

The Right to Work of Asylum-Seekers and Refugees in Bulgaria: Rethinking Integration

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HRTS W3996 Human Rights Thesis Seminar – Spring 2017

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Abstract

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This thesis discusses the right to work of refugees and asylum-seekers in the context of the current refugee crisis, using Bulgaria as an example of the less studied case of transit countries. Bulgaria legally recognizes the right to work of refugees and yet has no political will to effectively fulfill this right with appropriate integration policies. At the same, refugees are not interested in integration because they perceive Bulgaria as a pit stop, but still need income, so they engage in informal employment in precarious conditions. Through an analysis of the legal and policy framework, and the practical constraints for accessing adequate employment, this thesis proposes to rethink the paradigm of integration, which is not attractive to either the government or refugees, and offers an alternative human rights-based approach.

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List of abbreviations

BHC – Bulgarian Helsinki Committee

ECRE – European Council on Refugees and Exiles

EU –European Union

ILO – International Labor Organization

LAR – Law on Asylum and Refugees

OECD – Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development

SAR – State Agency for Refugees

UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

UNICEF – United Nations Children's Fund

Acknowledgements

This thesis is the fruit of a field research that I completed in Bulgaria in January 2017. I would like to thank all of the people who agreed to give me an interview and share their observations on the topic, namely Mariana Stoyanova, Lora Milanova and Mohamed Kemal Zaki from the Bulgarian Red Cross, Iliyana Bozhova from SAR, Vera Zaharieva from IOM Bulgaria, Emiliya Bratanova from UNHCR, Bistra Ivanova from the Multi-Kulti Collective, Katerina Stoyanova from The Refugee Project, Mohamed Ezz from the Association of Syrian Refugees, Stana Iliev, Yavor Stoyanov, and Basel Husni.

I would also like to thank Professor Mila Rosenthal and my colleagues from the Human Rights Senior Seminar for their guidance and insights. Thank you also to my friend Alice, who helped me with her comments.

Finally, I want to thank my mother and my sister for their love and constant support for my endeavors, and my boyfriend Sulaimane Mezzouji for always believing in me.

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1. Refugees, the right to work and the concept of integration

The 1951 Refugee Convention was written in order to respond to a very specific challenge: the large population of European refugees due to the post-World War II displacements of population and the rise of totalitarian regimes in the continent. However, in 1967 this *ad hoc* convention had to be complemented with an additional protocol which removed its temporal and geographic limits since even more people around the world were fleeing their countries due to fears of persecution. The status of refugees is still regulated by the same convention and its underlying assumptions, built around the image of the European refugee of the 1950s.

Today, we are witnessing what has become known as “the largest refugee crisis since World War Two.” the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) has reported that there are 65 million displaced people worldwide, 25 million of whom are refugees or asylum-seekers, the other 40 million being internally displaced.¹ And 50 years after the 1967 protocol, multiple voices call for another reformulation of what a refugee is in order to respond to the changing international context, the fact that migration flows are mixed and that it is not so easy anymore to distinguish between those who “genuinely” need asylum and those who migrate “merely” seeking a better life (even though they might be fleeing from countries endemically plagued by corruption, terror, poverty and lack of respect for human rights).

The predominant idea since the 1950s has been that refugees are meant to look for asylum and not for a job in the new country. If they are looking for economic opportunities, they would

¹ UNHCR. “Global Trends. Forced Displacement in 2015.” (2016).

rather fall under the category of economic migrants and should not be allowed preferential access to other countries. Thus, employment becomes a critical space in which the identity and rights of refugees are negotiated. By tracing an epistemic and legal divide between refugees and economic migrants, one recognizes their socioeconomic needs in different degrees and ends up restricting refugees to life in refugee camps and reliance on humanitarian aid. Alternatively, they are criticized for immigrating to other countries in search of better employment and welfare provision even after being granted asylum – what is known as “asylum-shopping.” So in terms of refugee protection, the legal status of refugees may facilitate their access to countries of asylum, but in the long term may result harmful to their ability to earn their livelihoods.

Taking all of this into account, this thesis will emphasize the economic interests of refugees and the need for a shift from the humanitarian relief structure towards rights protection, self-reliance, and access to sustainable livelihoods.² When refugees do not have legal access to employment, they frequently end up working illegally in order to provide for themselves. The risk of labor exploitation and precariousness in such situations is high, hence refugees deserve enhanced protection as a vulnerable group whose rights are enshrined in international and state law.

Frequently, measures for protecting and fulfilling refugees’ access to work come within the framework of “integration policies,” which are permeated with assumptions about a projected ascension to citizenship by fulfilling a number of prerequisites, such as learning the local language, adapting to local society, remaining in the country and being sedentary instead of immigrating. However, this intense focus on making refugees “belong” is what might provoke the failure of such policies, as well as divert resources from alternative approaches that might be

² “Refugee Crisis Reveals Critical Gaps in Support for Millions Fleeing Conflict.” Columbia Global Centers Symposium. December 15, 2016.

more beneficial for refugees' rights and overall wellbeing. We might want to reconsider whether the imperative of integration is compatible with the fulfillment of the basic human rights of refugees, such as the right to work. Therefore, the proposal of this thesis is to rethink integration, and instead adopt a human rights-based approach in order to respond best to the needs of refugees.

1.2. Transit countries: a case study of Bulgaria

In the context of the current refugee crisis in Europe, the process of integration is becoming more and more problematic. Not only are most governments not interested in facilitating the integration of refugees and asylum-seekers, fearing that this might create a “pull” factor (Germany is an important exception here), but refugees and asylum-seekers themselves are frequently unmotivated to stay and “integrate” into countries they perceive as transit. So as we recognize that refugees are individuals with economic interests, we must also recognize that transit countries and final destination countries need to adopt different approaches to the situation.

Bulgaria, a country in South-Eastern Europe that is located on the way of asylum-seekers to Western Europe, is a case in point. It is perceived by refugees as not very economically prosperous and as hostile, due to border violence and the ambiguous messages of the government and society on whether they are welcome or not. Bulgaria is one of the 75 countries which grant refugees and asylum-seekers the right to work. Refugees who have received their status have the same right to work as Bulgarian citizens, while asylum-seekers are allowed to work starting at 3 months after they have applied for asylum. However, the level of legal employment among refugees is very low. The first reason for this is the state's complete lack of political will for

protecting refugees and investing in sustainable solutions. Since the end of 2013, there has been no state-led integration program whatsoever (which is why the period has been called “the years of zero integration”) and refugees have been left entirely on their own, only supported by a loosely coordinated network of NGOs and international organizations. The latest Integration Ordinance from December 2016 has been applied for literally zero refugees. One week before the submission of the thesis it was annulled with the promise of a new one being drafted soon.

Yet, the second reason for this situation is that refugees themselves are also not interested in long-term integration because they don't see many opportunities in Bulgaria compared to Western Europe. A minuscule number of refugees has registered at the Labor Bureau and the few existing integration or qualification programs, most of which are led by civil society, do not seem to enjoy high attendance. Therefore in Bulgaria there is unwillingness for integration on the part of both refugees and the government. However, refugees and asylum-seekers do need income while they are in the country. Given the complete lack of welfare provision and the fact that refugees are forced to leave the refugee centers once they receive an approval, many of them rely on money transfers from abroad while they remain unemployed, or engage in jobs in the gray or even black market. Even those who have a contract are exposed to exploitation and unjust treatment because of the fact that they are refugees.

A human rights perspective is highly necessary in this context. This would mean to regard refugees as rights holders and institutions as duty bearers who are obliged to respect, protect and fulfill these rights. The unity of these three duties is also important, because the state should be assumed to be responsible for not only respecting the right to work by legally allowing it but also for fulfilling it through active policies. The rights-based approach has become the new standard

in the development and humanitarian fields because it challenges the existing relief, charity and welfare models.³ Using refugee rights as a point of departure for the creation of policies would mean to challenge also the traditional models of integration that dominate policymaking currently, not only in Bulgaria, but in transit and receiving countries too.

1.3. Methodology

The central question of this thesis is: What are the problems in how the right to work of refugees and asylum-seekers is fulfilled in Bulgaria, and how can we rethink the concept of “integration” in transit countries in order to effectively fulfill it?

This question is divided into multiple sub-questions that will be explored in the subsequent chapters:

- What is the theory behind concepts such as “work rights,” “refugee,” “integration” and “transit countries”? (Chapter 2)
- What is the broader sociopolitical context of the current refugee crisis in Bulgaria? How has the crisis developed so far? (Chapter 3)
- What are the applicable laws and state policies that affect the right to work of refugees and asylum-seekers? What are the problems in current measures? (Chapter 4)
- What is the employment situation of refugees and asylum-seekers in Bulgaria? What are the problems that they face? (Chapter 5)

³ Mireia Cano and Assmaa Naguib. Report: Refugees and Migrants, and a Rights-based Approach to Development. Jameel Centre Auditorium, Greek Campus, AUC 8-18th January, 2007.

- What are some innovative practices that can change how we think about integration?
What alternative principles for policymaking can we propose that are based on protecting and fulfilling the human rights of refugees? (Chapter 6)

In order to give a comprehensive answer to the proposed research question, this thesis combines academic research and fieldwork. The academic research aspect has consisted in reviewing relevant literature, reports, laws, and policies. The fieldwork was conducted in January 2017 in Sofia, Bulgaria, when I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with various stakeholders: the State Agency for Refugees (SAR), UNHCR, and several NGOs. The main reason for choosing Bulgaria as a case study for this project was personal since as a Bulgarian I have extensive background knowledge and access to networks and information. In addition, while there is a wealth of research about countries like Jordan, Greece or Germany, the Bulgarian case has not received much attention even though it provides a unique prism for looking at the current issue.

The relevance of this thesis is linked primarily to the fact that it examines one of the most pertinent issues in the human rights field today. It explores an ongoing situation and this means that any of its conclusions might be useful for motivating real actions. My intention is to translate an abbreviated version into Bulgarian, publish it and make it available to relevant stakeholders and decision-makers.

The thesis is marked by one severe limitation, which is the lack of refugee and asylum-seeker voices. Due to constraints in time, networks and access to SAR centers, I have only been able to interview the Secretary of the Association of Syrian Refugees, who is not a refugee but acts as a spokesperson, and one Syrian refugee online. I consider this a weakness because it amounts to an

epistemological problem of power, of taking people as “objects of study” and depriving them of their “speaking rights.” However, the refugee perspective has been represented as much as possible through testimonials given in the media or interviews featured in other reports.

Before moving on to the next chapter, this section will concentrate on some issues of terminology. As a clarification, this thesis is going to concentrate on the right *to* work, which is later buttressed by labor rights *at* work. In the Geneva Convention, these two categories of rights are mentioned separately: Articles 17, 18 and 19 regulate the access to work, while Article 24 concentrates on labor rights, such as a fair wage, minimum age of employment, etc. Labor rights will be part of the discussion, especially with regards to exploitative conditions of work that some refugees face in Bulgaria, but the focus would be on the state’s role in granting and fulfilling the right to access appropriate and dignified work.

Secondly, there is a need to clarify the distinctions between terms like “refugee,” “asylum-seeker,” “beneficiary of international protection,” etc. As we have already seen, the legal definition of a “refugee” provided by the Geneva Convention has become inadequate because of its narrow scope. As a result, a number of categories and statuses have been developed in different countries for people moving in a variety of “refugee-like” circumstances. In Bulgaria, there are four types of protection: asylum, temporary protection, refugee status and humanitarian status/subsidiary protection. Asylum is granted to individuals persecuted because of their beliefs or activity in defense of rights and liberties. Temporary protection is granted to large groups of people fleeing from big scale conflict. Persons who are fleeing their countries because of persecution and human rights violations based on their race, religion, gender, nationality, or political views, would be recognized as refugees as per the Geneva Convention. Those who are

fleeing death penalty, torture or any other palpable threats in the context of armed conflict would be granted humanitarian status/subsidiary protection.

All of these are forms of international protection and are granted indefinitely. After receiving international protection in Bulgaria, beneficiaries have the same rights as nationals, with a few exceptions such as voting rights. For the sake of convenience, in this thesis all persons who have been granted one of these four types of protection will be referred to as “refugees.” The term “resettled refugees” would not be used frequently, because it refers to those who have already been granted asylum in Italy or Greece and are transferred to other EU countries. The EU has an additional fund for resettled refugees (\$6,000 per person) but that is discriminatory to countries like Bulgaria where most of the refugee population has migrated directly instead of being resettled.

In contrast to “refugees,” when using the term “asylum-seekers,” I will refer to persons who have entered the country and have applied for asylum, but are still waiting for a decision on their application and may or may not receive protection. Most of the Afghan asylum-seekers currently in Bulgaria have very little likelihood of being granted protection because the State Agency for Refugees considers Afghanistan as a “safe country of origin” and the recognition rate for Afghan nationals has dropped to 2.5% in 2016.⁴ The inhabitants of SAR centers in Bulgaria are actually all asylum-seekers. Once a refugee is granted international protection, they receive the same rights as citizens and lose their right to accommodation at such centers (which has led to considerable levels of homelessness among refugees).

⁴ Iliana Savova. Country Report: Bulgaria. 2016 Update. *AIDA: Asylum Information Database*, 41.

The last category that we will be dealing with is “economic migrant” – a term frequently used in current discourse to distinguish those who voluntarily leave their home country in search of better opportunities from those who are fleeing from persecution and cannot enjoy the protection of their own government. However, it has become increasingly difficult to determine whether a fragile state like Afghanistan is able to protect and fulfill its citizens’ human rights, so the boundaries between terms are very blurred.

Chapter 2

Theoretical framework

2.1. Conceptualization of the right to work of refugees and asylum-seekers

The current research on the right to work of refugees comes mostly in reports by international organizations like UNHCR, OECD, the World Bank and the ILO. These studies focus on labor market participation, legal and policy framework, and macroeconomic impact of refugee employment. Country case studies are sometimes used, but field-based empirical data is not always available, especially for countries that are not among the 20 with largest refugee populations.

Studies gravitate between several perspectives of why the right to work of refugees is important. One of them is the “integrationist” perspective, which presupposes that integration is something to be strived for and that the right to meaningful and lawful employment contributes to achieving it.⁵ Another perspective is the “self-sufficiency” one, which links the right to work to reducing vulnerability, securing dignity, and switching from short-term humanitarian responses to long-term development strategies.⁶ Yet another perspective is the “human capital” one, which refers to refugees as a “grossly underutilized labor force”⁷ and puts an emphasis on the possible benefits of refugee employment for the national economy. Therefore it is not only the wellbeing of refugees that is at stake but also their value as people “worth accepting.” This last perspective is

⁵ Such a discourse is adopted in Miguel Peromingo’s “Work and refugee integration in Sweden” (*Forced Migration Review* 48, November 2014), Maria Vincenza Desiderio’s “Integrating Refugees into Host Country Labor Markets: Challenges and Policy Options.” (*Migration Policy Institute*, October 2016), and others.

⁶ For example, see works such as Alexander Aleinikoff’s “From Dependence to Self-Reliance: Changing the Paradigm in Protracted Refugee Situations.” (*Migration Policy Institute*, April 2015) or E. Lester’s “Work, the Right to Work, and Durable Solutions: A study on Sierra Leonean Refugee in the Gambia.” (*International Journal of Refugee Law*, 17, 2005)

⁷ Roger Zetter. “Are Refugees an Economic Burden or Benefit?” *Forced Migration Review* 41 (2012).

frequently used to make the right to work more appealing to decision-makers, and is probably the reason for the “open-door” policies of Germany in the current crisis (along with what is known as a “Holocaust guilt”). However, viewing refugees only in terms of their potential to contribute to the economy comes close to compromising the moral value that is fundamental to the protection of human beings fleeing from danger.

Most studies find that a restrictive approach to the right to work prevails worldwide: some 75 of the 145 states parties to the 1951 Refugee Convention formally grant refugees the right to work. Another common finding is that, in both countries that grant the right to work and those that do not, the majority of refugees work in the informal sector.⁸ Even though in some countries work in the gray sector is fairly common, this thesis problematizes it because such jobs are outside the scope of any protection. Refugees, as a vulnerable group, need additional measures to protect them from exploitation. The quality of jobs in the informal economy is lower, wages may be sub-standard, working conditions may be poor and there may be exploitative practices, including child labor.

There is a general consensus that the legal right to work is a necessary but insufficient condition for ensuring employment. In a comprehensive analysis of the right to work, researchers Zetter and Ruaudel define three metrics as principle determinants: refugee and employment law, policies and practices that facilitate or constrain the right to work, and mediating socioeconomic conditions/the profile of refugees. At each of these levels, there are many layers of practical constraints, namely weak institutional capacity, concerns about decreasing jobs available to citizens, employers’ attitudes, the condition of the local economy, or the size of the formal

⁸ Roger Zetter and Héloïse Ruaudel. “Refugees’ Right to Work and Access to Labor Markets – An Assessment.” *Knomad Study* (2016): 27.

sector.⁹ Of course, the profile of the refugee population also plays an important role: refugees who lack transferable skills and education will face more difficulties. A study of labor market participation of refugees in the UK has concluded that language competency is of unequivocal importance for employment, in addition to other factors like pre-migration qualifications, time spent in the host country and contacts with religious and co-national groups.¹⁰

2.2. The identity and status of refugees

The lack of pathways to employment may precipitate secondary migration of refugees who leave the host country in search of better opportunities. We can interpret this as a moment when their identity as refugees merges with their identity as economic migrants, which suggests that the two are not mutually exclusive. Scholar Penelope Mathew has argued that refugees should not be denied their economic and social rights because even though “refugees have not migrated *in order to* work, [they] need and have the right to work once they have reached safety.” Mathew notes that there may be compelling arguments for protecting those fleeing poverty, but she distinguishes pure “economic”/“survival” migration from the situation of those who are “forced” migrants and whose basic relationship with their state has broken down.¹¹

Refugees’ status normally gives them a more privileged position with respect to other migrants because their right to access and remain in a host country is regulated by international law.

However, international development expert Katy Long has made the assertion that the legal status of refugees is actually one of the biggest obstacles for them: she argues that since “refugees” and “migrants” became two legally distinct categories in the 1950s, the humanitarian

⁹ Ibid., 13.

¹⁰ Sin Yi Cheung and Jenny Phillimore. “Refugees, Social Capital, and Labour Market Integration in the UK.” *Sociology*, Vol. 48, Iss. 3, (2013).

¹¹ Penelope Mathew. *Reworking the Relationship between Asylum and Employment*. (Routledge, 2012): 3.

discourse has harmed refugees because it has prevented them from finding durable solutions for their livelihoods. Refugees are judged for joining existing migration routes in search for a better life like economic migrants, instead of patiently waiting in their first country of asylum.¹² This is the so-called “sedentary” bias, which Long relates to the common UNHCR policies of “encampment,” and which is very relevant in the cases of secondary migration from transit countries to destination countries.

The difference in the status of refugees and economic migrants is reflected in real differences in the level of employment and wages. The so-called “refugee gap” in the labor market participation of refugees and economic migrants is sometimes attributed to an “entry effect” due to limited language skills and host country work experience.¹³ Some of the other possible reasons are the traumatic experiences of refugees and the lengthy asylum procedures which result in insecurity about the future skill atrophy and isolation.¹⁴

The level of employment of refugees is however higher than that of asylum-seekers. Asylum-seekers tend to be more engaged in the informal economy and they experience a process of ascension when they obtain international protection. Policies with regards to asylum-seekers are marked by their perception as “undeserving,” compared to “deserving” refugees.¹⁵ In a case study of the UK, Alice Bloch and Liza Schuster have analyzed the curtailment of welfare for asylum-seekers which was based on the argument that it works as a magnet. They trace the

¹² Katy Long. “When refugees stopped being migrants: Movement, labor and humanitarian protection.” *Migration Studies*. Vol. 1, Iss. 1 (2013).

¹³ Linda Bakker, Jaco Dagevos, and Godfried Engbersen. “Explaining the refugee gap: a longitudinal study on labour market participation of refugees in the Netherlands.” *Journal Of Ethnic And Migration Studies*, November 4 (2016).

¹⁴ Gareth Mulvey. “When Policy Creates Politics: the Problematizing of Immigration and the Consequences for Refugee Integration in the UK.” *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 23, Iss. 4, (2010).

¹⁵ Rosemary Sales. “The Deserving and the Undeserving: Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Welfare in Britain.” *Critical Social Policy* 22 (3) (2002).

distinction between “genuine” refugees and “bogus” asylum-seekers in Western Europe to the period after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the outbreak of the war in Yugoslavia, when there was no longer a perception of a “rogue” political system that people needed to be saved from.¹⁶ Host countries fear that those who apply for asylum are undercover economic migrants, so they enforce a punitive regime during the asylum procedure. The paradox is that this leads to social exclusion that, once a refugee has been proven “genuine,” has to be remedied afterward with inclusion policies.¹⁷

2.3. Integration and belonging

Integration is a concept that is repeatedly used in Bulgaria and that denotes the prevalent understanding of how to manage the presence of refugees in the country. Virtually all policies and institutions related to refugees in Bulgaria are marked by it: “Ordinance on Integration,” “National Program for Integration,” Integration Center,” etc. However, the term should not be treated as self-evident, so this section will give some large brushstrokes on how ideas such as “integration,” “citizenship” and “belonging” are conceptualized, so as to provide a foundation for further discussion in the rest of the thesis.

Integration is defined by Castles et al. as “[t]he process through which immigrants and refugees become part of the receiving society.” As a nuance, they add that the term is often politically loaded, used in a normative way and that in general, it is too vague and slippery.¹⁸ In their extensive literature review on integration, the authors question the assumption that there is just

¹⁶ Alice Bloch and Liza Schuster. “Asylum and Welfare: Contemporary Debates.” *Critical Social Policy* 22(3). (2002): 398.

¹⁷ Sales. “The Deserving and the Undeserving?” 474.

¹⁸ Stephen Castles, Maja Korac, Ellie Vasta, Steven Vertovec. *Integration: Mapping the Field*. (Oxford: Oxford University, 2002): 116.

one way of becoming part of a given society, or that nation-states need to be “mono-cultural” to be cohesive, and ask whether we are referring to integration into an existing local community, into a social group or into society as a whole. Some alternative concepts are discussed too, such as “inclusion” (into the labor market, housing, education, neighborhood life, etc.), which can tap into discussions of social exclusion, or “participation,” which has a more active connotation.¹⁹

One conceptual framework for the vague concept of integration has been constructed by Alastair Ager and Alison Strang, who identify ten core domains that reflect normative understandings of integration in the case of refugees. Employment is one of the markers/means, along with housing, education, and health, while the domain of rights and citizenship is defined as foundational for all of them.²⁰ Citizenship, in Ager and Strang’s study, means above all access to rights. However, one thought-provoking study on volunteering among refugees shows the construction of the imagery of the “good citizen” in refugees’ discourse as an economically productive individual who actively contributes to society, as opposed to the “bad citizen” who is lazy and drains the economy. Volunteering, the authors argue, helps refugees construct themselves as “good citizens” on the path of employment and resist dominant notions of dependency.²¹

What does becoming a citizen mean and how can a refugee earn it? Should citizenship even be necessary in order to have access to basic rights? In discussing this, we have to keep in mind that receiving societies play a crucial role in allowing refugees to belong and that integration is a two-way process. Another study of the UK, which is one of the more widely-studied countries,

¹⁹ Ibid., 114.

²⁰ Alastair Ager and Alison Strang. “Understanding Integration: A Conceptual Framework.” *Journal of Refugee Studies* Vol.21. Iss. 2, (2008).

²¹ Su Yin Yap, Angela Byrne and Sarah Davidson. “From Refugee to Good Citizen: A Discourse Analysis of Volunteering.” *Journal of Refugee Studies* Vol. 24, No. 1 (2010): 167.

reveals the “problematization” of refugees in politics and the construction of “degrees of unwantedness” that leads to a stratification of rights. The usage of “crisis” language has created feedback effects between policy-makers, who create a problem, audiences who react to it in a hostile way, and back to policy-makers who respond to these reactions.²² In such a context, integration measures lose their meaning because of the mixed messages of governments: the negativity of political discourse conflicts with any integration strategy. This is applicable to Bulgaria’s government and its half-hearted attempts to promote integration as well.

2.4. Transit countries

Much of the literature so far has presupposed refugees’ desire to “belong” to the host society. Research and policy are marked by the “sedentary” bias that leads them to underestimate or criticize refugees’ interest in choosing a country where they want to settle based on welfare, opportunities or family reunification,²³ even if the first country they enter is considered a “safe country” by international standards. In fact, such secondary migration and the filing of applications for asylum in multiple countries has been labeled as “asylum-shopping,” and has been one of the reasons for the enactment of the Dublin II Convention in the EU. This convention basically establishes that the state where an application for asylum is first submitted has to examine it, so as to avoid multiplication and the emergence of “orbit refugees” who circulate between countries. In practice, this is unfavorable to periphery countries of the EU, such as Italy, Greece, and Bulgaria, because they receive the majority of the asylum-seeker influx.

²² Gareth Mulvey. “When Policy Creates Politics,” 456.

²³ Aspasia Papadopoulou. “Exploring the Asylum-Migration Nexus: The Case of Transit Migrants in Europe.” *GCIM Global Migration Perspectives* No.23. (2005): 4.

When classic destination countries close their borders, peripheral and transit countries become a “buffer zone” where migrants get stuck. The situation in the EU since the EU-Turkey deal at the beginning of 2016 is a case in point. In these circumstances, the nuances of how refugees perceive the country they are stuck in will have an important effect on their employment levels and motivation to belong. In an article which is very relevant to this thesis, Losi and Strang argue that in countries that refugees do not perceive as final, such as Italy or Malta, neither they nor the local population aspires toward integration. In Malta, refugees are not particularly interested in legal employment, but rather in saving up enough money for their next step. Most asylum-seekers end up in Malta by chance and their attitudes reflect disappointment in not reaching mainland Europe.²⁴ A similar sentiment has been documented by a study among Kurdish asylum-seekers in Greece for whom the country is a “waiting room” - a place to stay for a couple of years and work in the informal economy in order to pay off the debt to smugglers or relatives, and finance the second part of the trip.²⁵ At this phase, refugees are not interested in integration or even socializing with other camp residents. Instead, they focus on transnational networking with friends and family in their home country and destination countries.²⁶

One example of how a transit country can manage an influx of asylum-seekers that do not intend to remain in it is Serbia. With the intensification of the flows of asylum-seekers in 2014, Serbian authorities decided to adopt an open-border policy and instead of granting asylum, created a so-called “certificate of having entered the territory of Serbia for migrants coming from countries where their lives are in danger.” The country set up temporary reception centers along a “humanitarian corridor” through Serbia for the provision of aid and accommodation, restricting

²⁴ Losi, N and Strang, Alison. “IntagraRef: Local communities and refugees, fostering social integration.” Project Report. Institute for International Health and Development. (2008): 36.

²⁵ Papadopoulou. “Exploring the Asylum-Migration Nexus,” 12.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

asylum-seekers' mobility only to this route.²⁷ The fact that Serbia never developed integration measures was criticized by civil society but this was in line with the interests of both the government and refugees.

The aim of this section has been to present the basic theoretical knowledge that we need to be equipped with in order think critically about notions such as the right to work, the identity of refugees, integration, and transit migration, which come into play in the concrete example of Bulgaria. The next section will discuss the specific background of the case study and will prompt our transition from theory to practice.

²⁷ Pavle Kilibarda. "Serbia Facing the Refugee and Migrant Crisis". *Südosteuropa Mitteilungen*. Iss. 02. (2016).

Chapter 3

Socio-historical background of the refugee crisis in Bulgaria

The current “refugee crisis” is a result of the number of ongoing wars in the Middle East, and primarily the civil war in Syria. Neighboring countries such as Turkey, Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon have had to bear the primary impact of the crisis, but the issue gained international attention only when it reached Europe. But the way in which European governments have dealt with the situation has been highly problematic: hundreds of people have drowned in the Mediterranean, and asylum-seekers have faced border violence, fences, squalid conditions in camps, and a rise in xenophobic discourse that portrays them as a problem and a threat.

The subject of this case study, Bulgaria, shares a border with Turkey and has been at the forefront of the crisis. However, for a variety of reasons, asylum-seekers have tended to avoid Bulgaria and take the West Balkans route through Greece and Serbia: it is shorter, there are more smuggling channels, and many refugees are afraid that once they are registered in Bulgaria, they would be extradited back there by force of the Dublin agreements when they attempt to file an application for asylum in another country.²⁸ Even those who do enter the country and apply for asylum frequently leave while their procedure is still ongoing. The State Agency for Refugees (SAR) has reported that 61% of applications since 2015 have been terminated for that reason.²⁹ Overall, according to Ilyana Bozhova, senior expert on Social Activity and Adaptation at SAR,

²⁸ Bulgarian Helsinki Committee. “Human Rights in Bulgaria. 2015.” (2016): 117.

²⁹ Data provided by SAR.

asylum-seekers tend to stay for periods ranging between 6 and 10 months, after which they resume their journey.³⁰

This is the first mass asylum-seeker wave towards Bulgaria since it became a member of the EU and its external land border. The SAR started its statistic in 1993 and according to it, in the years before 2013 the average number of applications was around 1,000, mostly coming from Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine. If we look at the number of applications received in the most recent years: roughly 7,000 in 2013, 11,000 in 2014, 20,000 in 2015, and 19,000 in 2016,³¹ we can see the unprecedented change of scale that the current crisis has presupposed, especially given that Bulgaria's population is around 7 million people. We should take into account that not all of those who enter the country submit applications for asylum (the statistics of the Ministry of Interior show that 34,000 irregular immigrants were apprehended in 2015 for example³²), but even then, the numbers cannot be compared to those in Turkey or Greece.

3.1. Development of the crisis

The first impacts of the refugee crisis in Bulgaria were felt in August 2013. The sudden increase in the influx of asylum-seekers led the state's asylum system into an administrative collapse. It was not able to provide asylum-seekers with adequate conditions upon arrival or a timely procedure for the review of their application because it lacked a clear strategy for emergency situations. In 2013, the capacity of the centers of SAR was around 3,000 people. But as we have seen, more than 7,000 people applied for asylum that year and SAR had to recur to the assistance of UNHCR and several foreign governments. The lack of appropriate buildings led to the

³⁰ Bozhova, Iliyana. Interview by Author. Personal Interview. Sofia, Bulgaria. March 13, 2017.

³¹ "Applications decisions 1993-2006." State Agency for Refugees.

³² Ministry of Interior. "Situational Picture of the Migration Circumstances for the period 2013-2016." n/d.

precipitated transfer of people to abandoned schools and military divisions in the capital, Sofia, and along the border with Turkey. The problem was that the number of employees at the centers remained the same and was therefore highly insufficient.³³ Around 100 people currently work in Harmanli, one of the biggest centers in Europe, which hosts 3,100 people.^{34, 35} One of the mistakes of the government was that it started expanding the existing centers instead of creating new ones, thereby letting the refugee population concentrate in the capital and in Harmanli, instead of distributing it in more locations. However, every new attempt to open an SAR center has been met with the resistance of local population.

The improvement of the conditions in the centers that was achieved in 2014 was halted in 2015 when the administration was not able to cope with the increasing numbers of refugees. This resulted in delays in application procedures, food being served only twice a day in centers, and even a period without any provision of food in the fall of 2015.³⁶ When the provision of food was reestablished three times a day, asylum-seekers were deprived of the already minuscule aid (\$32 per month) that they were receiving (even though these two services are not alternatives and are both part of what is required of the government according to international standards). A false quarantine was announced in Harmanli due to pressures by the local population that was scared off by lies spread by the far-right about an epidemic of skin diseases in the center. After the authorities imposed the quarantine, asylum-seekers rioted against the decision and the poor conditions in the center, which resulting in more than 300 arrests.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Rosen Bosev. "The (Im)Possible Solutions." *Capital*. December 1, 2016.

³⁵ UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "Bulgaria: UNHCR concerned about calls for expulsions following tensions at overcrowded and substandard reception centre for asylum-seekers." November 29, 2016.

³⁶ Bulgarian Helsinki Committee. "Human Rights in Bulgaria. 2015," 118.

In the beginning of 2016, as a result of the EU-Turkey deal, the West Balkans route was closed. The Bulgarian government was afraid that the asylum-seeker flow would be then redirected through Bulgaria and it intensified its efforts for controlling the border and constructing a barbed wire fence along it. The government has claimed that this has resulted in a 40% decrease in entries in 2016 compared to 2015.³⁷ However, the closing of borders has left a large asylum-seeker population “stuck” in Bulgaria and has left SAR centers filled over their maximum capacity, which has become a precondition for tensions. The most frequently reported problems are border violence, the confiscation of money, documents and possessions by border officials, the development of bribing schemes for the supply of goods in SAR centers, the lack of quality translation services, the overcrowding of rooms, etc.³⁸

3.2. Characteristics of the asylum-seeking population

The first wave of refugees was mostly Syrians who were crossing the Bulgarian-Turkish border with the help of smugglers. By the end of 2015, Afghans became the biggest group of asylum-seekers, followed by Iraqis and then Syrians. The demographic aspect of the population changed too: from families they became mostly young men, the larger part of them without education, who had embarked on the journey in groups. Afghans are particularly quick to leave the country because they are aware that they might not be given asylum, while some Iraqis and Syrians prefer staying until they receive a status as a refugee and are able to travel legally in the EU.³⁹

³⁷ Capital. “The Number of Refugees Who Have Entered Bulgaria Has Decreased with 40% in 2016 Compared to 2015.” January 4, 2017.

³⁸ UNHCR. “An Investigation on the Needs of Asylum-Seekers and Refugees according to Age, Sex and Social Group.” (2014): 4-6.

³⁹ Milanova, Lora. Interview by Author. Personal Interview. Sofia, Bulgaria. January 11, 2017.

A UNHCR-led research has observed that Syrians tend to have fewer problems in how they are treated compared to individuals from Afghanistan or African countries. Among Bulgarians, there is an emerging rhetoric that defines Syrians as good, “real” refugees and Iraqis and Afghans as bad, “fake” refugees. Syrians have eventually adopted this discursive strategy in order to defend their right to receive asylum. In their interviews, Mohamed Ezz of the Association of Syrian refugees and Syrian refugee Basel Husni both insist on differentiating Syrians from Afghans. Another important takeaway from the interviews with them is that the refugee community is not homogenous: even when we talk about Syrians, they may be Arabs or Kurds, in support of the Assad regime or against it, which means that these groups are not cohesive and might require different approaches.

According to data provided by SAR, the percentage of refugees in a working age is 66%. In the last five years, there has been a decline in the average level of education of incoming asylum-seekers: those who have a secondary or high school degree constitute 54%, while those without education are 23%, and only 6% have a university degree (even though very few of them can provide written proof of it).⁴⁰ Mariana Stoyanova, program manager of the Refugee and Migrant Service of the Bulgarian Red Cross, has underlined the fact that the current wave of asylum-seekers from Afghanistan is the generation that has grown up under the regime of the Taliban and has hardly had access to quality education, unlike previous waves of Afghan asylum-seekers in the 1990s who came with high levels of education and qualifications.⁴¹

⁴⁰ State Agency for Refugees at the Council of Ministers. Report on Activities in 2016, 8.

⁴¹ Stoyanova, Mariana. Interview by Author. Personal Interview. Sofia, Bulgaria. January 12, 2017.

3.3. Political scene, far-right parties and anti-refugee discourse

Bulgaria has been characterized in recent years by a very volatile policy environment. In the last four years, there have been 6 different governments, 3 of them being caretaker governments that took control after the previous cabinet resigned. This period of political instability has exactly coincided with the refugee crisis. Therefore, there has been a lack of political will and continuity between different governments to implement effective policies on refugees. Another important characteristic of the country is that it is the poorest of the 28 EU member states, and that the level of unemployment is around 8%, and among the youth (15-24 years old) it was 17%.⁴²

As in the rest of Europe, the far-right has been on the rise in Bulgaria. The “United Patriots,” a coalition of ultranationalist parties, got almost 10% of the vote in the last parliamentary elections in March 2017. Characterized by their racist, xenophobic and Islamophobic discourse, they incite hate speech through the television channel “Alfa.” They are reportedly responsible for organizing and staging protests against the construction of SAR centers around the country. Several TV reports of such protests reveal that the people marching in them do not have a clear idea of why they are marching and that their banners have been given to them by outside people.

A notorious group in Bulgaria is the so-called “refugee hunters:” a self-organized group of civil vigilantes who patrol along the border and arrest those who cross the border illegally. They have argued that they do this in order to protect their villages, which reflects the widespread fear and mistrust among the Bulgarian population. A 2015 poll found that 63% of Bulgarians consider the refugees a threat to the Bulgarian people.⁴³ According to another survey, 78% of the local population perceives refugees as a burden to the economy and for nearly 51% having a refugee

⁴² National Statistical Institute, 2016.

⁴³ Dnevnik. “Alpha Research: For 63% of Bulgarians refugees are a threat.” 28 September, 2015.

for a co-worker or neighbor is unacceptable, as opposed to 23% who would not mind it.⁴⁴ A study on the perceptions on refugees has suggested however that most of its interviewees “underline the fear of extremism (however justified) and not the fear of non-integration.”⁴⁵ The fears of the local population are fueled by the media and for Katerina Stoyanova from The Refugee Project the problem is that even positive messages now come with a negative framing such as “They might not be bad people.”⁴⁶

These tendencies have to be examined in the light of longer historical processes and dynamics. A central factor for Islamophobia in Bulgaria is that the country’s national identity is shaped by the oversimplified legend of the so-called “500-year Turkish yoke,” a remnant of the days when Bulgaria was part of the Ottoman Empire. The multiculturalism that characterized life in the empire has been erased from the national narrative and during the communist period, there has been a political effort towards homogenization, including the forced migration of Bulgarian Turks to Turkey. Today, Bulgaria has a relatively ethnically homogeneous population (ethnic Bulgarians are 84% of the total⁴⁷) and minorities such as the Roma experience discrimination and physical violence.⁴⁸

The unstable political environment since the beginning of the refugee crisis and the social tensions in the country have been reflected in the frequently changing policy framework with regards to refugees’ right to work, which is enshrined both in international and state law. This will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

⁴⁴ Lyubomir Kyuchukov. “Impact of the Refugee Crisis on Bulgarian Society and Politics: Fears But No Hatred.” Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Office Bulgaria. Analyses (April, 2016).

⁴⁵ Iva Kopraveva, Louisa Slavkova and Rafaela Tripalo. “The good, the bad and the Eastern European – refugees and the Communist past.” Deutschlandforschertagung '16. September 30, 2016.

⁴⁶ Stoyanova, Katerina. Interview by Author. Personal Interview. Sofia, Bulgaria. January 13, 2017.

⁴⁷ National Statistical Institute, 2015.

⁴⁸ Bulgarian Helsinki Committee. “Human Rights in Bulgaria. 2013.” (2014): 66.

Chapter 4

Legal and policy framework

4.1 Applicable international law

The 1951 Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees is the principal international legal instrument that defines the rights of refugees. Bulgaria acceded on May 12, 1993 to both the Convention and its 1967 Protocol⁴⁹ and has made no reservations. With regards to refugees' right to work, the Convention does not set high standards for countries. Articles 17(1) and 18 demand that refugees should be given the same access to work and self-employment as the most favored non-nationals. States are encouraged to assimilate the work rights of refugees to those of nationals, but the convention recognizes the possibility of introducing restrictive measures for the protection of the national labor market.⁵⁰

Special attention is given to refugees who hold diplomas and want to practice liberal professions by demanding states to give them a treatment as favorable as possible (Art. 19). The countries that do grant the right to work are required by Art. 24 to give refugees the same labor rights as nationals, in terms of remuneration, hours of work, overtime and holiday arrangements, minimum age of employment, women's work, etc.

In addition to the Geneva Convention, refugees' right to work sits within a wider framework of protection of the right to work for all categories of workers under international law, which are applicable to refugees. Notable instruments include the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human

⁴⁹ *Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees*. New York, 31 January 1967. United Nations Treaty Series, vol. 606, p. 267. Entered into force 4 October 1967, No. 8791.

⁵⁰ *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, 1951*, 189 United Nations Treaty Series 150. Entered into force April 22, 1954.

Rights (Art. 23), the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Articles 6–8), and various ILO Conventions, notably Recommendation No. 71 of 1944. The right to work enshrined in international instruments permits the access to the job market but is not the guarantee of a job, although some treaties, particularly the ICESCR and ILO Convention No. 122 of 1964, oblige states to move towards full and productive employment.

On another level of international law, we can consider the regional framework of the Council of Europe. Bulgaria is a state party to the 1961 European Social Charter since 2000 and is one of the 15 countries that have signed the 1995 Additional Protocol that allows organizations to lodge collective complaints of violations of the Charter. Article 1 of the Charter establishes that states should protect the right to work of persons under their jurisdiction and should promote vocational guidance and training.⁵¹

In terms of EU secondary legislation, which is legally binding to Bulgaria as a member state, Directive 2011/95/EU of the European Parliament is the most relevant to refugees' right to work. Its Article 26 establishes that refugees should be authorized to engage in employed or self-employed activities and that states should endeavor to facilitate full access to employment-related education opportunities for adults, vocational training and counseling services under equivalent conditions as nationals.⁵² Therefore, even though the Geneva Convention does not set binding requirements for states to provide refugees the same right to work as nationals, other relevant international instruments set this as the standard that Bulgaria has to respond to.

⁵¹ Council of Europe, European Social Charter (Revised), 3 May 1996, ETS 163

⁵² Directive 2011/95/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 December 2011. 20.12.2011 *Official Journal of the European Union* L 337/9

4.2. Applicable domestic law

Access to the labor market is automatic and unconditional for anyone who is granted international protection in Bulgaria. This is established in the main legal document that regulates the rights of refugees in Bulgaria: the Law on Asylum and Refugees (LAR). Its Article 39 enumerates five fundamental rights and one of them is the right to employment and vocational training. The other four are the right to residence, the right to accommodation, the right to social assistance and emergency medical help, and the right to freely return to their country of origin. LAR names the State Agency for Refugees as the principal organizer of auxiliary work activities for both asylum-seekers and refugees whereby they can be offered an opportunity for vocational training and employment (Art. 56(1)).⁵³

Another instrument that is applicable to refugees' right to work is the Law for Employment Promotion. It establishes that every Bulgarian citizen who is looking for a job can register at the local office of the Employment Agency and extends that to refugees as well (Art. 18).⁵⁴ The same law in its Article 17 determines that those who are unemployed and are actively seeking a job, which includes refugees, have the right to receive information about vacancies and vocational/adult education programs, mediation for recruitment, career counseling, as well as a stipend for the duration of any training program.

Finally, Bulgarian law also establishes that refugees do not need work permits in order to engage in employment. According to indicators proposed by the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE), Bulgaria puts no formal barriers in front of refugees for employment: they do not

⁵³ Law on Asylum and Refugees. Amended by: Law amending the Law on Asylum and Refugees, № 101/2015 of 11 December 2015.

⁵⁴ Law on Employment Promotion. Last modified March 2008.

need work permits, there is no labor test that they have to pass and they are not limited to certain sectors of the economy or to a maximum number of days per year that they can work.⁵⁵

For asylum-seekers, the situation is a little bit more complicated. Employment without a work permit is allowed only within SAR centers.⁵⁶ For labor outside SAR centers, asylum-seekers can apply for a work permit 3 months after submitting their application while they are waiting for a decision. However, in the last year and a half, the rules on work permits have been changed three times. Up until October 2015, the minimum stay required before receiving a work permit used to be 1 year. Then this requirement was modified to 3 months, which was evaluated as a considerable progress. However, in May 2016 the minimum stay was extended to 9 months without a consultation with SAR. In December 2016, the Law on Aliens was changed again and the minimum stay went back to 3 months.

In general, Bulgaria's legislation falls in line the applicable international and European legal instruments. However, despite this comprehensive formal recognition of the right, refugee employment levels in Bulgaria are low. The next section will explore how state policies have affected this outcome.

4.3. Policies up to 2013

Under the abovementioned legal instruments, states have obligations to respect, protect, and fulfill the right to work of refugees. Firstly, the obligation to respect refugees' right to work translates in the provision of a secure legal status and documentation.⁵⁷ In Bulgaria, there are normally no issues with this, except for the case of asylum-seekers. The whimsical changes in

⁵⁵ Savova. Country Report: Bulgaria, 48.

⁵⁶ Ordinance Laying Down the Conditions and Procedure for Issuing, Refusal and Withdrawal of Work Permits for Aliens. Art. 4

⁵⁷ The Michigan Guidelines on the Right to Work. *Michigan Journal of International Law*. Vol. 31 (2010): 303.

legislation have resulted in the complete misinformation of asylum-seekers about their rights and the unclear situation of those who applied for such a permit when the law was changed.

According to SAR, around 1/3 of asylum-seekers request such work permits⁵⁸ but the observations of the Red Cross are that less than 10% do that.⁵⁹

Secondly, the state has an obligation to protect refugees' right to work, which means that it has to take positive measures to protect violations of refugees' right to work and rights at work by private actors, such as discrimination.⁶⁰ No special policies have been implemented with regards to non-discrimination of refugees in the workplace, despite the xenophobic tendencies in the country and even though some refugees report receiving a smaller salary than Bulgarians for an equal amount of work. There have been reports about sanctions imposed companies for employing asylum-seekers with irregular documentation.⁶¹

Finally, the obligation to fulfill would mean creating the necessary infrastructure to make the right effective, such as employment offices, language and skills training, microloans, recognition of diplomas, and incentives to employers.⁶² Such measures have traditionally been part of larger policies targeted towards integration and have been the most problematic since 2013. This section will provide a brief overview of the National Program for Integration as it functioned up until 2013. It was far from perfect, but it demonstrates the possible ways in which the state would aim to fulfill refugees' right to work.

⁵⁸ Bozhova, Iliyana. Interview by Author. Personal Interview. Sofia, Bulgaria. January 13, 2017.

⁵⁹ Stoyanova, Mariana. Interview by Author. Personal Interview. Sofia, Bulgaria. January 12, 2017.

⁶⁰ The Michigan Guidelines on the Right to Work, 303.

⁶¹ Martin Dimitrov and Zornitsa Stoilova. "What refugees do." Capital. February 20, 2015.

⁶² The Michigan Guidelines on the Right to Work, 303.

The first National Program for Integration of Beneficiaries of International Protection was created in 2005 and was renewed every 3 years up until 2013. The implementation of the Program was handled by the Integration Center of SAR. The program covered between 60 and 100 people each year,⁶³ which was a small but acceptable number considering that the average number of incoming refugees each year was 1000.

The Program determined that all refugees had the right to receive funding for accommodation, social support, medical insurance, Bulgarian language instruction, cultural adjustment, professional training and translation services within one year after receiving their legal status. According to a Monitoring Report published by the Bulgarian Council for Refugees and Migrants, most of the measures of the program were implemented, but the general goal of the program was not achieved.⁶⁴ One of the main problems was the insufficient financial aid or its delay which caused many of the refugees to start working instead of staying in the program.⁶⁵

In terms of professional training, the program foresaw 3 months of training for those who had successfully completed the 6-month-long classes in Bulgarian. The options for training were courses in hairdressing, cosmetics, tailoring and computer literacy. In 2013, only 11 out of 100 completed the professional training courses.⁶⁶ The course on computer literacy was not even implemented, even though a new computer room was equipped using funds from the EU. The Bulgarian Red Cross reports that since vocational courses were in Bulgarian, many participants

⁶³ Zvezda Vankova. "Monitoring Report on the Integration of Persons who Have Received Asylum in Bulgaria. 2014." December 2014. Bulgarian Council on Refugees and Migrants, 6.

⁶⁴ Zvezda Vankova. "Monitoring Report on the Implementation of the National Program for Integration of Refugees (2011-2013) in 2013." Bulgarian Council on Refugees and Migrants, 3.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.,10.

have experienced difficulties with the theoretical parts, such as safety measures or labor laws.⁶⁷ Another one of the frequent complaints among refugees was the lack of variety in the courses and the lack of courses on entrepreneurship or mentorship programs. The truth is that such courses bound refugees to lower segments of the labor market and were not developed with consideration of refugees' profiles. On the other hand, SAR has reported that it faced a disappointing response because several participants dropped out before the end of the courses and some women used the hairdressing and cosmetics courses not out of professional interest but rather for their personal needs.⁶⁸

Another institution that was involved in the labor market integration of refugees was the Employment Agency and its regional Labor Bureaus. In 2013 the Labor Bureaus were instructed to focus on the measures targeted at refugees that were planned in the Law for Employment Promotion. However, by 2014, the total number of registered unemployed people was 24, of whom 9 were women, and only 1 was assisted in finding a job. The Employment Agency has complained that refugees are not motivated enough to use their services and they need the help of social mediators.⁶⁹ This is due to the fact that application procedures and documents are available only in Bulgarian. Another obstacle was the fact that refugees could not show any recognized evidence of previous education or work experience, which led to their registration as unemployed and lacking any education or professional qualifications.⁷⁰ The Agency also organized at least two job fairs with about 10 employers at each but according to NGOs only asylum-seekers with no right to work were present at the events.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Milanova, Lora. Interview by Author. Personal Interview. Sofia, Bulgaria. January 11, 2017.

⁶⁸ Bozhova, Iliyana. Interview by Author. Personal Interview. Sofia, Bulgaria. March 13, 2017.

⁶⁹ Vankova. "Monitoring Report 2013," 30.

⁷⁰ Milanova, Lora. Interview by Author. Personal Interview. Sofia, Bulgaria. January 11, 2017.

⁷¹ Vankova. "Monitoring Report 2013," 34.

4.4. Policies since 2014: the years of “zero integration”

The unprecedented increase in the refugee population in Bulgaria in 2013 and the unstable political situation in the country jointly produced a complete institutional collapse in 2014. Instead of strengthening its organs in order to tackle the situation, SAR closed the Integration Center and declared that it was not responsible for the integration of refugees anymore. The Program for Integration was supposed to be renewed in 2014, but that did not happen. Since then, the country has witnessed almost four years of “zero integration,” characterized by frequent changes in legislation, policies that only remained on paper, and defective coordination between the competent institutions (the Ministry of Interior, SAR and the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy).⁷²

After SAR gave up its responsibilities on integration, the Council of Ministers ordered that these should be shifted to the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy. The Ministry declared that it needed first a general strategy and in mid-2014 published the National Strategy for Integration (2014-2020). This strategy had the pretense of introducing new approaches for integration and featured an emphasized role of the municipalities for the integration of refugees, as opposed to concentrating on the capital as previous policy documents. However, this was just a strategy, not a program, and did not foresee any concrete measures or possibilities for funding, so it remained merely a set of long-term objectives written on paper.

The same ministry developed in February 2014 a program for refugees that would provide 500 people with Bulgarian classes, 100 with professional training geared at specific job vacancies,

⁷² Aleksandar Velichkov. “The Refugee Crisis in Bulgaria – Causes and Consequences.” *Center for Political Studies*. December 6, 2013.

and 200 with a subsidy for employment for 6 months. This program also remained on paper and in 2014 absolutely no refugees took part in it.

The Employment Agency created yet another integration and employment program for refugees, which included language courses and subsidized employment. In 2014, 13 people participated in it, while in 2015 virtually nobody took part. In the midst of such overlapping and inefficiency refugees were now left entirely on their own and who were relying on the limited efforts of NGOs and volunteers. The lack of financial aid for accommodation, medical insurance, and integration violated their social, labor and health rights and as a result, their desire to remain in Bulgaria was reduced to a minimum.⁷³ In 2014, 46% of those who applied for asylum abandoned their status determination procedures in Bulgaria, and that number rose to 80-90% in 2015 and 2016.⁷⁴

In 2015, the national system for asylum was modified several times with the introduction of new ordinances. The latest Ordinance on Integration was accepted in August 2016. It awarded municipalities a central role for integration by allowing them to apply for funding and request the number of refugees that they can receive, thereby helping to avoid the concentration of refugees in the capital and along the borders. Municipalities were then supposed to provide services such as accommodation, Bulgarian classes, career counselling and access to adult education, inclusion in employment and training programs and provision of information about job vacancies.⁷⁵

However, according to UNHCR expert Emiliya Bratanova, the problem was that there was no

⁷³ Vankova. "Monitoring Report. 2014," 36.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 63.

⁷⁵ Ruling № 208 of August 12, 2016 on the Ordinance for the Conditions and the Order for Concluding, Fulfilling and Suspending an Integration Agreement with Foreigners who Have Been Granted Asylum or International Protection

institution responsible for the implementation of this Ordinance.⁷⁶ Furthermore, none of the 265 municipalities has submitted an application to participate in the scheme so far.⁷⁷

In the last week of March 2017, the current caretaker government suddenly announced the annulment of the Ordinance on Integration. Considering that it had been completely ineffective, that was received as good news by some. The problem is that in political discourse, the issue is framed as if it was the fault of refugees for not signing up for the scheme, and politicians are threatening that in any future ordinance there will be sanctions and withdrawal of welfare if a refugee does not sign up.⁷⁸ However, as we have mentioned, the problem was rooted in municipalities' failure to participate and the lack of a controlling organ to supervise them.

The most recently cited factor for the inefficacy of policies on the access to employment are the lack of economic and institutional capacity. However, the root cause of the problem is the lack of political will to deal effectively with the problems and the understated aim of the government to demotivate refugees to stay in the country.⁷⁹ In terms of funding, integration measures have almost entirely been funded by the EU. But according to Bistra Ivanova from the Multi-Kulti Collective, during the distribution of the funds between the EU countries in 2014, Bulgaria deliberately made a bad deal because even though it is an outside border of the EU, it is the third country with the smallest funding after Luxembourg and Lithuania.⁸⁰ Bulgaria and Estonia were both allocated 10 million euro, even though the number of refugees and asylum-seekers

⁷⁶ Emiliya Bratanova. Interview by author. Personal Interview. Sofia, Bulgaria. January 9, 2017.

⁷⁷ The Sofia Globe. "Bulgaria preparing changes to rules on integration of migrants and refugees." March 17, 2016.

⁷⁸ Lilya Chaleva. "The Council of Ministers Annulled the Ordinance on Integration of Refugees" Dir.bg. March 31, 2017.

⁷⁹ Bulgarian Helsinki Committee. "Human Rights in Bulgaria. 2014," 71.

⁸⁰ Ivanova, Bistra. Interview by Author. Personal Interview. Sofia, Bulgaria. January 13, 2017

registered by the UNHCR in 2014 was 6000 in Bulgaria and 120 in Estonia.⁸¹ This is another piece of evidence that supports the claims of NGOs in Bulgaria that the government intentionally subverts the integration program because it has a stake in forcing refugees to leave the country.

This is probably the most important takeaway from this chapter. Even though the right to work of refugees is protected on both the international and domestic legal level, any solution that expects the government to encourage more people to stay in the country and integrate will be met with half-handed measures. By discarding the imperative of integration and substituting it with a rights-based approach, we might be able to reconcile the interests of both the government and refugees.

⁸¹ Regulation (EU) No 516/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 April 2014 establishing the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund

Chapter 5

Current employment situation

The information contained in this chapter has been gathered through personal interviews with experts, as well as a review of relevant reports by local and international NGOs and media coverage on refugee employment. There are no reliable statistics on the level of employment of refugees, or their engagement in the informal economy. However, the data and testimonials in the following sections will provide a clear picture of the current employment situation of refugees and whether or not their right to access appropriate work is effective.

5.1. Tendencies in the economic life of refugees

In *The Economic Life of Refugees* Karen Jacobsen explores refugees' economic coping strategies, making the distinction between refugees in camps and urban refugees because of factors such as the availability of aid, the freedom of movement, and the urgency for self-sufficiency.⁸² Using Jacobsen's methodology, this section discusses the economic life of refugees and asylum-seekers in Bulgaria, bearing in mind the distinction between urban and "encamped" individuals, which in most cases corresponds to the division between "refugees" and "asylum-seekers" but not always because some asylum seekers choose to leave camps voluntarily.

It has become a concern of humanitarian aid agencies that aid actually hinders refugees from becoming independent in the long term. However, since Bulgaria provides only shelter and food, and no other economic support anymore, this is not the case. Most people in SAR centers rely on

⁸² Karen Jacobsen. *The Economic Life of Refugees*. (Bloomfield, CT : Kumarian Press Inc., 2005): 11.

remittances from their relatives abroad. They also come up with inventive ways to support themselves: some of them have become specialized in trade with mobile phone SIM cards that come with internet connection, which are a highly valued commodity. One phenomenon is also the role of information as currency: since refugees are not informed about their rights and the services available to them, some people act as informants and deliver information about documents and procedures in exchange for money.⁸³

Asylum-seekers have the possibility to work in the centers without having a work permit but almost nobody does that.⁸⁴ SAR has commented that some asylum-seekers who have permits work informally in *kebab* restaurants or markets.⁸⁵ But even though people in centers have freedom of mobility, there are still constraints on movement that put them in an unfavorable position with respect to the access to work, such as the lack of resources for transportation or the curfew.

Because of the cost of living in urban settings, employment becomes a priority for those who choose to leave the camps or receive an approval of their application for asylum and lose their right to live in SAR centers. Again, there is no welfare available through the state. Some, like Red Cross expert Mariana Stoyanova, suggest that this might be a good thing because it ends up forcing people to stand on their own feet more quickly and achieve self-sufficiency.⁸⁶ However, given the lack of an integration program to help them find housing or jobs, there is absolutely no safety net for refugees. This, combined with the impact of trauma and time spent in transit or at camps during administrative procedures, leads to skill atrophy, lack of motivation and

⁸³ UNHCR. "An Investigation on the Needs of Asylum-Seekers and Refugees," 2014, 10.

⁸⁴ Mariya Ilcheva, "Why few refugees want to stay in Bulgaria." *DW*. April 27, 2016.

⁸⁵ Iliyana Bozhova. Interview by Author. Personal Interview. Sofia, Bulgaria. March 13, 2017.

⁸⁶ Stoyanova, Mariana. Interview by Author. Personal Interview. Sofia, Bulgaria. January 12, 2017.

depression.⁸⁷ As a result, most of them are not able to cope and leave the country. One Syrian couple has reported that once they received an approval of their asylum applications, they had to spend three days on the street, after which a friend of theirs who was still at the center helped them secretly stay with him. There, they waited to receive money from relatives in Syria and used it to leave for Denmark.⁸⁸

In general, after they are granted asylum, most refugees remain unemployed. In 2016, only 78 refugees reached out to SAR in search for employment.⁸⁹ Around 50 of them found jobs through SAR, while 8 were employed through the Labor Bureaus. UNHCR expert Emiliya Bratanova has estimated that on average, out of a target group of 10 people, between 1 and 3 people would say that they are interested in working. Two Syrian refugees interviewed by the Bulgarian news agency Darik have stated that they have no intention to work because their relatives in Syria send them remittances every month. Yet, they are planning to remain in the country and possibly study.⁹⁰

Those refugees who desire to work tend to find temporary and irregular jobs, oriented towards generating quick cash, and characterized by low financial risk. Most of them are in small enterprises in low-skilled sectors such as the HoReCa (Hotel, Restaurant, Cafeteria) sector, especially *kebab* fast food restaurants, retail in small shops and markets, car repair, construction, factories and warehouses, hairdressing, sewing, etc.⁹¹ Those with knowledge of English frequently join call centers. A limited number of refugees are employed as translators and social

⁸⁷ Neli Filipova. "Practical aspects of employment."

⁸⁸ Bulgarian Helsinki Committee. "UN Human Rights Committee Stops the Deportation of Refugees in Bulgaria because of a Danger of Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment". February 8, 2016.

⁸⁹ Data provided by SAR.

⁹⁰ Darik News. "Many of the Refugees Do Not Want to Work." September 20, 2015.

⁹¹ Data provided by SAR.

mediators at NGOs. Most jobs are concentrated in certain neighborhoods of the capital, and particularly the big retail market “Iliantsi.” Younger refugees are attracted by job opportunities at hookah bars and discos at the “Student city” quarter, which is known as a party location for students and where jobs are more enjoyable and well-paid.⁹²

One strength of refugees and asylum-seekers are their language skills, since Arabic, Farsi and Pashto are considered “rare” languages in Bulgaria. Malian refugee Lamin Bamba, who is a university graduate, reports having sent out a number of CVs to different companies but receiving no response, which led him to work at a supermarket chain. However, a friend of his recommended that he apply for a job at an IBM call center, where his French language skills made him a valuable employee.⁹³ Another refugee, Elias Soulainan from Syria, found a job at a call center thanks to the rare combination of languages he speaks: Spanish, Arabic, Kurdish and English.⁹⁴

5.2. Problems faced by refugees

So far, one recurring reason for why refugees in Bulgaria are unemployed or employed in low-skill/informal occupations has been their lack of interest in staying in the country. Nonetheless, this section will take a deeper look at some of the obstacles that refugees face, which in many instances are the real reasons behind their desire to leave in search of better opportunities. The most frequently cited are:

1. The difficulties with the local language;

⁹² Ezz, Mohamed. Interview by Author. Personal Interview. Sofia, Bulgaria. January 11, 2017.

⁹³ Martin Dimitrov and Zornitsa Stoilova. “What refugees do.” Capital. February 20, 2015.

⁹⁴ Svetlana Tarashoeva. “Five Syrian Refugees in Sofia.” Marginalia. June 21, 2014.

2. The low level of previous qualifications or professional experience, especially among women;
3. The lack of procedure for assisting those who do not have diplomas to prove their education or qualifications;
4. The complicated procedures at the Labor Bureaus that are able to find jobs for very few people, most of which are low-paid;
5. The discrimination they face by employers who pay them less than promised or fire them after a short period of work.

Most refugees who are able to find work accomplish this through other refugees, the ethnic community in Sofia, or local NGOs that advertise vacancies shared with SAR. It has been found that the refugee population does not frequently rely on employment firms, job-search websites, newspaper ads, or direct applications.⁹⁵ The 2013 Monitoring Report found out that the majority of refugee workers did not have a contract and most of them affirmed that they were willing to work anything, even if it was not related to their skills. Those who were more highly qualified expressed their desire to certify their skills and start work in their field.⁹⁶ However, most of them did not bring their diplomas and did not speak almost any English. Therefore, it is very hard for qualified people to find adequate employment. For example, Syrian artist Isa Mohamed Musa shares that he is not able to work as an artist in Bulgaria and friends of his have helped him get a job as an assistant in piano restoration.⁹⁷

For many, especially those who are not very highly qualified, work in the gray sector is the only option after a number of unsuccessful attempts to find a legal job. Such jobs, especially if they

⁹⁵ UNHCR Regional Representation for Central Europe. "Access to Employment," 16.

⁹⁶ Vankova. "Monitoring Report. 2013," 16.

⁹⁷ Svetlana Tarashoeva. "Five Syrian Refugees in Sofia." Marginalia. June 21, 2014.

are provided by the ethnic community, serve both their economic and social needs. But in these cases there is a higher risk of exploitation and workers are deprived of protection. Refugees report earning between \$6 and \$8 per day, which is not enough for them to cover the basic needs of their families.⁹⁸ There are also several accounts of work exploitation in which employers refused to pay refugees their salaries or only paid half of the sum, including employers for whom SAR acted as an intermediary.⁹⁹ Even in businesses owned by the local Arab community, refugees are given lower salaries than Bulgarians.¹⁰⁰

The turnover rate among refugees seems to be higher than average because of a lack of work discipline or employer mistreatment. Frequently an employer promises a year-long employment but in reality is looking for Arabic speakers for a short-term project, after which workers are fired. The Red Cross cites one example of a programmer who spent 6 months creating an operating system for his company, after which his employer announced that he no longer needed him.¹⁰¹ One particular company for foreign exchange is infamous among refugees and NGOs, because a lot of those who were employed by it were either fired in such a way or left it voluntarily despite the high salaries because the company's activities were fraudulent.¹⁰²

Other reasons for leaving jobs or rejecting job offers, according to SAR, include the low salary, the location of the job outside of the capital, or the hard physical labor that is required for certain positions. SAR reports that even though some refugees claim that in their home countries they used to work in agriculture and livestock breeding, nobody usually responds to vacancies in

⁹⁸ UNHCR. "An Investigation on the Needs of Asylum-Seekers and Refugees," 2014, 9.

⁹⁹ Vankova. "Monitoring Report. 2014," 37.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Kemal Zaki, Mohamed. Interview by author. Personal Interview. Sofia, Bulgaria. January 11, 2017.

¹⁰² Husni, Basel. Interview by Author. Online Interview. January 8, 2017.

these fields.¹⁰³ This is because refugees are unwilling to relocate their families to small villages, especially when there is no accommodation included. SAR also explains that the average salary in Bulgaria is not appealing for refugees because males are frequently the sole breadwinners in their households and their families are large for Bulgarian standards.¹⁰⁴

In terms of the gender dimension, it is important to note that refugee women are in a more vulnerable position in the labor market and experience higher unemployment rates. SAR reports that men are normally more mobile and active in job searches, and that they are more willing to accept day-jobs.¹⁰⁵ Refugee women from the Middle East have often been housewives in their home countries and may or may not have professional experience. Most of them share that their husbands approve of them working, but there are also cases of family conflicts because of that.¹⁰⁶

Usually, Bulgarian NGOs encourage women to find employment by explaining that this is the usual practice in Europe. However, Katerina Stoyanova from the Refugee Project questions the Western conception of housewives and mothers as “not working” and underlines that it is important to give refugee women the right to choose, instead of expecting them to conform to a preconceived idea of what constitutes labor.¹⁰⁷

Refugee women have self-organized by founding the Council of Refugee Women in Bulgaria, which provides social counselling and mediation, distribution of charity donations, as well as assistance for job-seekers based on personal informal networks.¹⁰⁸ The Council has reported that

¹⁰³ Anna Andreeva. SAR. “Bulgaria on Air” interview. Sofia, Bulgaria. September 4, 2016.

¹⁰⁴ Data provided by SAR.

¹⁰⁵ Neli Filipova. “Practical aspects of employment of foreigners with a refugee or humanitarian status in Bulgaria.” Round table on Implementation of the National Programme of the Integration of Refugees in the Republic of Bulgaria (2011-2013) in Sofia, 2012.

¹⁰⁶ UNHCR. “An Investigation on the Needs of Asylum-Seekers and Refugees,” 2014, 11.

¹⁰⁷ Stoyanova, Katerina. Interview by Author. Personal Interview. Sofia, Bulgaria. January 13, 2017.

¹⁰⁸ UNHCR Regional Representation for Central Europe. “Access to Employment,” 24.

Muslim women face more everyday discrimination for wearing traditional clothes. And even in sectors like hairdressing and cosmetics, some of them cannot find appropriate jobs because they are accustomed to gender-separated salons, hidden from the public, rather than the open-windowed mixed-gender salons popular in Bulgaria.¹⁰⁹

A small share of refugees who come to the country with some savings become entrepreneurs or self-employed. They usually own a small business in retail, food service, or hairdressing, and commonly hire within their own ethnic community. UNHCR reports that entrepreneurs face communication and adjustment problems in approaching different state institutions and following administrative procedures. Also, their financial opportunities are extremely limited, because banks seldom give loans to refugees.¹¹⁰ One example of the path of a refugee entrepreneur is the story of the Iranian couple Mehdi and Beri Mosadepur. At one of the employment fairs of SAR, Mehdi learned about the opportunity to apply for EU funding for starting an enterprise. Together, they decided to open a hairdressing salon and were granted \$10,000, the first \$2,000 of which they used for purchasing equipment and renting space. However, the rest of the grant was delayed because some of the expenses are not recognized as valid. In order to maintain the business, the family borrowed money from friends, but they never received the rest of the grant and got into debt. Today they work as translators in the morning in order to sustain themselves and share that their life is hard and frantic because of the entrepreneurship experience.¹¹¹

If we take a look at the other side of the equation, we see that despite the existence of exploitative practices among some companies, other employers are actively seeking to employ

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 27.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Martin Dimitrov and Zornitsa Stoilova. "What refugees do." *Capital*. February 20, 2015.

refugees, as a part of CSR strategies or a simple wish to help out. They most often reach out to SAR, which then distributes the job offers among different NGOs. In 2016, 60 employers contacted SAR and offered more than 300 vacancies.¹¹² The salary that they offer ranges between \$250 and \$750 per month; many of these are positions that have been left unfilled by Bulgarians.¹¹³ One company, Telus International, even offers Bulgarian language classes.

However, a number of challenges arise. Employers are frequently uninformed about the legal rules about refugees' right to work and frequently dismiss refugee applicants because they believe that they cannot hire an alien citizen without having proven that they cannot employ a Bulgarian for the position. But this rule does not apply to refugees, who fall under a separate category different from that of aliens. In addition, some employers have dismissed asylum-seekers' work permits as illegitimate because they were uninformed about how they function. Finally, employers are ignorant about refugees' issues with diplomas: UNHCR has described the case of a supermarket chain which participated in a career fair, offering a number of low-skilled positions but requiring diplomas for high levels of education. As a result of this requirement, no refugee was employed.¹¹⁴

5.3. The role of civil society

In the context of the “years of zero integration,” civil society has attempted to fill the void of integration measures and fulfill refugees' right to access meaningful employment. However, most of the initiatives have been *ad hoc* and unsustainable, due to limited financing. The lack of coordination between the different organizations has also resulted in overlapping and saturation

¹¹² Data provided by SAR.

¹¹³ Anna Andreeva. SAR. “Bulgaria on Air” interview. Sofia, Bulgaria. September 4, 2016.

¹¹⁴ Bratanova, Emiliya. Interview by author. Personal Interview. Sofia, Bulgaria. January 9, 2017.

of programs in the capital. Mariana Stoyanova of the Red Cross notes also that there is an excessive focus on SAR centers, while those who live outside of centers receive almost no attention and support. She also comments on the fact that training courses should be tailored to participants' previous background because having people with high and low education studying Bulgarian together has a demotivating effect on those with lower education.¹¹⁵

This section will give an overview of the organizations that are involved in refugee integration. They are all part of the Bulgarian Council on Refugees and Migrants, which acts as a coordinating organ.

The Bulgarian Red Cross is one of the most active organizations in the assistance of refugees. In 2014, it opened an Information and Integration Center financed by UNHCR in order to make up for the closing of SAR's Integration Center. In 2016, the Center started its own pilot "mini-integration program" for 40 people that included Bulgarian classes, vocational training through an external company, as well as a service for translation and legalization of diplomas. It also offered benefits for participants, such as covering social security payments for one year, a free bus pass, and covering the fees for childcare, which is a very important service that facilitates women's participation.¹¹⁶

The Center offers social mediation to anyone who requests it (260 people in 2015), and their statistics show that the biggest number of requests was related to job searches (89 people). SAR sends them updated information any time that an employer contacts it and announces vacancies for refugees, and the Center then publishes the offers on a job board. The Center then helps

¹¹⁵ Stoyanova, Mariana. Interview by Author. Personal Interview. Sofia, Bulgaria. January 12, 2017.

¹¹⁶ Milanova, Lora. Interview by author. Personal Interview. Sofia, Bulgaria. January 11, 2017.

refugees with writing a CV, creates a profile on websites for job seekers, applies for jobs for them or calls employers and schedules interviews.

Another organization that is deeply involved in refugee integration is the Center for Social Rehabilitation and Integration “St. Anna” of Caritas, which was also opened in 2014, replicating many of the services of the Red Cross. It functions thanks to the labor of volunteers, including refugee volunteers, under the motto “help for self-help.” In 2015, it has worked with almost 200 refugees and has assisted 16 of them in finding employment.¹¹⁷

IOM’s office in Bulgaria has organized yet another integration program, which included both refugees and migrants in general. It was meant for 60 beneficiaries and featured language classes, free bus passes, and visits to cultural events and museums. The outcome of the program was that, out of each 15-people group, the average number of those who graduated was 9. This is attributed to the fact that classes were organized during the day and those who found employment prioritized it over the integration program.¹¹⁸

A more novel approach is taken up by The Multi-Kulti Collective, which started as an informal multicultural group that emphasized the value of personal contact for integration. They conduct research and prepare reports on integration, and focus on food as an element that brings people together. One of their programs is a social enterprise that promotes restaurants owned by foreigners and refugees and provides catering with meals produced by them.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Caritas. Migrants and Beneficiaries of International Protection. <http://caritas.bg/bg/in-action/item/4034-bezhanci-i-migranti-caritas>

¹¹⁸ Zaharieva, Vera. Interview by Author. Personal Interview. Sofia, Bulgaria. January 11, 2017.

¹¹⁹ Ivanova, Bistra. Interview by Author. Personal Interview. Sofia, Bulgaria. January 13, 2017

There have been two initiatives aimed at encouraging self-employment among refugees. In 2013, Association Forum organized a course on entrepreneurship and implementation of projects for small businesses. The total cost of the project was \$25,000 but according to participants, it was too formal, only three sessions were held, and the few participants learned very few new skills.¹²⁰ NGO experts observed that the activities did not lead to an improvement in the employment situation of the beneficiaries and none of them actually created their own business.¹²¹

In 2015, activist Stana Iliev organized a business incubator through the Red Cross. Her idea was to train university students to collaborate with refugees on the elaboration of a business plan and to provide financing for the ideas through EU microfunds. Many of the participants created their own businesses but these remained unregistered, not insured and without prospects for growth. The incubator had no more funding to assist them in the following steps and they remained in a limbo.¹²²

Despite the good intentions of their organizers, most one-time initiatives are unsuccessful in achieving their stated goals. This is also the case of the employment fairs that have been organized in recent years by different actors: some by SAR, others by the Employment Agency or IOM. Such fairs happen irregularly and very few of them produce any tangible outcomes. The reasons for this vary - the limited number of employers, the lack of translators for employer – job-seeker interactions, the mixing-up of refugees and third-country nationals who are governed by different legislation, or the lack of coordination between NGOs to present the fairs to job-seeking refugees.¹²³ The Refugee Project has recently taken up a more innovative approach by

¹²⁰ UNHCR Regional Representation for Central Europe. "Access to Employment," 23.

¹²¹ Vankova. "Monitoring Report 2013," 17.

¹²² Boycho Popov. "Entrepreneurship Bulgarian-style." Investor.bg. 28 May 2015.

¹²³ UNHCR Regional Representation for Central Europe. "Access to Employment," 23.

first doing preliminary interviews with refugees who are looking for a job and then reaching out to employers that are a good fit for refugees' qualifications and desires.

In conclusion, we can see that there is a significant overlapping between the large number of “mini integration programs” and integration centers of the different NGOs, while one-time initiatives almost always fail to make a lasting impact. Most importantly, all of these initiatives are top-down, and no efforts are made to empower and engage the ethnic community in Bulgaria. The Council of Refugee Women in Bulgaria is the only group that has been started by refugees. A new association called Al-Sham has recently been founded by a group of Syrians who have traditionally self-organized to provide informal help and mediation to refugees.¹²⁴ However, even though they provide the same services as NGOs (and more effectively), such as assistance with finding a job, accompanying people to the hospital, acting as translators, etc., they do all of this on a voluntary basis and do not have access to the same sources of funding.

¹²⁴ Ezz, Mohamed. Interview by Author. Personal Interview. Sofia, Bulgaria. January 11, 2017.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

The main objective of this thesis has been to investigate and analyze the problems in how the right to work of asylum-seekers in Bulgaria is fulfilled, and to use this knowledge in order to propose a way of thinking about this right that is outside of the dominant paradigm. Chapter 2 has given us the tools we need in order to think more critically about the “sedentary” bias, the economic identity of refugees, and the approaches that a transit country can take (especially the case of Serbia, where the necessity to provide a passageway for transit has completely substituted traditional integration measures). Chapter 3 has shown us, among other things, the inability and unwillingness of the Bulgarian government to respond effectively to the current refugee crisis. Chapter 4 has suggested that even though the right to work of refugees and asylum-seekers is recognized in Bulgaria, since 2014 there has been “zero integration” and zero support for refugees. Finally, Chapter 5 has revealed the lack of interest among refugees for remaining in the country, the types of jobs they choose, and the problems they face for achieving better opportunities.

Taking all of this into account, it is the purpose of this chapter to argue in favor of a new approach, one that is guided by a rights-based approach instead of integration. Such a principle would actually better fit both the needs and desires of refugees, who need money and are likely to migrate further, and of the Bulgarian government, which has no interest in having a large refugee population. So far, the government has attempted to discourage refugees from staying by violating their human rights. From border violence to squalid conditions in camps and no support

for homeless refugees (4 homeless refugees have died this winter, according to the Red Cross¹²⁵), Bulgaria has constructed itself an image of a country to be avoided (an Arabic language “refugee handbook” online reportedly also confirms that¹²⁶). In contrast, the policy in Serbia has been, in the words of researcher Pavle Kilibarda: “If none of these people were interested in staying in Serbia [...], why not simply let them pass, and let them spread word of how kind the Serbian people and authorities had been towards them?”¹²⁷

What if the government respected, protected and fulfilled refugees’ rights, resigning to the fact that they would probably leave the country without expecting them to belong? The next section outlines some good practices in the private sector in Bulgaria and abroad that may serve as an example of a possible approach.

6.1. Alternatives and good practices

The Bulgarian company “Alladin Foods,” whose owner is of Syrian origin, has become popular because of its improvised “mini integration program.” Every few months a representative of the company visits the center in Harmanli and offers job vacancies in informal conversations. The company offers contracts with social security, a training course of 4-5 months, and free housing and food for the entire family. In 2013 and 2014, more than 130 people were accommodated in a house close to the factory with such contracts. In the beginning, the company also organized classes in Bulgarian but these were canceled due to refugees’ lack of motivation.¹²⁸ The owner is aware of the fact that Bulgaria is not the final destination of refugees and that most of them stay in the house for 5-7 months and afterward continue their journey to Western Europe. However,

¹²⁵ Kemal Zaki, Mohamed. Interview by Author. Personal Interview. Sofia, Bulgaria. January 11, 2017.

¹²⁶ Alexander Andreev and Tatiana Vaksberg. “Why do so many refugees avoid Bulgaria?” DW. September 9, 2015.

¹²⁷ Kilibarda. “Serbia Facing the Refugee and Migrant Crisis”. 41.

¹²⁸ Vankova. “Monitoring Report. 2014.” p. 40.

he does not mind the fact that they use the opportunity for training that the company provides before seeking employment in Germany, or even at other similar companies in Bulgaria. Instead, he is glad that he is saving people from unemployment and homelessness and serving as a springboard for better opportunities.¹²⁹

Another Bulgarian company that is actively working towards providing livelihoods to refugees is the textile firm “Pirin Tex.” Its owner is French and he has hired 10 refugees so far, 4 of whom are still working there. The company provides subsidized accommodation for the first 6 months of work, after which they start paying rent. According to “Pirin Tex,” they have gone through administrative hurdles in the process of employing refugees, but the biggest challenge has been the working habits and integrity of refugees. Five or six people have left work after receiving training; some of them have done it even without giving prior notice.¹³⁰ Despite such problems, these two companies have invested in refugees and have sought to empower them.

In Berlin, a project called the ReDi School of Digital Integration is a very good example of a program focused on empowerment through new technologies. ReDi primarily teaches coding skills to refugees. After seeing that some of the more outstanding participants were struggling to find employment but were coming up with innovative ideas for mobile applications, the school decided to also create an entrepreneurship track. There, participants have designed apps such as Bureaucrazy, which helps other refugees navigate the complex German bureaucratic system;

¹²⁹ Martin Dimitrov and Zornitsa Stoilova. “What refugees do.” Capital. February 20, 2015.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

Jasmin, a catering service which gives illiterate Syrian women cooking jobs; or Let's Integrate, which helps Germans and newly arrived refugees connect over shared interests.¹³¹

One of the most useful approaches that are made possible by new technologies is the bridging of refugees with clients abroad. For example, a US-based venture called NaTakallam hires Syrian refugees located in Lebanon, Egypt, Germany, France and Turkey to provide Arabic language lessons through Skype to students around the world. The lessons cost \$15 per hour, which is considerably less than an average Arabic private tutoring session in New York which is \$60-\$70. Many students also highlight the "human experience" when engaging and communicating with the refugees. This shows a way in which refugees' unique life experience can be used as an asset rather than a hindrance.

Using digital platforms to provide remote work is one of the most promising opportunities for refugee employment. Such jobs which may be very appropriate for several groups of refugees: those who are in a process of migration, those who might prefer to work from home, such as women, and those who may be restricted in their freedom of movement, such as center and camp dwellers. Transformify, which was created by a Bulgarian living in the UK, connects remote workers/freelancers with businesses for services such as tax accounting, mobile and web development, graphic design, and social media marketing. One important feature of the platform is that the workers set their own rates and companies are not allowed to renegotiate, which is a safeguard against exploitation. Other similar websites use a crowdsourcing approach by breaking down business operations into "microtasks" that can be completed by a large number of low-skill workers and then combined back together.

¹³¹ Peters, Adele. "Refugees Wanted: Meet the Companies Creating Jobs for the Displaced." *Fast Company*. September 14, 2016.

6.2. Rethinking integration

From the abovementioned examples, we can draw some conclusions that apply for Bulgaria and for transit countries in general. These are not policy recommendations *per se* – they rather paint an ideal picture of how the state should act. All of the conclusions are oriented towards one fundamental standard, which is the upholding of human rights and human dignity. Even though we will be discussing the right to work, we will also acknowledge that human rights are indivisible and interdependent, and that we cannot turn a blind eye to violence and mistreatment at the borders or homelessness among refugees.

First and foremost, the state must comply with its human rights obligations towards refugees and assume its responsibilities. The myriad of ineffective strategies, programs and projects that are drafted but never actually implemented is inadmissible. All of the support to refugees is left to NGOs and their multiple integration centers and initiatives, which unfortunately have limited funding and capacity, count on volunteer labor, and are badly coordinated. The state must assume a central and coordinating role and needs to clarify the responsibilities of each institution.

One major change in the current approach would be to stop framing refugees' access to work within integration programs. As we have seen, a small portion of refugees participate in them, and many of the participants drop out because they lack motivation or because they cannot combine them with employment. Naturally, when a person has a family to feed, they will prefer earning money to studying Bulgarian. SAR and NGOs frequently criticize the lack of motivation to learn Bulgarian, but it is actually understandable, considering how difficult the language is and the fact that they won't use it in the future. We cannot expect refugees to learn Turkish,

Bulgarian, Serbian and Hungarian on their way to their desired destination. Therefore, programs for refugees should not focus on language classes as much, and should not make them a prerequisite for getting access to training and vocational programs.

One way that the state can fulfill refugees' right to work would be to provide short-term opportunities for those who desire to earn money and do not have access to remittances. Bulgaria is the second or third country on the route of refugees and by the time they arrive, most of them have exhausted their savings and need to save up more money for the rest of the trip or pay off their debts to smugglers. This can be addressed by creating programs for temporary regulated jobs that are suitable for people who do not speak the local language.

Nonetheless, this does not mean that refugees should be bound to low-skilled jobs such as tailoring and hairdressing. The examples in the previous section have shown that digital technologies offer many new opportunities for upskilling and empowering people, through developing both hard and soft skills. As in the example of ReDi, refugees who are equipped with the necessary tools come up with their own solutions to the problems they face such as bureaucracy, unemployment, or lack of interaction with the local community.

SAR centers should also open more employment positions for asylum-seekers themselves. The centers are usually understaffed, and asylum-seekers can work there without a permit. Currently, almost none of the asylum-seekers are using this option, because they do not want to commit to a job.¹³² However, opening more temporary positions for cooks, technicians, translators and teachers would provide income and daily activity for center dwellers, as well as forge community bonds.

¹³² Mariya Ilcheva, "Why few refugees want to stay in Bulgaria." *DW*. April 27, 2016.

An idea that is frequently proposed as a solution to “integration problems” and which the government has, unsuccessfully, tried to implement in its latest strategy, is distributing the refugee population around small villages in the country. For example, a Bulgarian philanthropist attempted at one point to buy houses in underpopulated Bulgarian villages and invite refugees to live there and engage in agriculture. However, the idea failed because of the opposition of the local population. It is also unclear how many refugees would have agreed to resettle in half-empty villages. To explain this example, political scientist Anna Krasteva has argued that cities are historically a multicultural space that tolerates differences while villages are more homogenous. In addition, cities have the advantage of an established migrant community which absorbs the newcomers and this is where the “friends of refugees” (civil society organizations, lawyers) are mostly located.¹³³

Therefore, a more appropriate approach would be to work with the ethnic community in the capital, which has been the one to absorb the majority of refugees. Normally the role of the ethnic community is underplayed, because “segregation” is considered the opposite of “integration” and is therefore labeled as undesirable. However, segregation has an ability to provide refugees with social capital, access to ethnic networks, a shared language, and employment in economic enclaves. What differentiates a “neighborhood/quarter” from a “ghetto” (which is what the government fears) are the stigma, poverty and crime rates, which are preventable if measures are taken now to engage and strengthen the ethnic community. Supporting, financing, and involving grassroots organizations like the Council of Refugee Women and Al-Sham in the decision-making process will enable the community to respond to the new challenges in a bottom-up way. Supporting ethnic businesses for job creation and

¹³³ Svetla Encheva. “Anna Krasteva: It is sad how difficult it is for solidarity to advance.” *Marginalia*. 28 July, 2015.

making sure that refugees are provided with fair working conditions will also contribute to community development as a whole.

These are some of the conclusions that can be drawn from the analysis of refugees' right to work in Bulgaria. The proposed approach aimed at wellbeing, rights protection and meaningful employment without the requirement of belonging would potentially improve the situation of refugees and allow them to pursue their economic interests without fearing that this would make them "less refugees." However, we must not forget that if we look at a macro level, these solutions are only patches that remedy some of the consequences of the crisis rather than addressing it at its roots. As David Rieff has said in his book *A Bed for the Night*, "[t]here are no humanitarian solutions to humanitarian problems."¹³⁴ And it is fundamentally hypocritical to talk about protecting human rights and assuaging the effects of international politics and warfare on displaced people, when we ourselves are responsible for bombing their places of origin.

Word count (without footnotes): 14,834

Word count (with footnotes): 16,607

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