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Syrian Refugees in Bulgaria: A Double Edged Sword Report

Syrian Refugees in Bulgaria: A Double Edged Sword

A Report of the FCJ Refugee Centre from the visit to
Bulgaria in June 2014

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List of Acronyms

ACET – Assistance Centre for Torture Survivors

BHC – Bulgarian Helsinki Committee

CCR – Canadian Council for Refugees

CRWB – Council for Refugee Women in Bulgaria

EU – European Union

IOM – International Organization for Migration

NGO – Non-governmental organization

UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees



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A. Introduction

In June of 2014, a delegation from the Canadian Council for Refugees (CCR) was invited by the Bulgarian non-governmental organization Association One to visit Bulgaria and gather information about Syrian refugees in Bulgaria.

The impetus for this delegation was to address concerns expressed by the FCJ Refugee Centre that Bulgaria, a country with minimal asylum claim experience, is struggling to cope with the large numbers of Syrians crossing the border, resulting in challenging conditions and precarious situations for asylum claimants.

Among a variety of goals for the trip, the delegation aimed to better understand the complex situation of Syrian asylum-seekers and refugees in Bulgaria. This understanding was facilitated by interviews with key stakeholders including state agencies, NGOs, Syrian refugees, as well as visits to immigration reception centers in Bulgaria, culminating in this report, its concomitant recommendations and a short video reproducing parts of the conducted interviews and comments gathered during the visit.

The Visits of The FCJ Delegation

Represented by Francisco Rico-Martinez (Co-Director of FCJ Refugee Centre), Varka Kalaydzhieva (Anti-Human Trafficking Coordinator at FCJ Refugee Centre), and Nicole Maine (York CRS Graduate Fellow and Volunteer at FCJ Refugee Centre) the delegation travelled to Sofia, Bulgaria to conduct meetings and gather information from June 16th – 20th, 2014. Association One (which previously existed as *Common Step* but was subsequently dissolved) joined the delegation for most of the meetings and was represented by Danka Tsoleva and Dimitar Arseniev. During the visit the delegation met with a number of non-governmental organizations as well as government representatives, refugees and organizations like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and International Organization for Migration (IOM). Visits were also made to integration and reception centres.

The three members of the delegation had various and often overlapping roles during the visit. Nicole Maine was primarily responsible for writing this report, conducting interviews, and organizing the audio and visual components of the visit. Varka Kalaydzhieva acted as a translator, visit coordinator and Bulgarian expert as well as reviewing and contributing to the report. Francisco Rico-Martinez also assisted with interviews and reviewed the report.



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During the meetings the delegation asked a series of questions (see Appendix A) focused around four major themes:

- 1. Access to the Bulgarian border for Syrian asylum seekers**
- 2. The asylum claim process**
- 3. Integration of Syrian refugees and protected persons in Bulgaria**
- 4. Possible areas of collaboration with the CCR**

All interviews were audio-recorded and photographed (these resources are available at the FCJ Refugee Centre in Toronto) and followed by a ten-minute video interview wherein Francisco Rico-Martinez asked the interviewee(s) four questions related to the key themes. Translation, where necessary, was provided by Varka Kalaydzhieva. The video recordings of this follow-up interview have been used to create a short documentary which aims to raise awareness for the plight of Syrian refugees and asylum seekers in Bulgaria.

Organizations and Centres Visited

Organizations:

- Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (Iliana Savova, director of the Legal Program for Refugees and Migrants)
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (Roland-Francois Weil, Representative in Bulgaria)
- Assistance Centre for Torture Survivors (ACET) (Mimoza Dimitrova, Chairperson, psychologist and psychotherapist)
- Global Village Champions (Yank Barry, founder)
- International Organization for Migration and Association for Integration of Refugees and Migrants (Radoslav Stamenkov, head of mission in Bulgaria and Vera Zaharieva)
- Bulgarian Council for Refugees and Migrants (Kina Sabeva, Chairperson)
- Council of Refugee Women in Bulgaria (Linda Awanis, President)
- Caritas Bulgaria (Radosveta Hadjieva, coordinator of migration services)
- Multi Kulti Kitchen Project (Bistra Ivanova)
- Foundation for Access to Rights (Valeria Ilareva, Head Lawyer)
- Bulgarian State Agency for Refugees (Colonel Nikolai Tchirpanliev, President)
- Migration Directorate, Ministry of Interior (Dragomir Petrov, head of directorate)



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Immigration Reception Centres

- Ovcha Kupel Integration Centre, Sofia
- Voenna Rampa Reception Centre, Sofia

Individual Interviews

- Marwan, Syrian refugee
- Joval, Iraqi refugee

Acknowledgments

The FCJ Refugee Centre delegation to Bulgaria was made possible by generous financial support from Sisters of the Holy Name.

The FCJ Refugee Centre thanks the organizations and individuals who agreed to be interviewed and generously shared their information and perspectives with the delegation, in particular the Syrian and Iraqi refugees who described their own difficult experiences of displacement.

The FCJ Refugee Centre offers a special thank you to the Canadian Council for Refugees for their support and to Association One for their invitation to visit and assistance in Bulgaria.



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B. Context – Bulgaria and the Syrian Refugee Crisis



Figure 1. Map of Bulgaria in Proximity to Syria¹

Since 2011, the devastating armed conflict in Syria has produced over three million refugees to date² most of whom have sought safety in neighboring countries, as well as in some European states. Although geographically far from the conflict zone, Bulgaria has received more than 6000 Syrian asylum claimants fleeing violence and persecution in their country of origin³.

¹ Andrew Higgins, "Far Right in Eastern Europe Makes Gains as Syrians Arrive," *NY Times*, December 14, 2013, accessed on August 10, 2014, Peter Kenyon, "With Dogs and Batons, Bulgaria Tells Syrian Refugees to Turn Back," *NPR*, April 29, 2014, accessed August 30, 2014 <http://www.npr.org/blogs/parallels/2014/04/29/307722541/with-dogs-and-batons-bulgaria-tells-syrian-refugees-to-turn-back>

² "Syria Regional Refugee Response," UNHCR Inter-Agency Information Sharing Portal, accessed August 30, 2014, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

³ Hristova *et al.*, "Trapped in Europe's Quagmire: The Situation of Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Bulgaria," *Border Monitoring EU*, 2014, accessed September 1, 2014 <http://bulgaria.bordermonitoring.eu/files/2014/07/Hristova-et.al-Trapped-in-Europes-Quagmire.pdf>



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The poorest nation in the European Union (EU), Bulgaria sees an average of 1000 asylum applicants crossing its borders each year primarily from places like Afghanistan, Iraq, Algeria and Armenia⁴. In 2013, however, Bulgaria received 9100 applications for international protection, 4000 of which came from those claiming to be Syrian⁵. To date the State Agency for Refugees (SAR) has processed between 6500 and 6700 Syrian asylum claims⁶ though there is no way of knowing how many currently remain in the country as records are no longer kept after an individual's status is determined⁷. If an individual is granted refugee status they are entitled to travel within Europe for the following 3 months; consequently most organizations estimate that half of those Syrians granted status in Bulgaria have left. Some estimates suggest that roughly 3000 Syrians currently remain in Bulgaria⁸. The asylum-seekers who receive a subsidiary protection status (referred to as humanitarian status) are allowed to travel to any European country provided that a special visitor visa has been issued. Therefore, most of the subsidiary protection status holders remain in Bulgaria indefinitely.

Unlike other groups of asylum claimants in Bulgaria, the Syrian population is estimated to consist of 50% women and children⁹ the majority (70%) of whom are of Kurdish origin¹⁰. For many of those fleeing the conflict in Syria, Bulgaria holds the promise of an entryway to safety and settlement in Europe and as such Turkish smugglers, with the assistance of Bulgarian smugglers¹¹ are paid huge sums of money to guide these asylum-seekers to and across the Bulgarian border.

The sudden influx of asylum claimants in 2013 found Bulgaria unprepared to meet this challenge, a lack of foresight which resulted in asylum seekers facing "a real risk of inhuman or degrading treatment, due to systemic deficiencies in the reception conditions and asylum procedures" of Bulgaria¹². These risks and concerns included *refoulement* at the border, detention for up to four days, lack of interpretation services at the border and detention centres, overcrowding in reception centres, risk of homelessness and destitution due to lack of state support, as well as overstretched and

⁴ Iliana Savova. Interview by author. Tape Recording. Sofia, June 16, 2014

⁵ UNHCR, "Bulgaria as a Country of Asylum," UNHCR Observations on the Current Situation of Asylum in Bulgaria, January 2, 2014.

⁶ Nikolai Tchirpanliev and Dragomir Petrov. Interview by author. Tape Recording. Sofia, June 19, 2014.

⁷ Savova, *Interview*.

⁸ Roland- Francois Weil. Interview by author. Tape Recording. Sofia, June 16, 2014.

⁹ Savova, *Interview*.

¹⁰ Tchirpanliev and Petrov, *Interview*.

¹¹ Savova, *Interview*.

¹² UNHCR, January, 2014.



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untrained staff at reception facilities. All of these issues, among others, were reported by UNHCR in January of 2014¹³.

Further to this the report documents truly deplorable conditions within the reception centres themselves, pointing out the lack of access to heating, medical assistance and sanitary facilities. The Harmanli and Voenna Rampa centres were in particularly dire circumstances as evidenced by the spread of Hepatitis A among residents, freezing conditions coupled with a lack of heating, people living in tents and blocked sewer systems¹⁴. In many cases what resources were available were provisioned by the mobilization of the NGO sector in Bulgaria. Though little of this effort was undertaken in a strategic, cooperative manner, a number of private citizens and civil society were able to contribute food, clothing, medication and assistance in a number of situations where the government was unable to do so¹⁵. Emergency funding was also provided by the European Commission, Czech Republic, and Netherlands Red Cross¹⁶.

Despite these initial setbacks and obstacles, the Bulgarian government is to be commended for the small improvements it has made in the following four months to address the criticism of reception conditions. As a result of these efforts the UNHCR noted improvements in access to medical services in all centres, better accommodation and sanitary conditions, improved interpretation services and consequently has retracted a January 2014 recommendation that Bulgaria be removed from the 'take back' provisions of the Dublin Regulation¹⁷.

While measures taken by SAR and various non-governmental and grassroots organizations have led to a significant improvement in the lives of Syrian refugees in Bulgaria as well as the efficiency of asylum claims processing, UNHCR concern remains for the sustainability of the progress that has been made. A mass deployment of 1,500 police officers to the border with Turkey and the resulting sudden, but unexplained, reduction of asylum claimants have raised suspicions about clandestine 'push-backs' and forcible removal at the border¹⁸. Furthermore, the UNHCR harbours ongoing doubts about the accommodation and sanitary provisions in reception centres, with specific concern for the number of available toilets and access to hot water¹⁹. These chronic

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Weil, *Interview*; Savova, *Interview*.

¹⁶ Tchirpanliev and Petrov, *interview*.

¹⁷ UNHCR, "Bulgaria as a Country of Asylum," UNHCR Observations on the Current Situation of Asylum in Bulgaria, April, 2014.

¹⁸ UNHCR, April, 2014.

¹⁹ Ibid.



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issues are amplified by a lack of opportunity for recreation and occupation, particularly for adults, coupled with the termination of the National Program for the Integration of Refugees (NPIR) in December of 2013²⁰.

The common perception among key stakeholders like SAR and some NGOs is that Syrian asylum seekers and refugees want to use Bulgaria as a transit point to other EU countries rather than a settlement destination. This conclusion can be disputed however, given the lack of an integration program to support social inclusion as well as the numerous obstacles that asylum claimants may not anticipate before entering the country. Informal data collection by the president of SAR led him to conclude that 95% of asylum seekers and refugees want to use Bulgaria as a transit country to their final destination in a Western European country²¹.

Recent media reports and concern from humanitarian and human rights organizations further point to the existence of an ongoing, albeit improved, crisis with regards to Syrian refugees in Bulgaria. Reports of violence and use of excessive force at the Turkish border are detailed and numerous²² as are descriptions of the bitter realities that Syrian asylum claimants and refugees are facing in Bulgaria²³.

To this end the FCJ delegation aimed, in its visit to Bulgaria, to uncover the reality of the situation, for both Syrian refugees and the organizations that are working with them. The remainder of this report will focus on the major themes of: a) access to the border, b) the asylum claims process and c) integration, with special emphasis on d) recommendations and future action that can be taken to provide support where needed in this ongoing crisis.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Tchirpanliev and Petrov, *Interview*.

²² Peter Kenyon, "With Dogs and Batons, Bulgaria Tells Syrian Refugees to Turn Back," *NPR*, April 29, 2014, accessed August 30, 2014; "Bulgaria: Asylum Seekers Summarily Expelled," Human Rights Watch, April 29, 2014, accessed August 20, 2014.

²³ Daniel Trilling, "Syrians in Bulgaria: 'Why Don't They Help Us,'" *Al Jazeera*, May 6, 2014, accessed August 15, 2014; Boaz Arad, "Syrian Refugees Looking for European Haven Face Bitter Reality in Bulgaria," *Haaretz*, April 11, 2014, accessed August 13, 2014.



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C. Key Findings

Hypocrisies and Challenges

Throughout the course of the delegation's visit to Bulgaria it became apparent that Syrians, as well as other asylum claimants and refugees, face a variety of challenges and obstacles that extend beyond those related to fleeing violence and persecution in their countries of origin.

Among the most notable of these obstacles, is the framework of racism and discrimination espoused by none other than the head of the State Agency for Refugees. In an extensive interview with Colonel Nikolai Tchirpanliev, the president of SAR and member of the general headquarters staff of the Bulgarian army, it became apparent that an undercurrent of xenophobia and condemnation runs through SAR's approach to certain refugee populations including Syrians. First, he used Kurdish Syrians as scapegoats comparing them to the Roma population (an historically subjugated and persecuted community in Europe) and claiming that they are "absolute illiterates" who refuse to learn Bulgarian and are actively segregating themselves from society. He concluded that wealthy refugees as well as those with higher education are going to reach countries such as Switzerland and Germany saying that "the only people who stay in Bulgaria are the Kurdish who are worse than our gypsies in every aspect. I don't feel uncomfortable to say that they have been living in dig-outs in their countries." He even went as far as singling out the Arab-speaking refugees by stating that "the national culture and tradition of Arabs is lying." These are but a few examples of the racist rhetoric employed by representative of SAR, and as such might be interpreted as a part of the greater framework of the Bulgarian response to asylum claimants at the border.

This particular interview also revealed the ways in which SAR views its duties and responsibilities at the Turkish border. Colonel Tchirpanliev lamented Bulgaria's exclusion from the Schengen Area, as he explained the government's aim to prove itself as a reliable border of the EU. Evidently this proof is manifesting itself in an increasingly exclusionary and closed border, a theme that will be further addressed later in this report.

Sadly, such attitudes of discrimination appear to extend beyond the confines of SAR and into the wider public. As Iliana Savova of the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (BHC) explains:



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*'As a society we don't have any experience to being exposed to foreigners as such. So, therefore, immigration is a very new phenomenon to this country. So it's really very easy to manipulate the public opinion if they don't have opinion of their own.'*²⁴

According to Ms. Savova, though Syrian refugees are no longer the topic of the day in Bulgaria, hate speech and discrimination is still present in media representations of the situation. Refugees, she explained, are an easy scapegoat on which to blame political and economic problems in Bulgaria, and consequently, various media outlets encourage the public to ask "do they have a right to be here, are they eating the bread of the nationalists?"²⁵ Such sentiments hardly foster an open and welcoming approach to the arrival of thousands of newcomers.

Access

*"Welcome to Bulgaria, but [only] through the official check points, and submit a refugee claim."*²⁶

One of the key challenges for Syrians seeking asylum in Bulgaria, is simply gaining access to the country in order to make an asylum claim. Bulgaria's 280 km border with Turkey is considered an external border of the EU, and as such has become increasingly heavily guarded in the wake of the Syrian refugee crisis.

Much of the border runs through mountainous and heavily wooded areas, devoid of official border crossings, known as the 'green border.' Since mid-2013 Syrian asylum seekers, among other groups, have repeatedly attempted the dangerous journey of crossing the border, with the help of well-paid smugglers, at un-monitored locations. No one denies the immense risk of making such an attempt; SAR lamented the discovery of human remains allegedly abandoned by Turkish smugglers and eaten by animals in Turkey, many kilometers outside the Bulgarian border²⁷.

²⁴ Savova, *Interview*.

²⁵ *Ibid*.

²⁶ Tchirpanliev and Petrov, *Interview*.

²⁷ *Ibid*.



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BHC similarly reported cases of asylum claimants getting lost in the woods and lighting fires so as to be noticed by the Bulgarian border police. Ms. Savova shared with us the particularly disturbing and tragic story of a family trying to cross the border:

“We had a case, in the winter, of the death of a mother who was protecting her children, so she took all her clothes [off], and in the winter, to keep her children warm. Therefore she died, she froze to death actually”²⁸

Desperate Syrian families are led to green borders by Turkish smugglers who, in collaboration with Bulgarian smugglers, operate millions of dollars in business²⁹ smuggling asylum seekers to the Bulgarian border. For exorbitant fees, these smugglers guide Syrians to the densely wooded areas surrounding the Bulgarian ‘green border.’ Claimants are left several kilometers from the border and forced to make their own way for the remainder of the journey, navigating rough terrain and limited visibility.

Marwan,³⁰ a recently arrived Syrian man discussed his experience at the border, explaining how he paid a smuggler \$3000 to guide him and his wife along with their three young children across the border to Bulgaria.³¹ The smuggler drove Marwan and his family to an area several kilometers away from the border and then explained to them the direction in which the family would travel alone from there. Marwan and his wife then walked for two hours towards the border, crossing rivers and carrying their children on their shoulders until they were eventually found by the Bulgarian border police and taken into detention. He said that had he known how dangerous the journey would be, and how little help the smuggler would provide, he would never have taken the risk, particularly with his children.

In November 2013 the Bulgarian Government intensified its border control practices by deploying 1,500 police officers to the border while also beginning the construction of a 25-30 km fence (finished in July). Bulgarian border guards also work in collaboration with their Turkish counterparts, using sophisticated technology to monitor the area around the border as far as 17 km into Turkey. The president of the SAR explained the impetus for these changes as being in the interest of protecting refugees, and welcoming them through ‘official borders’³². He also explained that Bulgaria, as an

²⁸ Savova, *Interview*.

²⁹ Tchirpanliev and Petrov, *Interview*.

³⁰ Name changed for privacy

³¹ Marwan, *Interview*.

³² Tchirpanliev and Petrov, *Interview*.



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external border of the EU is responsible for protecting its co-member states from terrorists. In Colonel Tchirpanliev's own words:

"We want to prove that we are reliable East border of the EU. We don't stop any refugee to come to our territory but to come through the official border crossings. According to the present law they are criminals after they cross the green border."³³

Accusations of 'push-backs,' the prevention of individuals seeking international protection from physical entry to the country, or the forcible return of those who have made an asylum claim on Bulgarian territory,³⁴ have been widespread, particularly among the organizations we visited. Both the UNHCR, the Foundation for Access to Rights and BHC acknowledge various reports from asylum claimants of multiple attempts to enter Bulgaria.³⁵ Reports of violence and beatings at the border are also beginning to circulate, though with no hard evidence of push-backs or violence there is little that can be done to alter the situation.

The prevailing statistics, however, show that prior to the implementation of intensified border security roughly 3500 asylum seekers were crossing the border each month, while after November 2013, the numbers decreased to a few hundred a month, with only 150 individuals crossing the border in December of 2013³⁶. Many organizations feel that the dramatic decrease in asylum applicants, coupled with the reports of abuse and restricted entry at the border, are explainable only by a growing emphasis on push-backs facilitated by the Bulgarian government.

Asylum Process

Following entrance into Bulgaria, for those who gain this access, individuals must begin the process of making a formal asylum claim. Upon making an asylum claim in front of border police, or being detained by them, individuals are taken to a detention centre for 24 hours whereupon they undergo a medical evaluation, have their fingerprints taken and are interrogated (with the help of interpreters) by Bulgarian security services³⁷. At this point the State Agency for National Security may determine that an individual poses

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ UNHCR, April, 2014.

³⁵ Savova, *Interview*; Weil, *Interview*; Hristova *et al.*

³⁶ Savova, *Interview*.

³⁷ Ibid; Tchirpanliev and Petrov, *Interview*.



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a threat to the national security of the country³⁸. According to Valeria Ilareva, head lawyer at the Foundation for Access to Rights, no evidence is needed for this determination and as such, people are often arbitrarily determined to be illegal immigrants and as such not given access to the asylum claims system. She also acknowledged the occurrence of secret deportations during the period of legal limbo between making an asylum claim and the claim actually being registered by SAR. Of course there is no formal evidence of these deportations.

Ms. Ilareva described the case of two brothers from an unspecified country one of whom was allowed to make an asylum claim, while the other, for unknown reasons, was deemed a threat to national security and was consequently detained and unable to make an asylum application³⁹. In these situations, individuals may be kept in detention for up to 18 months whereupon they are simply released into Bulgaria (regardless of their supposed threat to the nation) without any papers or documents, and without any status. At this point, however, there is no regularization mechanism and thus no possibility of removing oneself from this irregular status and situation. The head of the Migration Directorate estimated that there are 200 individuals living in Bulgaria under such circumstances⁴⁰.

If however, an individual is found not to be a threat to national security, then their asylum claim is registered and they are released from detention whereupon they are assisted by SAR staff to continue their claim procedures and relocate to a reception centre to await their determination interview⁴¹. Under EU law such a determination must be made within 6 months, but to the credit of SAR, determinations for Syrian applicants are now being made within 45 – 60 days⁴² a vast improvement on the initial backlog of applications. Increased processing speeds are, however, not without issue, as Linda Awanis of the Council of Refugee Women in Bulgaria (CRWB) explained. Faster processing of Syrian asylum applications has led to the privileging of this group over others⁴³. The processing of claims from those of other national backgrounds is becoming progressively slower and wait times longer.

Problematically, asylum claimants who are in the reception centres are informed of their asylum interview only 24 hours prior to its occurrence⁴⁴. Those who live outside

³⁸ Valeria Ilareva. Interview by author. Tape Recording. Sofia, June 18, 2014.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Tchirpanliev and Petrov, *Interview*.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Linda Awanis. Interview by author. Tape Recording. June 18, 2014.

⁴⁴ Ilareva, *Interview*.



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the centres are informed 10 days prior. While the issues with this limited preparation time seem obvious, the president of the SAR was surprised at our delegation's concern. He claimed that the interview is not a test that one must prepare for, but rather that individuals need only truthfully tell their story and consequently need little time to prepare. Ms. Ilareva explained that at times it is almost pointless for her to accompany asylum claimants to their interviews as there is so little time to prepare and to learn their story.

Of course determination interviews are far more complex than this as Mimoza Dimitrova of the Assistance Centre for Torture Survivors (ACET) explained:

"during this asylum process [claimants] are not recognized by the state authorities as vulnerable persons, and many problems which arise from trauma, like, for example, concentration problems, or some anxiety problems, which also could affect their performance during the asylum interviews, were totally neglected by the authorities, by the staff providing asylum interviews and in addition they were considered as liars"⁴⁵.

Not only is the determination interview a stressful and often difficult experience, but according to this report little consideration, if any, is given to the trauma endured by many applicants, nor to the vulnerability of their situation. Further to this Ms. Ilareva noted that the individuals conducting determination interviews are often provided with conflicting information packages about claimants' countries of origin⁴⁶. She referenced situations where individuals were claiming asylum based on grounds not included in the SAR's country report, and as such were found to be liars due to this supposed 'discrepancy' and 'lack of credibility.' Additionally, she explained that claimants sometimes try to bring formal documents and evidence to their determination interviews to support their claim, but the interviewers often reject the evidence saying it is unnecessary. This becomes problematic though, if the claim is rejected and the claimant attempts to appeal the decision in court. At this point the court will not review documents and evidence that have not been accepted in the initial interview and formally noted in the interview protocol, thus claimants are unable to make their case. Ms. Ilareva was adamant that all evidence must be accepted in initial interviews, so it can continue to be used later in the procedure if necessary.

⁴⁵ Mimoza Dimitrova. Interview by author. Tape Recording. Sofia, June 16, 2014

⁴⁶ Ilareva, *Interview*.



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When applicants do manage to receive status in Bulgaria, and nearly 100% of Syrian applicants do, they are typically granted one of two possible designations. Convention refugee status is granted when applicants face individual circumstances in their country of origin, which cause them to fall under the parameters of the UNHCR convention. Humanitarian status, however, is a subsidiary type of protection in both Bulgaria and greater Europe originating from articles 2 and 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights which constitute the 'right to life' and prohibition from torture. This status is granted to those who are threatened by an armed conflict or danger of torture in their country of origin⁴⁷.

Mr. Weil, of the UNHCR, noted a complete reversal in the granting of status in Bulgaria, as current trends show the majority of successful applicants are being granted refugee status as opposed to the proliferation of humanitarian status prior to the arrival of Syrian claimants⁴⁸. He suggested two possible explanations for this phenomenon: 1) that the improved training of those performing status determinations has led to a greater recognition of convention refugees, or 2) that the authorities, being aware of convention refugees' legal right to leave Bulgaria for a time, are using this status to enable Syrians to leave the country⁴⁹. Due to the way asylum interviews are conducted members of one family may receive different statuses (refugee or humanitarian) leading to difficult situations where family members have to decide whether to leave behind those who are not allowed to travel in the EU due to their status, or stay together in Bulgaria.

While waiting for their determination interview to be scheduled, however, asylum applicants live in limbo in one of seven SAR operated Reception and Registration Centres : Banya, Sofia, Harmanli, Transit Centre Pastrogor, or Accommodation Centres of Voenna Rampa, Vrazdebnna and Kovachevtsi⁵⁰. The UNHCR's January, 2014 report outlines the appalling conditions of these centres ranging from unheated tents in winter, lack of medical services, substandard sanitary facilities and overcrowding⁵¹, but at the current time most organizations agree that conditions meet minimum standards. Under immense pressure from the BHC, UNHCR and the international community, the SAR worked in collaboration with various NGOs to establish acceptable conditions in the camps. Most of the centres are now refurbished, with food provided in all, as well as

⁴⁷ "State Agency for Refugees with the Council of Ministers," accessed on August 1, 2014, <http://www.aref.government.bg/index.php?cat=2>.

⁴⁸ Weil, *Interview*.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*.

⁵⁰ UNHCR, April, 2014.

⁵¹ UNHCR, January 2014.



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medical services, language classes and eradication of overcrowding. Many organizations have deemed conditions to be more or less acceptable at this time.

Voenna Rampa Reception Centre



Figure 2. 'Welcome to Hell' graffiti on wall outside Voenna Rampa Reception Centre, Sofia (photo by author).

While the reception centres may meet some minimal survival standards our delegation found troubling allegations of poor sanitation, disease, overcrowding and general frustration, among a variety of other issues. While the delegation was unable to visit all of the SAR reception centres, our observations and conversations with Syrians living in the centres revealed a different picture than that portrayed by some of the organizations we spoke with. During our visit to Voenna Rampa there was flooding in one of the washroom facilities causing one floor to be covered in water with some leakage down to the lower floor. Washrooms appeared to be small and crowded with women washing clothing in tubs on the floor. Kitchen space was small with only hot plates to heat food and limited supplies.



Figure 3. A woman washing clothes in washroom of Voenna Rampa Reception Centre, Sofia (photo by author).

The delegation is grateful for the many individuals who were willing to speak with us and share their experiences, though the realities they described were in many cases difficult to bear. During our visit to Voenna Rampa, we repeatedly heard Syrian refugees and asylum seekers express their frustration and sadness at the situation in which they currently live. Many of the individuals who were so graciously willing to speak with us became visibly angry and upset when discussing their plight and many had been in the centre for extended periods of time.

The conditions of the centre came up as a recurring theme among residents, with only one washroom and kitchen available for the hundreds of people living on each floor. This led to understandable tension and frustration between those forced to share the limited resources. Multiple people reported the spread of diseases like Hepatitis A and eczema due to the poor sanitary conditions and close confines in which people live. People were similarly frustrated by the lack of education available to Syrians, with the exception of Bulgarian language classes, and one woman said that her young son had not attended school in three years. To the centre's credit, food is provided three times a day to all residents of the centre, with provisions made for culturally sensitive foods.



Figure 4. Communal kitchen facility in Voenna Rampa Reception Centre, Sofia (photo by author).

Most people we met described their need for some form of medical treatment or treatment for a loved one. One woman, who talked to us with her two small children surrounding her, said that her two and a half year old son had a hormonal imbalance that could be corrected with treatment outside of Bulgaria. If not treated before the age of five, however, the affliction will become permanent. At this point the woman was unable to leave Bulgaria, likely due to her humanitarian status, and was relegated to waiting in the reception centre for what little help might come⁵². Another family vented their frustration at having all obtained refugee status except for their elderly and disabled grandmother who had only been granted humanitarian status. The family planned to leave Bulgaria, saying there was nothing for them there, but would leave their grandmother behind in the centre. This absurd and unnecessary situation reflects the determination of status as individuals rather than families, leading to difficult decisions and the tearing apart of families.

Psychological stress was another common topic among the individuals in the reception centre with one man describing his feelings of psychological ruin. Another woman

⁵² The delegation has recently learned that this woman has moved with her family to another EU country where relatives will be able to provide help with the treatment for her son.



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talked about the many people who consider taking their lives, seeing this as the only escape from their devastating circumstances. Frustration, stress and anger were made obvious to the delegation as well as a prevailing lack of hope endured by many of the centre's residents. Despite these manifold affronts on both the dignity and well-being of the Syrians we spoke to, one man took the time to express his gratitude to the Bulgarian community for the support they were able to provide.

Integration

Throughout the delegation's trip to Bulgaria it became overwhelmingly apparent that the biggest concern for organizations serving the Syrian community was the integration of Syrian refugees into Bulgarian society. As the UNHCR representative explained:

"Integration is the key...asylum is not just going from access to territory to providing the person with refugee status, it's what comes afterwards as well. It's a continuum and integration is the missing link in all of that"⁵³

This sentiment was repeated again and again during interviews with organizations like BHC, ACET, the Bulgarian Council for Refugees and Migrants and Caritas, all of which discussed the need for a planned and funded national integration program for newcomers with status in Bulgaria.

Recognition of status, whether it be refugee or humanitarian, is quite central to this issue as it is only after individuals receive their status determination that the access they previously had to resources and assistance dissipates almost entirely. These individuals must buy their own medical insurance, find housing, find employment and learn the language, all without government assistance or funding. When visiting the Ovcha Kupel Integration Centre, the delegation learned of several courses available for newcomers, though they are few and only available to a limited number of people⁵⁴. These courses were directed primarily towards women and included professional training courses in cosmetics, hairdressing and dressmaking.

Though asylum claimants are expected to leave reception centres within 14 days of recognition of status, in many cases they have been allowed to stay on because they have no where else to go. Those who are granted refugee status, and have funds or family to support them elsewhere in Europe frequently choose to leave Bulgaria as

⁵³ Weil, *Interview*.

⁵⁴ Courses were made available for 60 individuals at a time.



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there is little hope for establishing a life there in present conditions. Weil of UNHCR said that without any sort of government integration program it is basically impossible to integrate into Bulgarian life and society⁵⁵. Those with refugee status are entitled to travel for three months within the EU, but after this time refugees are expected to return to Bulgaria, the country in which they were granted status, though many decline to return. Under the Dublin Regulation refugees can be *removed* back to Bulgaria if discovered by authorities in other EU member states⁵⁶.

When the delegation discussed integration with Marwan, the aforementioned Syrian man who crossed the border with his family, and asked about his plans for the future, he indicated that he was not sure what to do next. He said that if leaving Bulgaria was a possibility, then he would certainly take the opportunity as Bulgaria is a poor country with very few job opportunities, particularly for refugees. Ms. Savova of BHC confirmed these fears, explaining that while refugees are legally entitled to work in Bulgaria, without knowing how to find a job or having the necessary language skills their chances of finding employment are extremely low. Marwan said he wanted to provide the best opportunities for his wife and children, though at this point he does not have a plan.

While the lack of integration resources for refugees and newcomers is a real and alarming problem in Bulgaria, this is not the first time that a need for such programming has been recognized. In fact Bulgaria has had a number of such programs in place in past years, programs that provided limited assistance, accommodation, education, language and vocational training for newcomers and refugees⁵⁷. The most recent five-year integration program, entitled the National Programme for Integration of Refugees, ended in December of 2013⁵⁸ and a new one has yet to be put in place. Ms. Savova suspects that the Bulgarian government may have an agenda in postponing the implementation of a new integration program in that the lack of resources causes people to leave the country. She indicated that SAR likely recognizes this reality and may hope that the poor conditions and lack of integration services will impel those individuals who are recognized as refugees to leave⁵⁹. This agenda, however, will likely backfire as under the aforementioned Dublin Regulation the majority of these refugees will be returned to Bulgaria and the state will be obliged to accept them.

There is also concern that political games and maneuvering are obstructing the implementation of an integration program in Bulgaria. Ms. Savova claimed that

⁵⁵ Weil, *Interview*.

⁵⁶ UNHCR, April, 2014.

⁵⁷ Savova, *Interview*.

⁵⁸ Kina Sabeva. Interview by author. Tape Recording. Sofia, June 17, 2014

⁵⁹ Savova, *Interview*.



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government representatives are reluctant to invest money and resources in a program to support refugees and asylum claimants because of an impending election⁶⁰. If the government is perceived to be supporting the needs of refugees over those of the Bulgarian people, this may affect the outcome of an election. Ms. Savova expressed her disgust at the possibility that the government may leave people to “die from hunger because...of political objectives and aims” though she acknowledged that this is a reality in Bulgaria.

Connected to the lack of integration program were conflicting reports about the nature of refugee and asylum claimant children’s access to the Bulgarian school system. Though reports were somewhat confused due to the adoption of new policies for the next school year (which had not yet begun when the delegation was visiting Bulgaria), access to education for children was an obvious concern for many service providers. According to the UNHCR representative children do not have immediate access to the Bulgarian education system and must first pass a placement test in the Bulgarian language before gaining this access⁶¹. Under the current system, children are often placed in classes outside of their age range.

This system, however, appears to be ending as both BHC and Caritas provided information about recently adopted legislation to allow children to enter schools without prior Bulgarian language training⁶². The idea is that children are able to learn a language via immersion, more readily than their adult counterparts and as such will be assigned to a classroom based on their age⁶³. This legislation ostensibly aims to encourage the integration of children into Bulgarian schools and to facilitate the improvement of language skills.

Throughout the visit the topic of resettlement came up several times, though with differing answers and approaches. Mr. Weil of UNHCR said that as a European country, Bulgaria falls under the principle of no resettlement, and that as a country of resettlement itself, it would be impossible for people to be resettled from there⁶⁴. Ms Savova, however, had a different but similarly negative perspective on the possibility of resettlement:

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Weil, *Interview*; UNHCR april *****

⁶² Savova, *Interview*.

⁶³ Radosveta Hadjieva. Interview by author. Tape Recording. Sofia, June 18, 2014.

⁶⁴ Weil, *Interview*



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Resettlement is a “double edged sword, because from one point, we need to, we need to really push for some kind of integration to be established here, because if we push for settlement, the government will focus on resettlement outside of this country and will never invest in proper integration. From the other than, if this could help a family to live a better life somewhere, and to survive their exile, I’m for it. So you don’t have an answer that is really one way”⁶⁵.

Though this section of the report has focused primarily on the lack of government-provided integration services for refugees and asylum claimants, there are, of course, non-governmental organizations that do invaluable work with very limited resources to support these individuals where the government fails to provide. ACET contributes vital psychological counseling to over 120 people each year, many of them Syrian refugees, while CRWB helps to bridge the gap between NGOs and refugees by providing information about rights and obligations as well as a variety of other supports. Ms. Awanis described the organization’s role in providing a space for women to simply tell their stories and vent their frustrations⁶⁶ while herself offering a listening ear as well as help and advice where possible. The organization also helps refugees with apartment rentals and the provision of necessary items such as clothing, blankets and kitchen utensils. The Multi Kulti Collective facilitates culinary presentations and events in Bulgaria that allow newcomers to share their cultural heritage while promoting integration into Bulgarian society.⁶⁷ Mr. Yank Barry, and his Global Village Champions foundation, has similarly aimed to provide food, clothing and shelter to Syrian asylum claimants and refugees in Bulgaria⁶⁸. Though we were unable to meet with the Red Cross due to scheduling conflicts, other organizations indicated their role in providing goods, furniture and housing assistance.

While there is a 2008 UNHCR ‘integration manual’ made available to newcomers with status in Bulgaria, it is surprisingly complicated, long and difficult to read. Moreover, the manual is written entirely in Bulgarian with no available translation. Not only does it seem absurd to distribute such a manual to newcomers who speak little, if any, Bulgarian, but even if people are able to read the manual it is written in an inaccessible and legally oriented way. The manual is primarily intended for those *working with* newcomers (lawyers, social workers, employers, teachers, academics, NGOs etc), rather

⁶⁵ Savova, *Interview*.

⁶⁶ Awanis, *Interview*.

⁶⁷ Bistra Ivanova. Interview by author. Tape Recording. Sofia, June 18, 2014.

⁶⁸ Yank Barry. Interview by author. Tape Recording. Sofia, June 16, 2014.



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than for refugees and asylum claimants themselves and as such is of little use as an integration aide.

The Invisibles

Though very similar questions were asked by the delegation at almost every interview, it became startlingly apparent that certain groups were not being recognized and their needs not being met largely due to a lack of awareness and in some cases misunderstandings in definition and terminology.

One such group, of which service providers had little awareness, was LGBTQ⁶⁹ asylum claimants and refugees. Even with her thirteen years of experience providing legal support to asylum claimants, Ms. Ilareva had never been presented with an individual claiming asylum on the grounds of sexual orientation⁷⁰. While most organizations recognized the right of displaced people to claim asylum on these grounds very few had experience with such claims. The president of SAR said that his “impressions are that with the exception of few prostitutes who[m they] dealt with [he hasn’t] noticed any people with such orientation.”⁷¹ Though he explained that all staff is highly trained in the process of asylum claims, this statement alone indicates a level of awareness far inferior to that needed for the recognition and processing of claims concerning sexual orientation. To our knowledge there has been only one case of claimant recognition based on sexual orientation in the history of the State Agency for Refugees.

Another issue, that in some cases may have been lost in translation, is that of human trafficking. Several organization representatives, when asked about victims of human trafficking conflated the term with individuals who were smuggled into Bulgaria to make their claims. The president of SAR himself stated that there is no connection between asylum and human trafficking⁷². When individuals did have awareness of human trafficking what little information they could provide was often related to the trafficking of Bulgarians outside of the country rather than in.⁷³ Ms. Dimitrova of ACET explained that while some organizations do specialize in the provision of services to victims of trafficking in Bulgaria, they are inexperienced in working with foreigners and

⁶⁹ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer

⁷⁰ Ilareva, *Interview*.

⁷¹ Tchirpanliev and Petrov, *Interview*.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Radosveta, *Interview*.



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interpreters and that they do not have funding for such services.⁷⁴ She said she has worked with this population but there are very few, if any specific services available to them.

Another topic that posed problems in terms of awareness was that of non-status people. Although many organizations acknowledged the existence of a non-status population in Bulgaria, we were unable to find an organization that works with or offers support directly to this community. The head of the Migration Directorate explained that there are no statistics on the number of people living without status in Bulgaria, but that these individuals that cannot be returned to their country of origin cannot be regularized in Bulgaria⁷⁵. He estimated that roughly 200 people existed in these circumstances and that they are allowed to live in Bulgaria provided they check in weekly with a state agency. In the case described earlier by Ms. Ilareva, in which one of two asylum claimant brothers was found to be a threat to national security, he was put in detention for 18 months and then released “quietly” in to Bulgaria to live in the limbo of no status.

Although some organizations provide limited services to women (Caritas, CRWB) there is no focused or targeted program available to women. As such very few services exist to aid women in their unique settlement challenges or to assist in the overcoming of gender-related barriers.

Collaboration with the Canadian Council for Refugees

One of the goals of the delegation’s visit to Bulgaria was to establish possible areas of collaboration between the CCR and organizations in Bulgaria. When asked about such collaboration (following interviews) the area of greatest focus was the breadth and history of Canadian experience and what aid this experience could provide to a country dealing with an influx of forced migration relatively late in its history.

Ms. Savova of BHC articulated a vision for collaboration that was expressed in varying ways by almost all of the other organizations:

“You have a much, much greater experience than us, in everything, in terms of, you know, policy and democracy, in terms of provision of direct services because we’ve been doing this job only for twenty years and you’ve been doing it for a much longer

⁷⁴ Dimitrova, *Interview*.

⁷⁵ Tchirpanliev and Petrov, *Interview*.



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*period of time, so whatever assistance you might consider available – share of experience, methodology, direct assistance, support with people here, to train us, to do, you know, camp management, or whatever, it is okay for us because **we do need it, we need support***⁷⁶ (emphasis ours).

The UNHCR representative was careful to explain that resettlement of refugees out of Europe is not a possibility and as such Canada should, wherever possible, make attempts to resettle refugees from the countries surrounding Syria, but not Bulgaria itself. He did, however, go on to praise Canada for its experience with the successful integration of newcomers, and suggested that such experience could be used to train Bulgarian authorities in this regard.

The Bulgarian Council for Refugees and Migrants expressed an interest in funding strategies, and learning from the CCR how it is that a government might be petitioned and ‘persuaded’ to finance NGOs to develop activities and integration support for refugees.⁷⁷ Ms. Awanis of CRWB, suggested collaboration with an emphasis on ‘capacity building’ in that the delegation could help her organization to identify gaps in their programming and thus build the capacity of the organization⁷⁸.

The representative of ACET, with a unique perspective, pointed to Canada’s experience in working with minors and victims of human trafficking. She acknowledged that the field must be expanded in terms of identifying victims of trafficking in Bulgaria and that the delegation could be of assistance in this regard.

The comments of Ms. Ilareva, the head lawyer of the Foundation for Access to Rights, however, are likely the most poignant and worthy of consideration. Her dedication to action over conversation is best articulated in her own words:

“The fact that you [the delegation] are here, the fact that you have taken the time to come sit with me, you have come to my office, this means you have a vision and I am very grateful for that. It’s always great to meet like-minded people, it’s very encouraging.

⁷⁶ Savova, *Interview*.

⁷⁷ Sabeva, *Interview*.

⁷⁸ Awanis, *Interview*.



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*But at the same time **just meeting and talking is not sufficient...**
So maybe if you have that vision and you have that in your heart,
something more practical⁷⁹*

Her words speak to the importance not only of the existence of the delegation and its visit to Bulgaria, but more than that of the importance of allowing this visit to engender real, purposeful action. Talking is not sufficient.

D. Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of the delegation was to identify and report on areas of possible collaboration to aid and support Bulgarian organizations in the assistance of refugees and asylum claimants. The suggestions for future collaboration, from organizations we met with, were quite abstract and tended to centre on very generalized support and knowledge sharing, facilitated by Canada's history of working with and resettling uprooted people.

Following extensive conversations with various stakeholders and visits to some integration centres, the delegation recognizes the need for concrete and implementable action items and as such has endeavored to identify several gaps in service provision and areas that need further development and support.

Within the realm of access to Bulgaria, reports of push-backs and violence at the border coupled with declining entries into the country, indicate an acute need for formal and ongoing monitoring of practices at the border. This includes not only the actions of police officers and surveillance technology at the border to identify irregular migrants, but also the treatment of applicants immediately after reaching the border.

The asylum claims procedure itself is also an area of grave concern for the delegation as more than anything there is a need for heightened transparency in claim proceedings. Clearly interviewers need additional training, both in sensitivity and awareness of the plight of particular groups (women, children, the LGBTQ community, victims of human trafficking etc). It must be made clear why some individuals receive refugee status, while others only humanitarian as this is resulting in broken families and immense frustration for asylum claimants. Further to this, the delegation feels that the 24-hour notification period before determination interviews is particularly troubling. Such a

⁷⁹ Ilareva, *Interview*.



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timeframe is insufficient and must be extended to allow claimants the time to prepare and seek necessary legal counsel. Additionally, the effect that Syrian claims is having on the processing of claims from people of other national origins needs to be investigated and remedied so that all claimants receive fair and reasonable timelines for processing and status determination.

Further to the need for sensitivity regarding various groups of refugees, is a heightened awareness to these specific needs and challenges within both the asylum process and integration. Despite asking such questions during every one of the delegation's interviews, the concerns of women, children, non-status individuals, victims of human-trafficking, LGBTQ claimants and those suffering from mental health issues were largely ignored. This group of 'invisibles' needs to be taken into account, particularly as roughly half of the Syrian population in Bulgaria is made up of women and children (far higher than other groups). This awareness and concern must extend from initial asylum claims, to life in reception centres and all the way through to integration in Bulgaria.

Though many of the delegation's conversations with organizations yielded rather abstract but important ideas for collaboration, three more tangible suggestions came to fruition. The first two, suggested by Ms. Dimitrova of ACET, were regarding Canada's experience working with minors and victims of human trafficking. It was made apparent throughout the delegation's visit that human trafficking is neither a firmly defined issue nor one that elicits considerable concern. To this end Ms. Dimitrova suggested collaboration with regards to supporting refugee children and asylum claimants, as well as bringing awareness to victims of human trafficking.

Additionally Ms. Awanis of CRWB felt that the CCR could help to develop the capacity of her organization by helping to identify gaps in service provision. She also called for assistance in fostering connections and networks with other organizations so as to build CRWB's capacity for collaborative research.

Due to limited funding and time, the delegation was unable to visit reception centres outside the capital of Sofia, or meet with organizations based in other areas. There was also not enough time to envision and develop actual collaborative plans to work with organizations in Bulgaria particularly with regards to the integration of refugees, something that most organizations called for in their interviews.

To this end the delegation recommends the formation of a second visit to Bulgaria to formalize possible areas of collaboration and to develop a plan and procedure for implementing assistance, in conjunction with relevant organizations. During this



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follow-up trip the delegation would endeavor to visit other reception centres outside of Sofia, travel to the Turkish border and meet with organizations operating there, visit detention centres that the delegation was unable to see and meet with more Syrians and Syrian families to learn about their experiences of coming to and living in Bulgaria.

The FCJ Refugee Centre has secured some funding to this end and as such is prepared to arrange and spearhead this important visit.



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Appendix A – Interview Questions

Questions for Organizations and Government Bodies

Begin with questions about the situation as a whole before moving into the specifics and role of the organization

General Information

1. How many Syrian refugees are in Bulgaria to date?
-How many come on a weekly/monthly basis?
2. How do Syrian refugees typically come to Bulgaria?
-What is the role of human smugglers?
-Where do they go?
-Camps, city etc?
3. Do they come alone or in groups?
-Do families travel together?
-Can you comment on the demographics? (ie. gender, age etc.)

Response

4. How does the government respond to asylum claimants?
-What is the process? What are the policies?
5. What has the public response to Syrian refugees been?
-How has the situation/population been portrayed in the media?
6. Is there a program for temporary foreign workers?

Refugee Experience

7. Has the experience been different for female refugees? Young refugees?
-LGBT claimants
8. What is the situation like for refugees in camps?
-What happens to refugees when they leave the camps?



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9. What is the process of removals and voluntary returns?
-What about transfers back to Bulgaria (ie. Dublin convention)

Integration

10. How are Syrian refugees integrating into Bulgarian society, if at all?
11. What are the main barriers to this?
12. What resources/organizations/governmental support is there for this vulnerable population?
-Is there any international aid or assistance?
13. Are there non-status/undocumented people in Bulgaria?
-How many?
14. Are asylum claimants able to work? Do they need a permit?
15. Can you comment on human trafficking in Bulgaria?

About the Organization

16. What is your organization's role within or towards the Syrian community in Bulgaria?
17. What services/programs do you offer? Can you tell us about them?
-Do Syrian refugees avail themselves of your services? How many?
-Do you feel that your services/programs are working?
-What are your main goals as an organization in relation to the Syrian refugee community?

Wrap-Up

18. What do you see as the most common/pressing issues for Syrian refugees in Bulgaria?



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Appendix B – Invitation from Association One

March 3, 2014

Canadian Council for Refugees
6839 Drolet #301
Montréal, Québec, H2S 2T1
Canada

Dear Mr. Rico-Martinez,

As a result of the armed conflict in Syria that continues to ravage cities and human lives, flux of refugees, mostly women and children, are constantly crossing the Bulgarian-Turkish border to look for safety in Bulgaria. Presently, there are more than 11,000 asylum-seekers and refugees in Bulgaria, majority of whom are Syrians. There are also refugees from Afghanistan, Algeria, Palestine, Mali and other countries.

Although Bulgaria is a member of the European Union, the country is in a dire economic state and lacks resources to address the poor living and settlement needs of newcomers. Moreover, a few years back Bulgaria had solely been a refugee-producing country, thus state institutions lack the experience to manage large influxes of refugees. The present government is hostile to newcomers and places asylum-seekers and refugees within the rhetoric of illegal immigration. In efforts to reduce border crossing, the government has embarked on a project to build a wall at the Bulgarian-Turkish border in violation of the spirit of the 1951 Refugee Convention. In addition, European Union has been widely criticised for its lack of material and cooperation support to member states receiving disproportionate numbers of refugees.

In the same vain, there are only a few Bulgarian NGOs serving newcomers and many lack the capacity and experience to successfully support refugees and asylum-seekers through their immigration and establishment processes. Moreover, there are no mechanisms in place to support effective cooperation among NGOs themselves and NGOs and government agencies. This lack of experience and collaboration is being aggravated by a broad anti-refugee sentiment, which is being fuelled by right wing parties using newcomers as scapegoats for political gain.



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Canada has been internationally recognized as a country welcoming to refugees and immigrants. The settlement service model established in Canada is unique because it provides essential support to newcomers helping them integrate while promoting diversity and multiculturalism. Given the complex refugee situation in Bulgaria and within the spirit of international cooperation we would like to invite Canadian Council for Refugees to visit Bulgaria and share knowledge and experience with local NGOs. We truly believe that local NGOs will greatly benefit from CCR's long time experience in protecting refugees and providing assistance to them. We are hopeful that such visit will result in long term cooperation and collaboration between CCR and local NGOs.

Sincerely,

Dimitar Arseniev
Chair of the Board

About Common Step:

Common Step was founded in 2010. In every aspect of our work we believe and strive to promote human rights, liberty, equality, democracy and rule of law. We respect diversity and believe that diversity is the main generator of peace and prosperity in the world.

Work with Syrian refugees

Common Step, in partnership with other organizations, has founded the "Initiative Syria" to raise awareness among Bulgarian communities about the plight of Syrian refugees that are living in camps in countries bordering Syria as well as in Bulgaria. We have completed several initiatives such as:

- Organized number of awareness-raising campaign to inform Bulgarian public about the conflict and the human rights violations perpetrated in Syria by government and coalition forces;
- Initiated a joint national campaign to collect essential items such as medicines, blankets, etc. for Syrian refugees sheltered in camps in Bulgaria and Turkey;
- Supported shooting and promotion of a documentary for the refugee camp "Atma" in Turkey. The documentary was aired on national television.
- Short video clips to promote and support the position that the conflict in Syria requires immediate decision;
- Organized exhibition of paintings done by refugee children living in Bulgaria to support people seeking asylum and sheltered at few overcrowded reception centres in Bulgaria.



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- Participated at the youth festival "Via Pontica" in Balchik city where many youth refugee artists had the possibility to show their art and educate the public about living in camps and escaping deadly conflict.



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Appendix C – Organization Summaries

Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, Legal representations and advocacy for refugees

- independent non-governmental organizations for the protection of human rights
- Legal Defense Program
 - o Advocacy before domestic and international courts in cases of human rights violations
- Legal Protection of Refugees and Migrants Program
 - o Supported by UNHCR
 - o In cooperation with State Agency for Refugees at the Council of Ministers
- “The programme offers legal consultations, representation and attorney defense to approximately 5,000 people annually. It takes part in the development of refugee and migration policy of Bulgaria, assists for the successful integration of refugees in Bulgaria, as well as for their dignified return to their countries of origin.
- The Programme offers free specialised legal consultations. Its team is engaged in: representation in refugee status determination proceedings, professional and independent legal defence, defence before the courts and other state institutions, assistance for successful integration, assistance for voluntary repatriation.”

<http://www.bghelsinki.org/en/>

Assistance Centre for Torture Survivors (ACET), Counselling services for refugees

- prevention of torture and rehabilitations services for victims of torture
 - o rehabilitation program located in Sofia
- provides individual psychological consultation, group activities and psychotherapy for second and third generation victims of torture

<http://www.acet-bg.org/index.php?lang=2&pid=1>

Council for Refugee Women in Bulgaria, Settlement services for refugees

- founded by refugee women to assist newly recognized refugees and especially women refugees in the process of their initial adaptation and integration in the Bulgarian society



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- provides assistance with integration and settlement for refugee women
- provides info and training on rights and responsibilities in Bulgaria
- represents refugee voices and interests before different institutions
- celebration of traditional and cultural activities

http://crw-bg.org/about_us.html

Bulgarian Council for Refugees and Migrants, Awareness-raising and advocacy for refugees

- founded in 2005 by the Bulgarian Red Cross, the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee and Caritas-Bulgaria as a platform of their activities related to the refugee and migration policy, protection and integration of refugees and migrants
 - association of organizations
- 2014 Project – Advocacy for Refugee Integration in Bulgaria
 - financed by UNHCR
 - prevention of gender based violence in international protection
 - specialized training for teachers of refugee children
 - workshops on social protection and integration of vulnerable refugees, UAMs
 - reports and advocacy
- held Annual General Meeting on March 25, 2014

<http://www.bcrm-bg.org/en/events.html>

Multi Kulti Kitchen Project, Awareness-raising and advocacy for refugees

- workshops, events, film-screening, dances, but mostly FOOD
 - put on by refugees and other migrants to share their cultural heritage
 - featured as a 'good practice' by the European Commission
- culinary courses, tours of Sofia for refugees
- partners with UNHCR, Bulgarian Red Cross etc.

<http://multikulti.bg/#events>



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International NGOs

IOM

-list of activities in their own order:

- Assisted voluntary returns of foreigners from Bulgaria to their countries of origin
- Assisted voluntary returns of Bulgarian nationals, mainly from EU countries
- Return, reintegration and protection of victims of trafficking
- Procurement of documents and visas for victims of trafficking and irregular migrants
- Family reunification programmes
- Integration of immigrants
- Assistance to unaccompanied minors and child victims of trafficking
- Labour migration
- Public awareness raising, prevention and education.

-also hosts a network of immigration centers across Bulgaria

<https://www.iom.int/cms/en/sites/iom/home/where-we-work/europa/european-economic-area/bulgaria.html>

State agencies

Bulgarian State Agency for Refugees, Refugee determination process

Ministry of interior, Migration department

- Nikolai Chirpanliev-head of the State Agency for Refugees
- website looks as though there has been no new activity since 2013, or at least no new or ongoing projects
- manages, coordinates and controls the implementation of the state policies relating to granting a refugee status and humanitarian status to aliens in Bulgaria
- consists of a chairman and two deputy chairmen to assist him
- operates the Integration Centre for Refugees
 - education and training in Bulgarian
 - cultural activities
 - sports activities
 - work with children
 - vocational qualification and re-qualification

<http://www.aref.government.bg/?cat=17>



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