



## **The Refugees - “Person of the Year or Problem of the Year for Bulgaria” (Summary)**

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The Syrian crisis has been recognized as one of the most difficult humanitarian catastrophes for the last decades. Bulgaria is finding itself in the extremely difficult situation trying to balance out between its role of an EU member country, that has endorsed and has taken the responsibility to keep all international agreements regarding the ones who seek protection and shelter, and from the other side to take the burden of being the first absolutely safe EU territory, that is accessible for the Syrian refugees by land.

The main law that regularizes the issue with the asylum seekers and refugees in Bulgaria is the Law for the Asylum and Refugees (LAR), in effect since 16<sup>th</sup> May 2002. Its main aim is to reach “full accordance between the national legislation and the international legal acts”. With the intensification of the situation and the considerably increased number of asylum seekers in Bulgaria in the last months, the Bulgarian Council of Ministers passed a bill on 13<sup>th</sup> November 2013 that revises and riders LAR. However, according to several human rights and non-governmental organizations (and the European Commission itself) this intended revision is in direct discrepancy with the international agreements.

Among the most disputable ones are the refugees’ right to freedom of movement in Bulgaria, the impossibility to appeal against the enforced law, the lack of prompt judiciary control and the fee introduction. According to human rights organizations, the suggested motions are in contradiction with the agreed mutual and nominal European standards that define the Directive 2013/33/ of the European parliament and of the council of 26 June 2013 laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection and the established Directive 2013/32/ of the European parliament and of the council of 26 June 2013 on common procedures for granting and withdrawing international protection and so they also violate numerous other legislative standards concerning international and national laws on human rights protection.

Until recently the EU has granted more than 2 billion Euros humanitarian aid for the Syrian refugees and for the next 2014-2020 framework period an “Asylum and Migration Fund” is being opened. The total budget is 3.869 billion Euros, and Bulgaria is to receive 11.6 billion Euros out of it. Further 96 million Euros Bulgaria is to receive for border protection.

The increase of Syrian refugee flow towards Bulgaria was suggested to the authorities in Sofia by several indicators: even at the start the conflict had all signs of intensification and seemed unlikely to cease; the distance between Sofia and Damask is only 2300km, the same distance is covered only by land; in fact after the Syrian border with Turkey Bulgaria is the second distant country (first in Europe and consequently in the EU); many of the Syrian refugees are Kurds (unwanted and in danger in Turkey); Greece, which is usually the most sought after destination, closed its border, and in its territorial sea waters there is an increased international presence, which naturally redirects the flow to the second most similar country - in this case - Bulgaria.



One of the most serious critiques pointed to the authorities - both from international non-governmental human rights organizations (The UN Refugee Agency Bulgaria, Amnesty International, Bulgarian Helsinki Committee), from volunteers, media, the foreigners themselves is about the living conditions in the accommodation centers. The environment there is described as inhuman - pictures and visual materials are constantly spread through the media.

Even though taking in the asylum seekers seems a complex task for Bulgaria, in reality, a more difficult one seems to be the integration of those refugees that would wish to remain in the country. Bulgaria has a National strategy in the sphere of migration, refuge and integration (2011-2020), but it is rather general, unspecific and bureaucratic. From 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2014 the National Program for Refugee Integration will start, which apart from Sofia will include other 2-3 cities in the country and will work with 1000 refugees, but its financing is not yet specified. The offer is for one million leva annually and the Program is for a period of 3 years. The State Agency for Refugees is to open a new department "Social Activities" as well as to record the number of infant refugees. The cooperation with the local-authorities is also to include refugee integration. For indistinct reasons, however, one of the main texts in the LAR that regulates exactly such activity is repealed. And in the same time the main argument and critique from the side of the mayors and citizens is that the Council of Ministers takes autocratic decisions, not only without consulting them, but even in some cases without even notifying them in advance. This only creates unnecessary tension and premises for the arousal for negative and even xenophobic moods among the local population.

Due to its exceptional popularity and sensitivity the refugee problem was amid the topics of the National Program "Governing Skills" 2013/2014. During the work in small groups the participants outlined as one of the major issues the cooperation between the centralized and local authorities when it comes to the crisis with the refugees. As the local authorities and communities are facing refugees for the first time, they don't have a clear idea about the statute of those people and about their role in the Bulgarian society. This phenomenon creates in the locals many fears and concerns.

Among the reasons for the difficult acceptance of the refugees by the local communities are: fear of criminality; prejudices on religious and ethnical base; lack of money; disbelief in the institutions and their bad coordination; lack of qualified specialists on a local level.

The suggested by the participants measures can be summarized in the following few directions:

- More information for the citizens that includes an information campaign about the refugees on a national level (also known as a positive media campaign), in addition clarifying campaigns in the smaller regions - "face to face" talks with the citizens living in areas with refugee centers.
- Improving institutional coordination through the creation of: 1) national working group composed by the engaged institutions with clear tasks and responsibilities 2) local coordination councils composed of the State Agency, the Ministry, local active citizens, the Mayor and political parties' representatives
- Mutual work with the NGOs and civil groups on national and local level (volunteer organizations, humanitarian and so on), engaging prepared experts - volunteers or paid ones
- Measures related to the improvement of the work of the state institutions such as speeding up the procedure of giving a statute, stronger measures on border



crossing restrictions, commissioning Ministry of the Interior employees to the places with refugee centers for higher security and for citizens' ease.

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