per refugee for shelter and food. From the very beginning, this has been the subject of criticism because, on one hand, it legitimises only business and state property as beneficiaries of financial support, whilst nothing is provided for volunteers, who meet the needs of refugees out of their own budgets, and on the other it cannot be sustained due to the upcoming summer tourist season.

Most of the Ukrainians are indeed accommodated in hotels on the Black Sea coast because of the large number of beds, but also due to the fact that they themselves know the Bulgarian seaside resorts as tourists and prefer to opt for the familiar. The fact that there are serious Russian and Ukrainian-speaking communities in the region of Varna and Burgas, which provide great support to newcomers, should not be overlooked. However, this is leading to the overcrowding of coastal towns and resorts, which do not have the capacity to offer the health, social and educational services necessary for tens of thousands of mothers with children.

„We are facing a humanitarian disaster. At the end of May the tourist season begins and the accommodation plan expires. The government is thinking of taking these people to the winter resorts. Is this what we are going to do this with these people, drive them to the sea and to ski, and change them every six months? These are traumatised children, people who do not know what to do, or where to go, with many different needs,” commented Diana Dimova, founder and chairman of „Mission Wings”, a foundation from Stara Zagora. The organisation supports the most vulnerable groups in Bulgarian society - victims of violence, refugees and migrants, people at risk of poverty and social exclusion, and others.

The cabinet has not yet announced plans about how or where more than 50,000 people along the Black Sea coast should be relocated. According to Krassimira Velichkova, adviser to the departmental Deputy Prime Minister Kalina Konstantinova, data is currently being collected on the available positions in departmental bases of state-owned enterprises and companies to which Ukrainians will be redirected.

However, the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions of Bulgaria (CITUB), to which the government has also asked for accommodation, sounded the alarm that, for example, the trade unions’ holiday homes were nationalised and sold to private individuals in the 1990s. Other government agencies openly do not agree to shelter refugees at the expense of their workers. „Departmental bases have been set up so that their workers can rest at affordable prices, and therefore the reluctance of some to join the programs is understandable,” said Atanaska Todorova, Chief Expert, Labour Market, Migration and Mobility at CITUB.

According to Diana Dimova of the Mission Wings Foundation, at a very early stage, from the refugee trains coming from Bucharest, the Bulgarian state must introduce a streamlined scheme to redirect arrivals to municipalities with capacity. Such is the case in Stara Zagora, where 65 social housing units for refugee families are currently being repaired and equipped, two municipal officials have been appointed to coordinate the processes, and there is a separate budget to feed those who are most vulnerable. „Where there are NGOs and Ukrainian communities, they have to put pressure on local structures. I, if I wait here, nothing will happen. I push them with whatever it takes so that things can happen,” said Dimova.

She went on to explain that the uncontrolled placement of refugees, in the most general case - mothers with children - in the private homes and properties of Bulgarian citizens also involves other risks, such as human trafficking, sexual and labour exploitation, and homelessness. She herself has faced several similar cases since the beginning of the crisis, helping Ukrainian women to be accommodated in sheltered housing.

ZERO INTEGRATION

The idea of the key role of municipalities in successfully welcoming and integrating asylum seekers in our country is not new. It came to the fore during the refugee crisis in the civil war in Syria, which began in 2013 and is proving to be incomparably smaller than the scale of the present situation. However, it unleashed a wave of xenophobic and anti-immigrant sentiments in society, fueled by the then leading nationalist organisations - IMRO and NFSB, which today ceded the leadership position of the Party „Vazrazhdane” („Revival”) to Kostadin Kostadinov.

However, anti-immigrant rhetoric quickly overflowed from the far right and entered the political mainstream, dooming any attempt to pursue an integration policy to failure. Along with the flirtations of then Prime Minister Boyko Borisov of the centre-right GERB party with the nationalists, whose crowning glory was an official coalition cabinet in 2017, President Rumen Radev did not hesitate to use sentiment against Middle Eastern migrants to reap political dividends. We recall that at the heart of his campaign for the 2016 presidential election was his fierce opposition to the decree proposed by the then Borisov government to resettle refugees in municipalities to which budgets and powers for integration into local communities should be allocated.

Thus, in practice, politicians from both the left and the right threw a spanner into the works of conducting an adequate integration policy in Bulgaria. In 2021, the Borisov-3 cabinet adopted a new National Migration Strategy (2021-2025). It is noteworthy that the title of the old one was the National Strategy for Migration, Asylum and Integration (2015-2020), and in the new words such as „asylum and integration” are no longer present. In reality, however, the effect of both of them has always been non-existent, as no action plan and financial framework has been voted on. The result is the eighth „zero” year for integration in our country, according to a report published in the Asylum Information Database (AIDA).

Embroiled, in this deliberately caused chaos, as it happened, was the new coalition government of the leader of „We Continue the Change” Kiril Petkov, who personally expressed the will of Bulgarians to welcome the needy Ukrainians as „our brothers and sisters.” „These are Europeans, intelligent, educated people. We, like everyone else, are ready to welcome them. This is not the usual wave of refugees from people with unclear backgrounds,” Petkov said in Brussels in March, sparking a wave of outrage and accusations of racism.

„WE DON’T HAVE A POLICY FOR ANYTHING”

Europeans or not, those fleeing the war in Ukraine have found themselves in the same populist trap as those affected by the events in Syria and Afghanistan. And the

new government find themselves in a situation in which they have to build up a refugee policy from scratch. „We are not just in an emergency situation, in which anyone would find it difficult for them to cope; it is not that the systems do not work, but there is brutal resistance from all around,” admits Krassimira Velichkova.

She went on to explain that the government are currently working on drastic changes in legislation in various areas to ensure the most simplified procedure for Ukrainian refugees to „stand on their own two feet”, and receive social support and health rights, because at the moment they have access only to hospital treatment. „Institutions are slow machines, it takes time to write everything,” she pointed out.

Despite the more positive attitude towards the refugees from Russian aggression, the approach to them in social terms does not differ much from that of people who have fled conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa. Recipients of temporary protection have access to one-time financial assistance from the Social Assistance Agency to the amount of up to BGN 375, for which in practice they wait about two months.

The government does not provide them with other forms of financial support, expecting them to enter the labour market as quickly as possible. According to the Minister of Innovation and Growth Daniel Lorer, employers have announced 150,000 vacancies for Ukrainians in the sectors of IT, transport, tourism, etc. However, it is doubtful whether the predominantly young mothers with several children and elderly people seeking asylum in Bulgaria fall into this profile. Nor is it clear how the issue of child-care for thousands of Ukrainian children will be settled, so that their mothers can work, given the shortage of places in municipal nurseries and kindergartens for Bulgarian families as well. Access to education is also a challenge due to problems with the vaccination cards of Ukrainian children and the language barrier. The Ministry of Education and Science has already announced that the education system can accommodate up to 60,000 children. The question of what we will do if several hundred thousand come to our country in the coming months remains unanswered. „We have no policy for them. We don't have a policy for anything,” commented Adelina Banakieva.

According to Atanaska Todorova of CITUB, the main problem for the rapid inclusion of Ukrainians who want to start work immediately in the labour market arises from a lack of information on where the widely proclaimed hundreds of thousands of vacancies are offered. For her, the large number of vacancies announced by employers is inflated. For example, 15,000 vacancies have been announced in the tailoring sector, but it is not clear where they are and which employers will hire workers.

„For two days now in Veliko Tarnovo we have been looking for a job for two tailors, technologist-tailors, who

have documents that they can work with machines with specific software and can work wonders in this field. And we can't find a job for two people in this economic activity, and at the same time we know that 15,000 people are wanted. Where are these vacancies - no one can answer us,” she explains. „We can say that 1,000 people have started work - out of 83,000 who have stayed in the country. [The interview was taken on April 13 – author's note] This is a very small percentage, given that they have the legal opportunity to work and are facilitated, compared to other refugees,” added Atanaska Todorova.

There is also a problem with the salary itself, because, according to the trade unionist, most of the jobs offered are for the minimum wage. This means that refugees, whose profile is generally that of a woman with one or more children, must cover their rent and support their families with BGN 710 per month.

The expert makes recommendations to the institutions, first of all, that the law on employment promotion should be amended so that people with temporary protection have the same access to employment measures as Bulgarians. Currently, the law only contains hypotheses about hiring third-country nationals with humanitarian or refugee status, and employers justify not hiring people with temporary protection, because they are unable to receive a six-month subsidy. Secondly, the trade unions and the Employment Agency are already conducting information campaigns on labour rights in Bulgaria. Last but not least, refugees from Ukraine need language courses, because only Bessarabian Bulgarians speak the language. In May, CITUB piloted three A1-level courses for Ukrainians, and they may start offering A2.

“What the government is doing so far is good, but it is somewhat unfair to other refugees. By providing shelter and food, we give the impression that this thing is forever. It is temporary and from some point they will have to rely on themselves,” Todorova concludes.

CHANGE – DIFFICULT, BUT NECESSARY

Adelina Banakieva is adamant that the volunteers are already at the limits of their strengths and capabilities and that it is high time for the state to perform its role. „What is being shown is that we can't take care of these people. We rely on volunteers and thank them very much. I don't want you to thank me. I want you to set me free. I have turned my back on my job, my family and my child, who is a minor, to do the work of the state!” she said.

Diana Dimova also shares the opinion that currently about 75 percent of the burden of welcoming and caring for Ukrainians is provided by citizens and volunteers. „Institutions can't just throw their hands up in the air and say: 'I don't know, get well!'" I see this everywhere, all round the country,” she said.

Despite the stress and the disappointment of the weak institutional response, however, she is optimistic that the current crisis could lead to a qualitative change for all refugees and migrants in our country. „I was very upset about all the little battles we failed to win for the 'bad refugees' from the south. But at one point I changed my mind and said to myself that this situation is very convenient. (...). We have no better opportunity to change policies and to change the situation for all people,“ she said with conviction.

Government Refugee Adviser Krassimira Velichkova does not deny that the state has not demonstrated the desired results in welcoming Ukrainian refugees. At the same time, she recognises as an achievement the fact that 80 percent

of Ukrainian citizens accommodated in the country have already received temporary protection - a fairly high percentage for the EU as a whole. Of the available five centres of the State Agency for Refugees at the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis, documents are currently being processed at 175 points in the country. For her, the decision to initially house Ukrainian families in hotels in resorts was the right one, because the other alternative was tent camps. However, she does not rule out such a scenario if the number of refugees from the war in Ukraine doubles.

„The flow from the southern border is also increasing. And we are doing good things for the Ukrainians, but we must use the situation to do things for other people from third countries as well,“ Velichkova stated.

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