

Bulgaria's struggle at the frontline

Eleanor E Roberts

Bulgaria has struggled to deal appropriately with mass irregular migration. It has also failed to address integration.

Bulgaria is one among many European countries dealing with insufficient capacity and unhelpful nationalist politics in the recent 'migration crisis'. The response to the increase in irregular entries across the Bulgarian-Turkish border since 2013 has been one of crisis management; less prevalent have been strategies to invest in long-term solutions. The current state of asylum procedure and border control in Bulgaria also offers an exemplary case of the difficulty in providing acceptable humanitarian protection once the international intervention that comes with the recognition of short-term crises has withdrawn. The current focus on tightening border control is motivated by fear and political interest, encouraged by the growing clamour of nationalistic, anti-immigration, right-wing groups.

In January 2014, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) called for other European countries to halt transfers to Bulgaria under the Dublin Regulation,¹ as the overwhelmed asylum system was struggling to cope with the 35% annual increase in asylum applications. Working alongside the State Agency for Refugees (SAR), UNHCR oversaw a substantial improvement in the Bulgarian conditions of registration, admission, accommodation and border detention. The capacity of SAR was increased to facilitate administrative reforms and improve the process of registering claims, issuing temporary papers and evaluating asylum applications. At the same time, major reconstruction and repairs were undertaken in the dilapidated transit, registration and reception centres.

This international direction saw the achievement of minimal international standards by May 2014, when UNCHR withdrew from its operational role and removed the suspension of Dublin transfers to Bulgaria. The agenda, speed

and priority of the implementation of long-term solutions to forced migration and refugee and asylum rights was once again the responsibility of the Bulgarian state.

In the following year, the number of asylum applications to Bulgaria did not stabilise or reduce. Between January 2013 and late 2015, over 25,000 applications have been made, equal to the total over the previous two decades. In 2015 alone, more than 13,000 asylum seekers have entered the country, the latest increase being attributed to a growing number of people seeking routes into Europe that avoid crossing the Mediterranean. However, there is a significant lack of impetus within the Bulgarian administration to develop a long-term, durable capacity to handle these vulnerable people, with their focus instead on short-term border control and territorial integrity.

Borders and barriers

The entire length of the Bulgarian-Turkish border is now equipped with advanced surveillance technology, including sophisticated motion sensors, thermal imaging and night vision cameras able to penetrate several kilometres into Turkish territory. The border is manned by over 1,500 armed police stationed every 200 metres, and 33 kilometres of it is lined by a three-metre-high barbed-wire fence due to be extended a further 130 kilometres after the Council of Ministers received the required parliamentary support for the project in June 2015.

UNHCR recommends that Bulgaria adopt a protection-sensitive border management policy supplemented by a humanitarian admissions programme that would allow for the more efficient and sensitive handling of asylum seekers. However, there continue to be credible reports of push-backs, intimidation, physical abuse and refusal of entry at the border.

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Meanwhile, those who succeed in lodging claims await determination of their status in one of six reception centres, often without access to flushing toilets or separate washing and cooking facilities. The centres are refurbishments of previously abandoned buildings never intended for long-term habitation. The largest, Voenna Rampa, was once a school but now houses 600 asylum seekers for months at a time, providing just two basic meals a day to adults and children alike. The months it takes to wait for status determination strain the resources of any individuals who wish to supplement this pitiful provision. Officially unable to get a job or undertake any sort of training, an asylum seeker who has been there for over three months says that each day he takes the bus into the city, just to leave the reception centre. "What am I supposed to do? I cannot sit around forever. I am a human being. Don't they get that?"

Unfortunately, as difficult as life is in the reception centres, it is unlikely to get easier for those who receive their status and plan to remain in Bulgaria. Since 2013 there has been

no integration policy at all. Once they receive their approval, refugees have 14 days to leave the reception centres but the state offers no assistance in their transition into Bulgarian society – no language classes, no training to develop or recognise marketable skills and qualifications, no access to housing, employment and social networks.

Nevertheless improvement in the treatment of asylum seekers

and the success of long-term integration cannot simply be solved by more directives. The efficacy of international law and EU directives is limited by racially charged domestic political rhetoric that fails to recognise that there is more to human rights than the minimum standards set down in international law.

The lack of a clear integration policy not only robs vulnerable individuals of justice and dignity but also sees Bulgarian society lose the productive capacity and potential of those refugees who wish to live and work in Bulgaria. Integration will not be successful while the policies of government and the official language of migration, refuge and asylum are too often permeated by hate speech and the humanitarian crisis reduced to one of border integrity and social cohesion. This leaves the difficult role of changing attitudes and providing integration support to independent, often under-funded, NGOs.

The Refugee Project is one such organisation in operation in Sofia.² The project recruits volunteers from Bulgarian society, and more recently from abroad, to provide informal teaching and educational support within the Sofia reception centres. Coordinator Katerina Stoyanova said:

"We need a space for integration, to make connections and meet people. People in the centres have no opportunity to meet local people, to socialise, and are subject to discrimination from all political parties."

However, it is not clear where the future of formal integration and long-term solutions lie. The first difficulty in establishing a national framework is with the specification of departmental responsibility: the State Agency for Refugees or the Department of Labour and Social Policy, in Bulgaria's case. Meanwhile, programmes like the Refugee Project cannot be responsible for formal and durable integration measures.

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1. www.refworld.org/docid/51d298f04.html

2. <http://refugeeproject.eu/en>



UNHCR/ G. Matsushy

Bulgarian-Turkish border.