



CONNECTION (CONNEcting Cities Towards Integration Action, AMIF 2020 -2022)

Analysis of needs and selecting support services

Action #1 of Sofia Action Plan

Community of Practice EMPLOYMENT

Dissemination level: Public

Date: August 2021

Description: Desk and field research to analyse the needs of potential users, public and private service providers, and propose appropriate services and a concept for the establishment of a of **CITIZEN ADVICE BUREAU FOR THIRD COUNTRY NATIONALS** in Sofia



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ACRONYMS:

AMIF – Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund

BCCI – Bulgarian Chamber of Commerce and Industry

BRC – Bulgarian Red Cross

CSOs – Civil Society Organizations

EU – European Union

GP – general practitioner

KPI – key performance indicator

NAPI - National Integration Action Plans

NGO – non-governmental organization

SDA – Sofia Development Association

SAR - State Agency for Refugees

TCN – Third Country Nationals

UNHCR – The United Nations Refugee Agency

1. INTRODUCTION

Sofia Municipality and Sofia Development Association are committed to increasing efforts for TCN and migrant integration through easier access to services, data minimization, improved data sharing and increased coordination among stakeholders. The unstable situation in Syria and Afghanistan currently increases the migrant influx to Bulgaria, being the outside border of the EU. In addition, Sofia is increasingly attracting more and more TCN, mainly from the Balkans, the former Soviet republics and the Middle East, particularly through tertiary education and seasonal employment. Sofia aims to facilitate the contribution of refugees and migrants to the city's civic, economic and social fabric and recognizes the value host communities bring to enable integration. Moving forward with this vision it is essential for the city to understand the needs of our migrant communities.

Over the next eighteen months Sofia will be part of some innovative developments in the framework of CONNECTION project, setting a blueprint for how best to support and improve the experiences of migrants giving them a sense of belonging and encouraging them on their journey of integration.

The purpose of this needs assessment analysis is to support Sofia in setting up a **CITIZEN ADVICE BUREAU FOR THIRD COUNTRY NATIONALS** – the first of its kind in Sofia and in Bulgaria, an initial phase of a one-stop-shop for foreigners. More specifically, the document covers the following areas:

- Assessing migrant needs in the epidemic situation, with focus on employment but also including other related areas;
- Employers' needs and attitudes;
- Identification of the local government services;
- Identification of services offered by NGOs;
- Identification of reference points for national government services and defining coordination, rather than any delegation of responsibilities.
- Key findings and conclusions.

The document also contains a concept for the CITIZEN ADVICE BUREAU FOR TCN, discussed and generally supported by over 20 stakeholders.

This report is a result of data gathering, processing and analysis that allow for the needs, conditions and capacities of target potential Bureau users and service providers to be identified and quantified/qualified. Data on needs was collected through different techniques: online surveys and group discussions. Secondary data that answers some key questions and allows conclusions to be drawn was also used. It is listed in the Bibliography section of this analysis.

This needs assessment analysis was conducted in collaboration with Sofia stakeholders in the area of third-country nationals and migrant service provision and integration, civil society and community organizations, employment and labour market experts, local and national government and development actors, leading to a jointly owned output.

The needs assessment analysis is developed in the framework of CONNECTION project, co-funded by EU's AMIF. Coordinated by EUROCITIES, with expert support from MigrationWork, CONNECTION promotes learning on how to think and do integration policies in a context of transnational learning. It works through 4 thematic communities of practice bringing together 22 cities from 12 member states with complementary needs and experiences to work on:

- How to develop a strategic approach to integration, participation and interaction;
- How to build a gender dimension into integration policies;
- How to build pathways to employment for migrants;
- How to design one-stop-shops as an integrated response to integration needs.

Sofia Development Association is a project partner on behalf of Sofia Municipality, and is engaged in the Community of Practice 3 – Employment.

2. MIGRANTS NEEDS ASSESSMENT, WITH FOCUS ON EMPLOYMENT

The employment of third-country nationals on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria is determined by the current national legislation in the field of employment of foreigners, which ensures protection of the national labour market; guarantees the rights of Bulgarian citizens and is in line with European Union legislation and practice.

The employment of foreigners on the territory of Bulgaria is regulated in the Law on Labour Migration and Labour Mobility (LLMLM), State Gazette no. 33 from 26.04.2016, in force from 21.05.2016. and the Regulations for its implementation (in force from 30.09.2016). The law provides equal access to the Bulgarian labour market and equal treatment of the citizens of another member state of EU, a country party to the EEA Agreement, or the Swiss Confederation, but imposes certain requirements and restrictions on access to the labour market for third-country nationals.

Third-country nationals may carry out activity on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria only if they reside legally on the territory of the country, which is certified by the relevant residence permit issued by the Ministry of Interior, and / or after issuing a relevant permit by the executive Director of the Employment Agency for access to the Bulgarian labour market.

Asylum-seeker can work 3 months after the date of submitting their application for international protection. Recognized refugees or refugees with humanitarian status have the right to legally work in Bulgaria under the same conditions as Bulgarian citizens.

According to data from the annual *Age, Gender and Diversity Participatory Assessment Report of UNHCR* for 2018¹ the basic needs for refugees relate to legal aid for obtaining refugee status, access to housing, education, finding a job. Refugees and asylum seekers residing in Bulgaria usually find employment in several sectors, including construction, catering, hospitality industry, commerce and retail, and the beauty industry. The report states that refugees cannot benefit from unemployment assistance programs because most of them work without a legal contract. Other major obstacles faced by refugees include poor knowledge of Bulgarian language, access to various financial services and opening of bank accounts, the recognition of prior learning and qualifications and driver's licenses. Beneficiaries of international protection who do not hold any diploma or other qualification document find themselves in a difficult situation with regard to the recognition of their skills and knowledge. Most job seekers can find work in the local market, but many report that

¹ <https://www.unhcr.org/bg/wp-content/uploads/sites/18/2020/06/AGD-PA-2018-FINAL-EN.pdf>

what they earn is not enough to cover their monthly expenses. Without any financial means, most of them report that they live thanks to the remittances sent to them by their relatives living in other European countries.

The biggest problem faced by beneficiaries of international protection is the lack of housing and the ongoing discrimination they face in the real estate market in Bulgaria. Interviewees say that it was difficult for them to find landlords willing to rent to refugees.

Access to Bulgarian language classes is still limited, as they are provided only by NGOs to a very small number of persons granted international protection.

Access to medical services is problematic due to various factors: beneficiaries of international protection are not very familiar with the healthcare system in Bulgaria and often do not know that they have the obligation to cover their monthly health insurance contributions. If they are not paid, refugees lose access to the health care system and cannot register with a GP. Also, doctors are reluctant to enrol refugees in their roster because they do not have access to an interpreter and the medical history of the patients.

Socio-cultural activities are indicated by the participants as something important for their integration and adaptation process. However, these activities are limited and it is impossible to cover all persons with international protection, even though socio-cultural orientation services are provided by several organizations.

Difficult access to information is also a problem identified by the respondents; most of the administrative information about public services is available only in Bulgarian, which includes all kinds of application forms and certificates issued by local and national authorities.

3. EMPLOYERS' NEEDS AND ATTITUDES

Many Bulgarian employers are looking for both permanent and seasonal workers; however, it is hard for them to find employees that cover all their requirements. Employees with all kinds of skills are sought after in the job market but often third country nationals do not fit the job criteria. The biggest reoccurring problem seems to be the language barrier. Knowledge of the local language is a must for almost every job that is offered out there. As mentioned earlier, there aren't yet enough language classes being offered, as only some NGOs offer classes to a small number of persons with international protection.

The level of education can be another problem for third country nationals seeking work on our job market. According to a 2018 *Report on the Employment of Refugees in Bulgaria* done by CATRO², the employers are mostly looking for people with secondary education and rarely do they require a higher education. This is confirmed by BCCIs' 2019 similar report *Action Plan for Refugee Integration*, where 62% of the employers interviewed need workers with secondary education. Considering that in 2018, according to data from SAR³, only 20% of the migrants had a secondary education or higher, we can conclude that there is a mismatch between the needs of employers and the level of education of the potential migrant employees.

Even if the migrants have some kind of education, it is often hard for them to prove it. A lot of them lack the proper documents needed to verify their education, qualification, or previous work experience. This is another problem Bulgarian employers face when looking to hire migrants and it is very hard to go around it. But in general, the Bulgarian employer is not familiar with hiring migrants. Only 14% of the participants in the research of BCCI had previously hired third country nationals. The companies that had workers from third countries share that these were people mainly from Macedonia, Moldova, Russia, Afghanistan. Most employers are left with good impressions of their work saying that they are responsible and conscientious, willing to work and learn Bulgarian.

Bulgarian employers are mostly willing to hire third country nationals as long as they have the right qualification, experience and understanding of the language but finding workers that have all these basics covered is still hard. According to BCCIs' research, most employers feel like they do not have good enough access to information regarding hiring third country nationals. SAR collects and provides general data on its website on a monthly basis, but detailed information on the current employment needs of asylum seekers is not yet publicly available. This is a major obstacle for any potential employer interested in the refugee profile.

² <https://www.unhcr.org/bg/wp-content/uploads/sites/18/2019/03/CATRO-Employment-Report-BG-FINAL.pdf>

³ <https://www.aref.government.bg/index.php/en/node/179>

There are two other obstacles in hiring migrants identified by employers that are worth mentioning. One is the uncertainty about the period of stay in Bulgaria. This is a problem for long term realization too as when employers are uncertain about the period of stay, they are less likely to invest in additional education or qualification needed for the job.

Nevertheless, companies are showing that they are willing to invest in migrants as long as they show initiative and willingness to learn. The second obstacle is the lack of information about the cultural and religious specifics that often provoke subconscious fears, stereotypes and prejudices in the workplace if not identified.

Fig. 1: Top five obstacles to hiring refugees according to employers



Source: CATRO

CATRO's report identifies the processing industry, hotels and restaurants, transport and construction and the agricultural sector as the most suitable employment opportunities for refugees in the future.

4. SERVICES OFFERED BY NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS TO MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES ON THE TERRITORY OF SOFIA MUNICIPALITY

Many non-governmental and volunteer organizations work on the territory of Sofia Municipality, which support the process of integration of migrants and refugees - through information, training, legal aid, psychological assistance, etc. This section describes by sector the organizations and the type of support offered to the target group of migrants, together with a list of the organizations offering them. This information is based on the multilingual website migrantlife.bg, developed and maintained by the Foundation Access to Rights.⁴

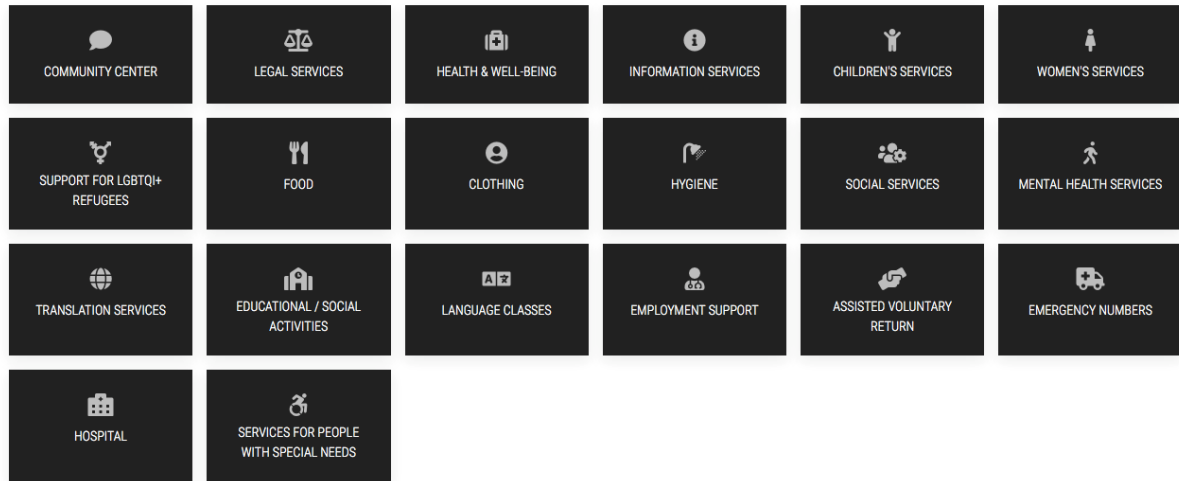
The main categories of services offered include:

- legal aid
- emergency services
- social services
- psychological support
- healthcare
- employment
- transport and travel
- financial services
- education and Bulgarian language courses (for children and adults)
- housing.

Specialized organizations also provide services specifically related to obtaining international protection status, family reunification, obtaining Bulgarian citizenship, etc. For each of these services, the site presents brief information tailored to the needs of the target group, as well as contacts of organizations that work in the field and can provide assistance. An interactive map shows the location of the service providers and directions on how to get to the respective place. Some services are offered by more than one organization although at present there is no coordinating unit or a referral point that can direct migrants to the service best suited to them. Furthermore, many of these services are offered on a project-basis and when the project comes to an end so does the funding. This is a major obstacle to sustainability and the achievement of long-term objectives in key areas of integration for the migrants, such as employment, education, social and cultural life.

⁴ <http://migrantlife.bg/bg/about-us2>

Fig. 2: Services offered to migrants and refugees by NGOs



Source: <http://migrantlife.bg/bg/about-us2>.

Main service providers and organizations working with migrants and refugees:

- [Bulgarian Red Cross](#)
- [International Organization for Migration](#)
- [Bulgarian Helsinki Committee](#)
- [Caritas Bulgaria](#)
- [Council of Refugee Women in Bulgaria](#)
- [Center for Legal Aid - Voice in Bulgaria](#)
- [Nadia Center](#)

Information on services for migrants and refugees, as well as the institutions (national and local governments) and organizations providing them is also available on the new website maintained by the Bulgarian Council of Refugees and Migrants here:

<http://mapping.refugee-integration.bg/>

5. SERVICES PROVIDED BY STATE AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND THEIR COORDINATION

From 2015 to 2020, the Republic of Bulgaria has a National Strategy on Migration, Asylum and Integration (2015-2020), which aims at the successful integration into Bulgarian society of persons who have received international protection and the effective use of their potential for the socio-economic development of the country. For the Strategy implementation National Integration Action Plans (NAPI) are developed annually. Since 2017, an Ordinance on the terms and conditions for concluding, implementing and terminating the agreement for integration of foreigners with asylum or international protection (Ordinance) is in force. The Ordinance regulates the agreement that beneficiaries of international protection can sign with the municipality in which they wish to reside.

In March 2021, a new National Strategy on Migration of the Republic of Bulgaria (2021-2025), which builds on the previous period of the National Strategy (2015-2020) and follows the commitments of the Republic of Bulgaria arising from its membership in the European Union, was adopted. The new strategy prioritizes the provision of conditions for the reception of migrants who arrive legally in the country for work, study or other reasons and have legal grounds to stay. Taking into account the needs of the labour market, it focuses in particular on attracting third-country nationals (TCN) by reducing administrative procedures for admission for the purpose of residence and work, improving their access to information on employment opportunities in the country in coordination with counselling and information centers, etc.

The National Strategy (2015-2020) and the Bulgarian legislation have clear provisions for the process of integration of the beneficiaries of international protection in all its components (legal information, social services, housing, work, education, etc.). At present, however, none of the strategies contains specific provisions on information, social and health services, education and other services for TCN.

The analysis below presents in more detail the state of integration services, according to the Strategy until 2020, as in the New Strategy the part dedicated to integration is very short and provides only general guidelines. The main sectors of integration as per the 2020 Strategy are:

- Identity documents
- Housing
- Healthcare
- Education
- Employment



- Social assistance
- Family reunion
- Bulgarian citizenship.

The Bulgarian state provides foreigners seeking protection on its territory with a fair procedure for granting international protection, the right to social and health insurance, free access to education, conditions for retraining and employment in order to better integrate into society.

Detailed information about the services that can be used by persons seeking and receiving international protection is available on the website of the State Agency for Refugees - <http://www.aref.government.bg/en>, as well as in the Handbook on Integration of Persons with International protection of <http://www.refugee-integration.bg/en/>.

Fig. 3: Services offered to migrants and refugees by state and local public bodies



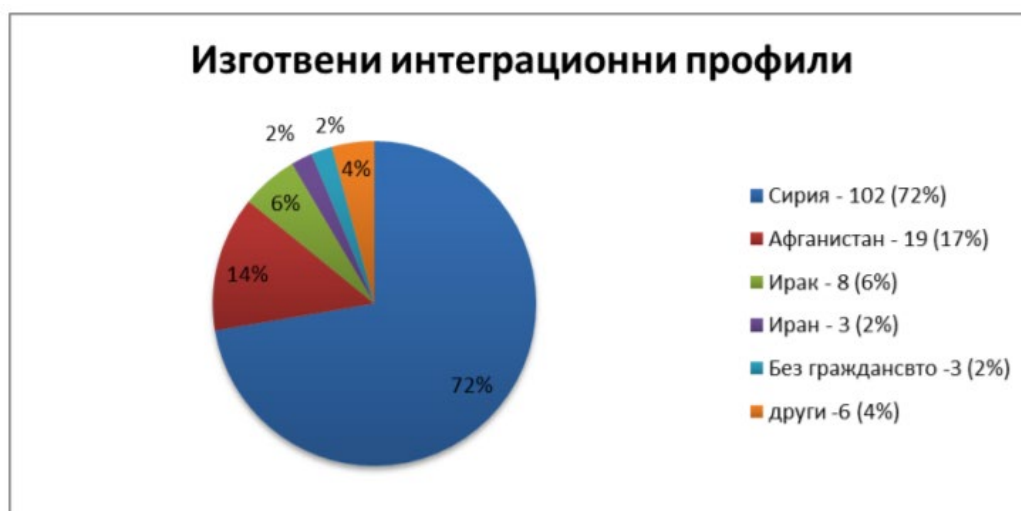
Types of special protection, source: <http://www.aref.government.bg/>

Information in English about the types of special protection could be found at <http://www.aref.government.bg/en/node/29>.

The main institutions providing services to foreigners are the State Agency for Refugees with the Council of Ministers (CoM) and local municipalities, represented by mayors. SAR works in direct contact with the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, the Ministry of Health, the Employment Agency and other institutions, as well as cooperates intensively with the Bulgarian Red Cross and other non-governmental organizations.

The process for integration of beneficiaries of international protection proceeds as follows: SAR prepares Integration profiles of the foreigner during the asylum and international protection procedure. The profiles are submitted to the Employment Agency and to interested employers in order to refer the beneficiaries of international protection to the relevant qualification and re-qualification opportunities and to help them with getting a job.

Fig. 4: Number of integration profiles prepared for foreigners who have expressed a desire to stay in the Republic of Bulgaria after acquiring refugee or humanitarian status for 2020:



Source: SAR Annual Report for 2020.

During the asylum and international protection procedure, SAR provides information on the possibility of concluding an Integration Agreement with a municipality in which the beneficiary of international protection wishes to settle, as well as information materials presenting in an understandable way to the foreigner the rights and obligations arising from this agreement.

After the decision on granting the status of protection is served, the recognized refugees are given the opportunity to participate in the National Action Plan for Integration (NAPI). They complete and submit an application for participation, which is reviewed by a competent authority. Based on the application and as an integral part of the Integration Agreement, the mayor of the host municipality prepares an Individual Integration Plan, which includes specific integration measures (for education, social assistance, medical care and health insurance, access to the labour market, etc.)

An Agreement defining the rights and obligations of all parties involved in the integration process is signed. During the participation in the NAPI, the beneficiaries of international protection have the right to health insurance and access to social services provided by the Labour Office Directorate and the Social Assistance Directorate, etc. When the period of being included in NAPI is over, the beneficiaries of international protection can settle down anywhere in the country. SAR assists in the transportation of the foreigner and their family members to the respective municipality. From that moment on, the foreigners are entirely responsible for finding a house and for covering their monthly expenses. They have the right to register as job seekers and receive social assistance in accordance with the same procedures applicable to Bulgarian citizens.

Municipalities which are willing to accept persons granted international protection on their territory must file an application to SAR in accordance with the 2017 Ordinance, taking into account the state of the local labour market, the available qualifications of the refugees, local demographic trends and economic development of the municipality, the existence of communities of foreigners which is important in order to avoid segregation and to prevent risks to socio-economic stability and security. Upon approval of the application, the mayor of the municipality concludes an agreement for integration with the recipient of international protection.

According to the 2017 Ordinance, the mayor of the municipality who has submitted an application for an integration agreement has the following responsibilities with regard to the integration of the beneficiaries of international protection:

1. Making arrangements and providing assistance for housing the foreigner and the members of his/her family;
2. Registering the foreigner and his/her family in the population register;
3. Assisting the foreigner with filing an application for obtaining Bulgarian IDs;
4. Assisting with the registration at the Labour Office Directorate;
5. Making a referral to the Social Assistance Directorate, if necessary;
6. Making arrangements for drawing up an individual integration plan for any child/ren in the foreigner's family, jointly with the Social Assistance Directorate and the child's legal representative;
7. Providing access to other administrative services;
8. When the foreigner and his/her family are entered in the population register, refer them to the Regional Office of Education;
9. Monitoring and control of the enrolment of children who are subject to compulsory preschool and school education, including minor and underage beneficiaries of international protection;

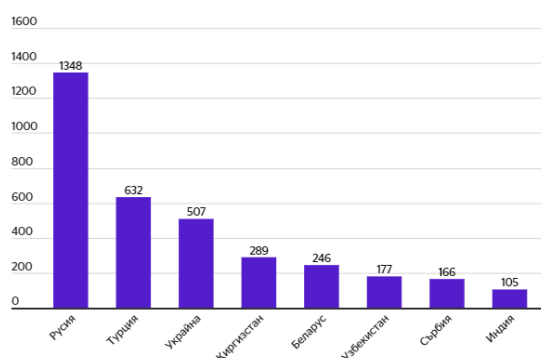
10. Providing information about selecting a family doctor on the territory of the municipality;
11. Providing opportunities for sports activities and events.⁵

The full list of state bodies and public institutions that provide integration services, as well as a brief description of their activities can be found on the website <http://www.refugee-integration.bg/en/>, developed under the project “Advocacy for the integration of refugees in Bulgaria Funded by the UNHCR Office in Bulgaria.

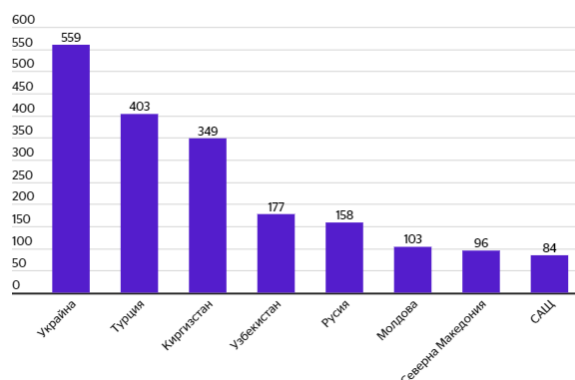
Although there are no provisions for services that third-country nationals can benefit from, highly qualified TCN arriving in the country have good prospects for integration and are well prepared through private services. They receive work visas such as blue cards – work permits of the European Union, offered to foreign citizens for highly specialized qualifications. After 2016, through blue cards, Bulgaria managed to attract some TCN – mostly IT specialists, but also engineers and managers. Since 2017, the blue card is valid for a period of 4 years without the need for renewal. In 2020 (until September) 401 blue cards were issued, while their number for the same period in 2019 was 330. Regarding the seasonal employment for 2020, 2431 TCNs are registered, while in 2019 ten thousand TCNs have been registered.

Fig. 5: Number of work permits issues to foreigners

**К | НАЙ-МНОГО ПОСТАНОВЕНИ РЕШЕНИЯ
ЗА РАБОТА НА ЧУЖДЕНЦИ
(01.01.2020-30.09.2020)**



**К | НАЙ-МНОГО ПОСТАНОВЕНИ РЕШЕНИЯ
ЗА РАБОТА НА ЧУЖДЕНЦИ ЗА 2019 Г.**

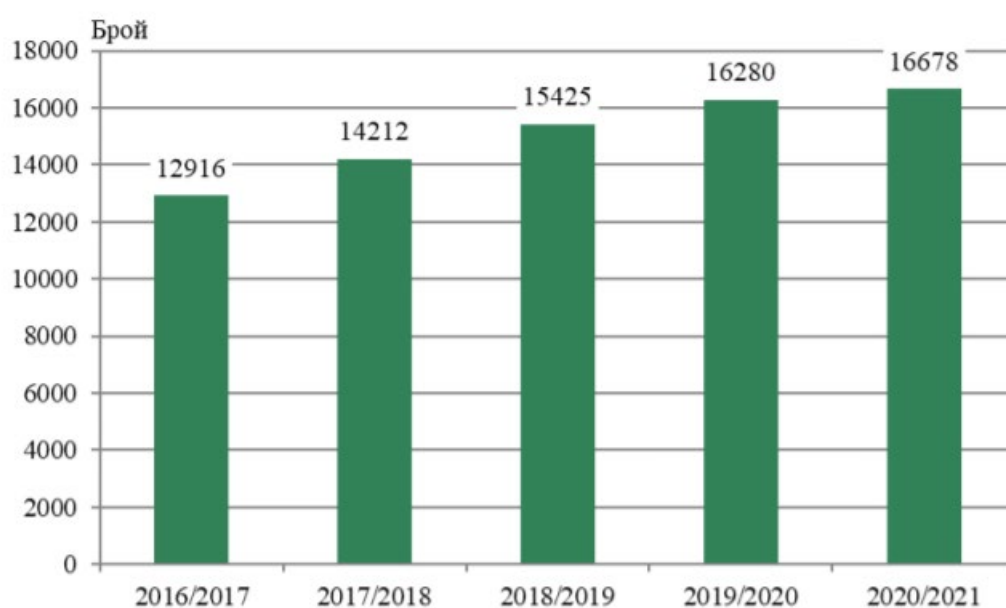


Source: Employment Agency

⁵ Ordinance on the terms and procedures for concluding, enforcing and terminating the integration agreement of beneficiaries of international protection of July 2017, <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/librarydoc/ordinance-on-the-terms-and-procedures-for-concluding-enforcing-and-terminating-the-integration-agreement-of-beneficiaries-of-international-protection>. Available in Bulgarian at <https://dv.parliament.bg/DVWeb/showMaterialDV.jsp?idMat=116399>.

Bulgaria also provides the opportunity for foreign citizens to study in higher education institutions. Information on the procedures for admission of foreigners can be found on the websites and administrations of the respective universities. For the 2020/2021 academic year, 16,678 foreign citizens are studying on the territory of Bulgaria, which is 8.9% of the total number of all enrolled students. There is a tendency to increase their number, as the most frequently chosen specialties are in the field of healthcare, and the largest number of foreign students are Greeks.

Fig. 6: Foreign students enrolled in Bulgarian universities



Source: National Statistical Institute

The main problem hindering the work of the institutions is the lack of an integrated information system. The diverse collection of data on foreigners in Bulgaria leads to duplication of activities by the structures of the Ministry of Interior and SAR. Sometimes this causes double registrations or discrepancies in the personal data of the same person in the separate information arrays. This complicates the implementation of administrative control of foreigners and slows down correspondence between individual institutions. The establishment of a single online platform for registration of all legally residing foreigners and those who have entered the country illegally will optimize the work of state bodies working with this category of persons. The scrutiny of administrative control over foreigners in the event of increased migratory pressure will also be facilitated.

6. STAKEHOLDERS NEEDS AND EXPECTATIONS

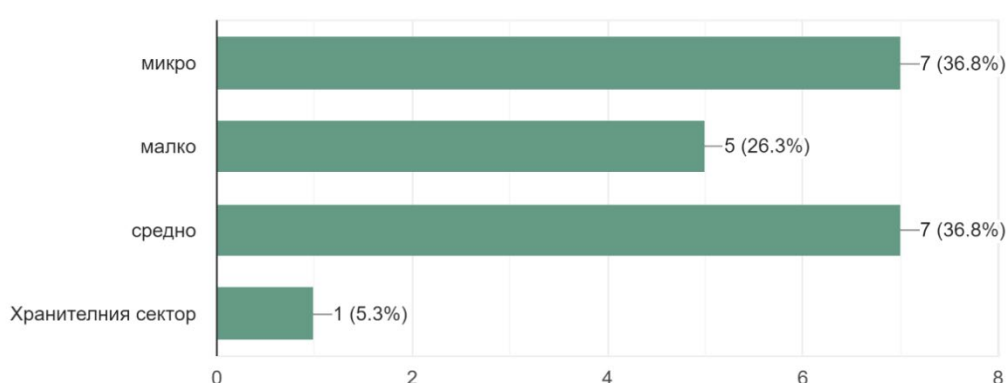
6.1. NEEDS AND EXPECTATIONS OF EMPLOYERS ON THE TERRITORY OF SOFIA MUNICIPALITY

The survey was conducted in the period May-June 2021, through a questionnaire sent by email to employers and businesses in Sofia and published on the SDA website. The purpose of the survey was to identify the needs of employers for services and assistance related to the employment of migrants, which can be obtained from the new Office for Information and Services for Third-Country Nationals, established jointly by SDA, Bulgarian Red Cross and the municipal enterprise "Markets" West of Sofia Municipality. Nineteen companies took part in the survey. The questions covered topics related to hiring migrants, the most common obstacles they encounter in the process, the opportunities to improve the awareness of both employers and migrants about the labor market conditions in Sofia, etc. Below are summarized the conclusions of the survey.

The respondents are mainly micro, small and medium enterprises.

1. В какъв икономически сектор работи вашето предприятие? То е:

19 responses



To the question "Are you interested in hiring migrants or refugees and have you hired any so far? In your opinion, what are the main obstacles to hiring migrants?" most respondents confirm that they have such an interest, and some of them have already hired refugees. The obstacles they name are "lack of language skills in Bulgarian and lack of knowledge of

Bulgarian law"; administrative and organizational barriers, among them non-recognition of prior qualifications, "a lot of paperwork, a problem with identity documents and their [migrants'] status, difficulty paying them through bank transfers because the banks refuse to open an account and issue a debit card to some refugees and migrants." According to the employers, the market test procedure for hiring migrants is "redundant and unnecessary"; on the other hand, the requirement for third-country nationals to make up to 35% of the company's staff makes it impossible for "start-ups to hire such employees."

With regard to the information that employers need when hiring migrants, the largest percentage - over 68% of respondents - indicate access to migrant job seekers, followed by information on the legal and regulatory framework of the employment regime for migrants.

3. Каква информация би ви била най-полезна при наемането на мигранти?

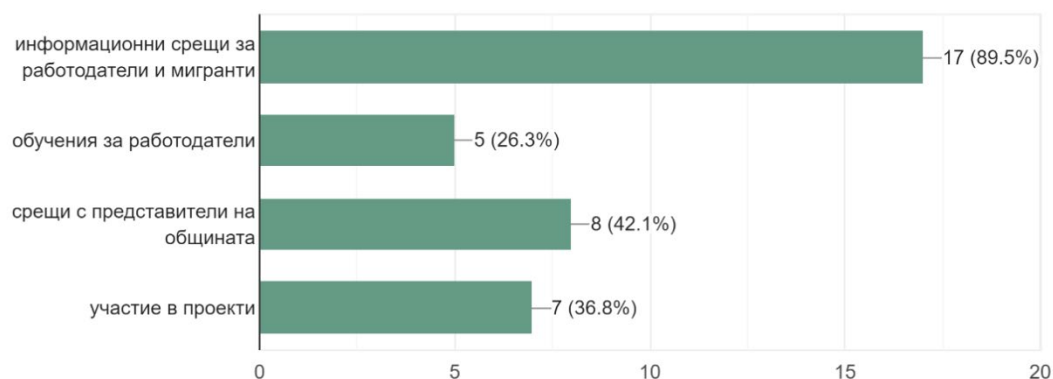
19 responses



Regarding the work of the newly established Bureau and what services would be most useful for employers, the largest percentage indicate the need for information meetings for both employers and migrants, meetings with representatives of the municipality, information about opportunities to participate in integration-related projects. For most of the respondents, the Bureau, as well as Sofia Municipality need to provide information about the integration programs on the territory of the municipality; to facilitate employers' access to migrants looking for work, and last but not least, to organize direct meetings with representatives of the municipality and experts in the field of labor integration for third-country nationals. Approximately the same answers are given to the question how non-governmental organizations in Sofia working on integration can assist local employers. In this case, again, most respondents mention facilitating the access to the target groups of migrants and refugees, followed by consultations on various integration issues, as well as organizing language courses for migrants.

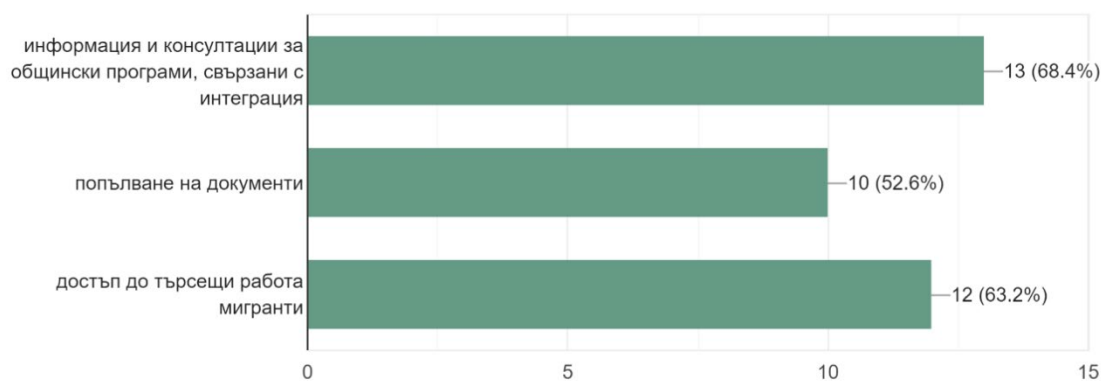
4. Бихте ли се възползвали от услугите на Бюрото и в каква сфера?

19 responses



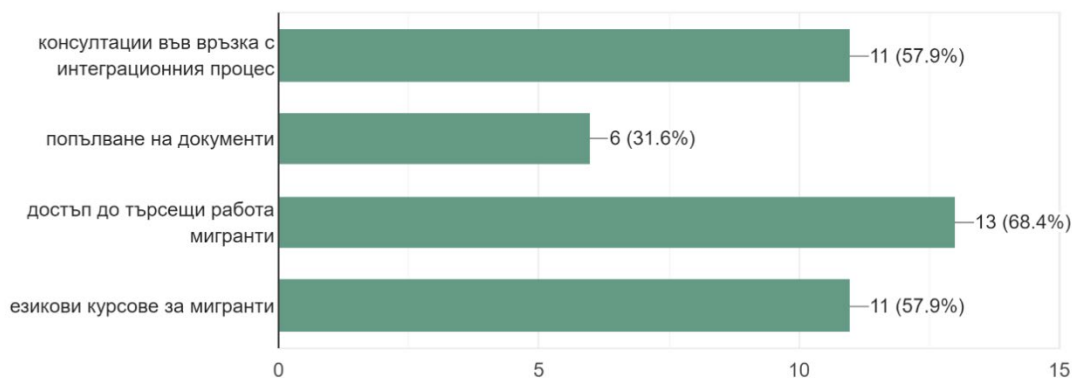
5. Каква подкрепа бихте искали да получите от Столична община, ако решите да наемете мигранти?

19 responses



6. Каква подкрепа бихте искали да получите от неправителствени организации в процеса на наемане на мигранти?

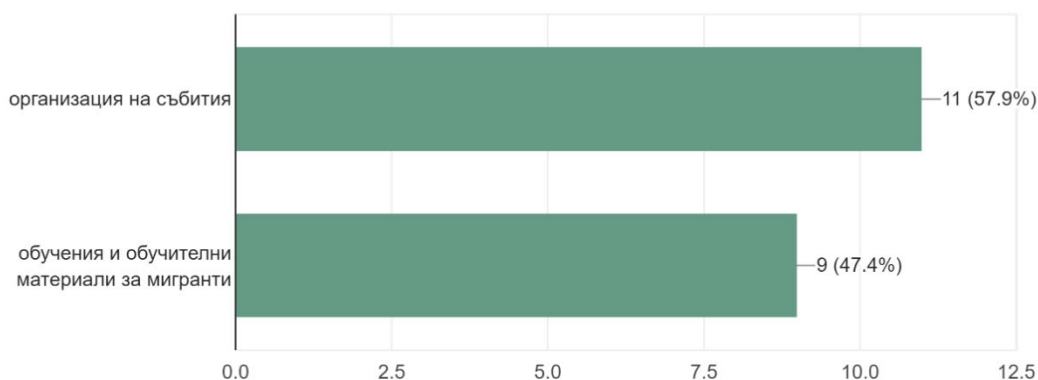
19 responses



With regard to the organization of the Bureau's services, more than half of the employers state that they could support its operation by organizing various events and providing training for migrants looking for work.

7. С какви ресурси бихте могли или бихте искали да подкрепите работата на Бюрото?

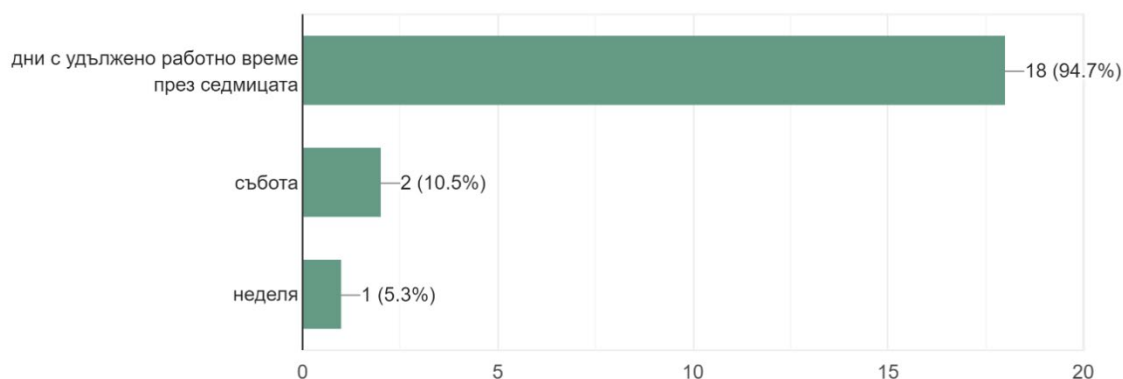
19 responses



Almost all respondents prefer the Bureau to work extended hours on certain days of the week which will make it easier for employers and migrants to meet.

8. Какво работно време на Бюрото би било удобно за вас?

19 responses



MAIN CONCLUSIONS

The survey indicates that most companies in Sofia do not have much experience in hiring foreigners. Professional qualifications, experience and knowledge of the Bulgarian language are the most important prerequisites for hiring migrants and third-country nationals. According to the employers, it is necessary to simplify and speed up the procedure for issuing a permit for access to the Bulgarian labour market for foreigners, as well as to inform companies more widely on how to hire foreigners. In this regard, Sofia Municipality can organize information meetings in the Bureau, together with NGOs and employers, on key topics related to hiring third-country nationals.

Sectors that employ people with migrant and refugee status include construction and repairs, catering, transport and logistics.

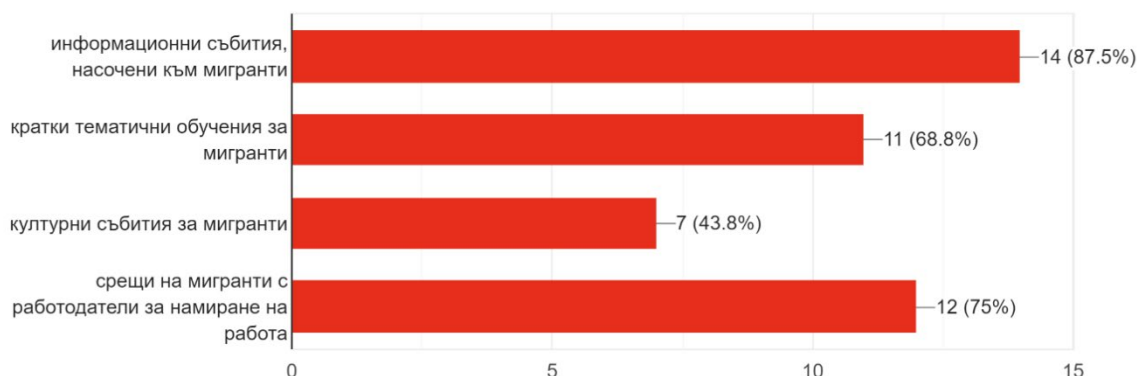
6.2. NEEDS AND EXPECTATIONS OF NGOS WORKING IN THE FIELD OF INTEGRATION ON THE TERRITORY OF SOFIA MUNICIPALITY

A similar survey was conducted among representatives of the NGO sector in Sofia - organizations working in the field of migration and integration; the survey was sent by e-mail and published on the SDA website. Sixteen organizations responded and their answers are summarized as follows.

When asked what the main services provided by the Bureau should be, more than 87% indicate information events aimed at the migrant community. This is followed by training for migrants and meetings between employers and migrants jobseekers, as well as organizing cultural events.

1. Според вас, какви трябва да са основните дейности на Бюрото насочени към мигрантски общности на територията на Столична община?

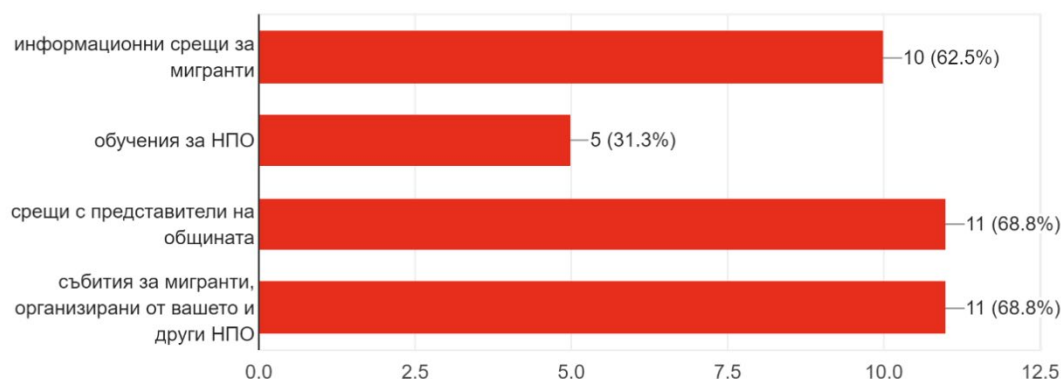
16 responses



The largest percentage of respondents indicate that the Bureau could complement their current work with more opportunities to organize events for migrants in Sofia; the same percentage of respondents - over 68% - also indicate the need for more meetings with representatives of the municipality on topics related to integration policies. More than half of the respondents also point to the need for Sofia Municipality to provide "financial resources" and "premises" for NGOs to carry out their integration work. Other needs identified include "information on programs, integration measures, funding opportunities for NGO projects to work with migrants", support for the labour integration of migrant women; assistance for the St. Petka Crisis Center, dissemination of information among migrant communities about the services for women provided by the Animus Association, etc. Last but not least, respondents also mention meetings with employers on social and health issues related to third-country nationals and the provision by the municipality of accessible information on visa issues, obtaining citizenship, etc.

2. Бихте ли се възползвали от услугите на Бюрото и в каква сфера?

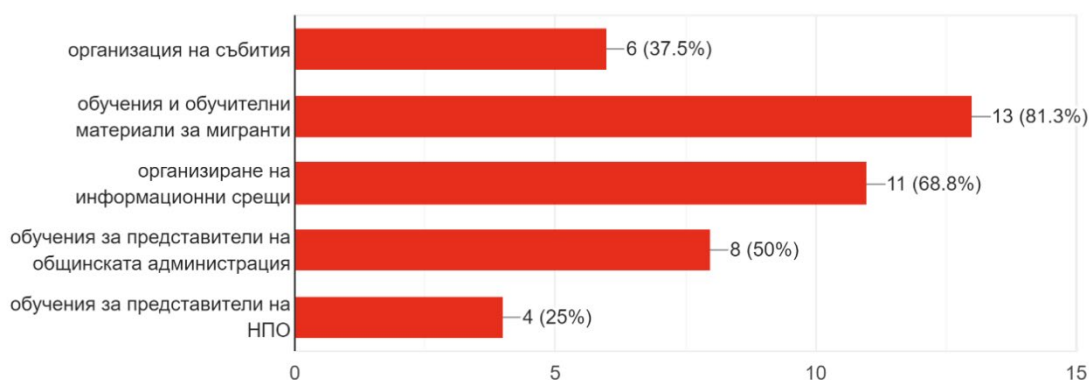
16 responses



Regarding the cooperation between NGOs and the Bureau, over 80% of the respondents state that they can provide training materials and organize training sessions for migrants on the premises of the Bureau, incl. Bulgarian language classes. Next is the organization of information meetings for migrants, followed by the organization of information and training events aimed at representatives of the municipality and the NGO sector on integration issues.

4. С какви ресурси бихте могли или бихте искали да подкрепите работата на Бюрото?

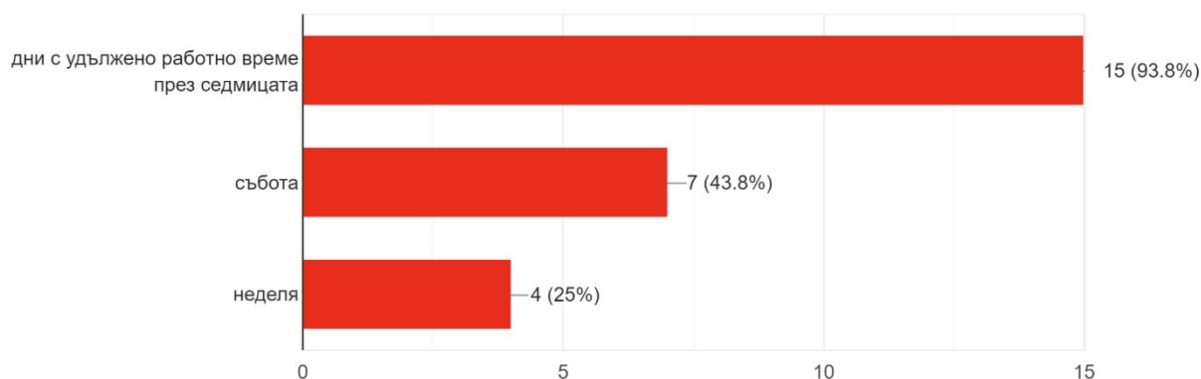
16 responses



Similar to the employers, NGOs also prefer the Bureau to have days with extended working hours, as well as the opportunity to hold events on Saturdays and Sundays. One of the proposals is for the Bureau to serve as an office space for the Refugee Advisory Board established in 2020, to hold information and consultation meetings to migrant and refugees.

5. Какво работно време на Бюрото би било удобно за вас?

16 responses



MAIN CONCLUSIONS

As can be seen from the surveys, both employers and the NGO sector emphasize the need for a service center which is to provide up-to-date information to all stakeholders - employers, NGOs, migrants, refugees, third-country nationals - on integration issues in Sofia Municipality. Regular meetings between representatives of the municipality and NGOs are recommended as well, as a means of coordinating the efforts of all actors, using human and financial resources most efficiently, and achieving synergies between integration activities taking place at different levels (grassroots, local, and national). Respondents also declare their readiness to support the work of the Bureau in various ways, by providing information materials or by organizing various thematic events.

7. KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Sofia lags behind most of its European peers when it comes to the integration of immigrants. Various institutions were involved in the integration of migrants, but their efficiency is hindered by a lack of cooperation, their dispersed location, the diversity of procedures involved and a complex bureaucracy.

It is crucial to avoid the development of ghettos or parallel societies, with migrants who end up knowing very little of Bulgaria's language, culture and history, as this would be detrimental to Sofia's social fabric.

Currently, over 20 different services are available to migrants varying from social security to judicial services, from school enrollment to banking services, in different parts of town, provided by different organizations and institutions. At the same time, municipal servants in regional administrations do not speak the languages of the majority of migrants.

A Bureau for Information and Services for Third Country Nationals as a first step to a one-stop shop could help. It should be based on a mutual cooperation between the relevant public services, NGOs and CSOs working with migrant communities and representative groups of third-country nationals.

A one-stop-shop with all the relevant services grouped together under one roof, would arguably be ideal. However, it is not viable for Sofia to emulate it in the short term since no such service even existed for Sofia citizens, let alone immigrants. Instead, in the short-term, it is recommended to set up an office, which does not process applications itself, but which is the reference point for those seeking integration services and information. Ensuring open access to everyone, regardless the status, is also a key operating principle. The centralized information and opportunities should be available to all city residents, not just migrants.

The Bureau should streamline services to TCN in one location, carefully selected to be both central and convenient. The convenience of the service centre also attracts non-immigrants to these locations. This helps "mainstream" city services and promote the healthy development of diverse neighbourhoods and inclusive communities. Social workers need to speak the languages that are most spoken by the migrants: Arabic, Farsi, Pashtu, Kurdish.

Apart from a physical space, the Bureau must have an online function as well – with digitalized services and opportunities, so necessary in the conditions of an ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. This would help integrate migrants into both city life and work much faster and with less frustration and fewer false starts.

Not only immigrants, but also employers and public institutions benefit tremendously from short, simple and transparent procedures for the application and acquisition of work and residence permits, family certificates, and so on. When these services are delivered correctly and with fairness, a powerful message of respect and dignity is communicated.

Reliable access and accurate information helps build trust in local government and public institutions. Trust promotes attachment and a sense of belonging, both important steps towards active civic engagement and participation.

Making it Work for You:

- Creating a centralized service point for newcomers is practical and efficient in addition to ensuring that immigrants have standardized information and ready access to core services;
- Centralized services also bring newcomers together with local public institutions and service providers in an open and friendly environment;
- Coordinating service delivery to newcomers requires institutions and service providers to collaborate, resulting in less duplication of services and increased cost effective programming;
- Service coordination includes public institutions as well as community and private sector organizations, encouraging public-private partnership;
- Language and cultural mediation minimizes error and mis-communication, improves service delivery and builds trust.

Figure 1: The Benefits of implementation of One-Stop-Shop, Handbook on How to Implement a One-Stop-Shop for Immigrant integration⁶

In addition, the bureau should also provide opportunities to migrant community organizations and migrant-lead organization to use the premises for their own events and initiatives, and thus have their voice heard and more prominent as a necessary step to empowerment.

⁶ Catarina Reis Oliveira (ACIDI, I.P.), Maria Abranches (IOM – Mission in Portugal) and Claire Healy (ACIDI, I.P.)
HANDBOOK ON HOW TO IMPLEMENT A ONE-STOP-SHOP FOR IMMIGRANT INTEGRATION, ISBN 978-989-8000-76-7

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Appendix 1: CITIZEN ADVICE BUREAU FOR TCN CONCEPT



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BUREAU FOR INFORMATION AND SERVICES

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VISION

Sofia as a multicultural city.

Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria, has always been a multicultural city with rich history, bringing together people from different part of the world. Their way of life has produced a mix of traditions, cultures, beliefs and opportunities for shared future. Sofia does not fall behind other European capitals and works on its long-term 2050 vision. It aims to offer quality urban environment, combined with competitive and innovative economy, sustainable energy resources, clean environment with lots of green spaces, friendly public and shared facilities and places, positive image, healthy lifestyle, but also a cultural centre, providing opportunities for education to all citizens, as well as a feeling of belonging. There are two long-term objectives that correspond with the presence of TCN in the city. These are “Authentic and multilayer city”, which encourages activities leading to the manifestation and understanding of other cultures, and “Community unification”, that facilitates activities resulting in stronger feeling of community and tolerance, secure and safe public space, equal opportunities for development and high living standard for all.


IDENTIFIED NEEDS

TCN as a resource for the development of Sofia economic, cultural and social environment.

In recent years Sofia as the largest city and biggest cultural, political and economic centre in Bulgaria attracts ever increasing number of foreign-born populations, including refugees and migrants. From the economic point of view Sofia is the city with the lowest percent of unemployed and the biggest shortage of labour force in Bulgaria. Sofia is home to many universities that attract more and more international students.

All these traits are a prerequisite for the development of services to provide information and advice to TCN, directing them to national and local structures, NGOS and CSOs, employers, social services providers, etc., with the goal to engage them with most efficiency and effectiveness with the existing social, economic and cultural structures of the city and to be able to contribute to their development according to their expertise and interests. TCN are a resource to meet some of the needs of the city, too, and can be a driver for development and innovations.

As of now, there is no centralized national or local point in Sofia that combines in one place information, services and resources for TCN, which leads to loss of opportunities and fragmentation, disinformation and lack of consistency for the incorporation of foreign-born populations in the public processes in Sofia.



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The functions of Sofia regional administrations are hindered since they have no unified procedures or the needed capacity to service TCN. At the same time data regarding the number and profile of TCN in Sofia is limited and unsystematic.

In particular, stakeholders working with TCN in Sofia have identified the following needs, based on their lasting experience of social, administrative, cultural work and service provision:

- Coordination between TCN and service providers, one-stop-shop information adapted to the needs of TCN.
- Information about TCN in Sofia – residents, students, workers, refugees and migrants, that can be of interest to local organizations, business companies, Bulgarian citizens who would like to learn more and be included in various initiative.
- Directing and referring TCN to existing services and assistance, offered by institutions and organizations.
- Assistance with interpretation during institutional visits, filling in administrative forms, etc.
- Direct support for TCN with Bulgarian language classes, social and cultural orientation, professional qualifications, etc. in accordance with the declared needs and the available funding (including online courses).
- Activities with children, including while the parents attend courses.
- Increased effectiveness and efficiency of services provided by Sofia municipality.
- Securing consistency of services that are provided on a project-based basis.

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TARGET AUDIENCES

The potential users of services include a broad circle of stakeholders.

- TCN, including students, workers, refugees, asylum seekers, persons without citizenship, EU citizens with special needs;
- Bulgarian citizens interested in the topic of migration and asylum, willing to take part in ad hoc initiatives or willing to offer support (as volunteers, donors, etc.);
- Institutions and organizations offering services;
- Regional administration of Sofia municipality;
- Employers and other stakeholders.

ACTIVITIES

The Bureau is not a new legal subject, it does not provide own services but rather coordinates and makes popular services that are already being provided. In addition, it conveys own training and advocacy programme and provides the space for appropriate activities to NGO and CSO partners.

- Coordinates (refers to) service provision to TCN from Sofia administration, bureau partners and stakeholders.
- Offers “one-stop-shop” type of information on site and electronically (internet site and/or Facebook) regarding services, events, trainings, etc. to foreign-born and local residents.
- Supporting NGOs and CSOs provide services and hold info sessions on rotation.
- Conducts trainings and own programme events.
- Offers the premises for cultural, educational and socializing events organized by the supporting organizations as part of an agreed schedule.

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GOVERNANCE

Shared governance based on official agreement between Sofia Municipality, SDA, UNHCR and BRC, with a complementary list of supporting organizations.

Expert council

It consists of representatives of Sofia Municipality, SDA, UNHCR and BRC. It gathers 2 to 5 times a year, adopts an annual programme, and budget, monitors the activities, effectiveness and quality of work.

Staff

The Bureau is staffed by two social workers, appointed by BRC, and one municipal servant (external workplace for an experienced servant in Vitosha regional administration). As an alternative: one coordinator, appointed by SDA.

Supporting organizations can allocate their representatives for the provision of specific services on rotation, based on the approved bureau programme.

TECHNICAL EQUIPMENT AND FINANCIAL BACKING

The financing of the Bureau will be implemented on a partnership basis and will be shared as outlined in the agreement.

Premises

The premises are provided by Sofia Municipality. Sofia Municipality also covers the utility costs necessary for its functioning.

Staff costs

Staff costs for the social workers are paid by BRC (with UNHCR funding). The staff costs of the municipal servant or SDA coordinator are covered respectively by Sofia Municipality or SDA.

Equipment

BRC provides office equipment, online presence and PR. Sofia Municipality/SDA provide link to municipal structures, databases and their support. Partners purchase additional equipment and furniture if needed – tables and chairs, smart board, etc.

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EFFICIENCY AND EXPECTED RESULTS

Since the Bureau is established as a 18-month pilot project, its efficiency and effectiveness will be assessed against KPIs annually. As a rule, each service provided will be accompanied by a service assessment. An annual report with an analysis should be published.

- Increased awareness of TCN regarding existing opportunities for support and active contribution to the economic, social and cultural life in the capital city;
- Improved coordination between Sofia Municipality, regional administrations, employers, NGOs and CSOs, service providers and stakeholders;
- Systematical assessment of TCN needs of services and the opportunities to meet the needs;
- Improved awareness of local residents regarding migration and asylum, combating disinformation, xenophobia and hate speech;
- Improved image of Sofia as a welcoming city for foreign students, workers, investors and migrants;
- Possible KPIs:
 - Number of TCN receiving services;
 - Number of TCN included in trainings/events;
 - Number of community/integration events organized;
 - Number of partner organizations collaborating with the bureau;
 - Number of volunteers recruited;
 - Number of approved projects in the area of integration of TCN, implemented in Sofia;
 - Level of satisfaction with the services/information/events;
 - Number of earned media that popularize the Bureau activities.

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SUSTAINABILITY

The Bureau is based on a formal agreement and is a result of a long-term partnership between the engaged parties.

UNHCR and BRC have over 25-year partnership experience to support local integration of refugees and asylum seekers in Bulgaria.

UNHCR funds activities for acceptance and integration of asylum seekers and migrants that are carried out by the Refugee-migrant service of the Bulgarian Red Cross on an annual basis, in accordance with the identified needs. The ongoing migration and refugee situation demonstrate the need to prolong this partnership in the mid-term future. It will provide the minimum viability of the proposed bureau.

Other organizations, funded by UNHCR in recent years, include the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, the Council of refugee women in Bulgaria, the Bulgarian Council for Refugees and Migrants, Access to Rights Foundation.

In addition, the future development of the bureau depends on the results of this pilot action in the framework of the CONNECTION project, and the desire of the partners and the support organizations.

External funding

The opportunities for external funding will be used such as the national programme of EU's AMIF and other European programmes and projects.

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APPENDIX 1: POTENTIAL PARTNERS OF THE BUREAU CONSULTED DURING THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT

INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION OF MIGRATION (IOM)

UNICEF

BULGARIAN HELSINKI COMMITTEE

FOUNDATION ACCESS TO RIGHTS

CENTER FOR LEGAL HELP "VOICE IN BULGARIA"

BULGARIAN COUNCIL OF REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS

UNION OF REFUGEE WOMEN IN BULGARIA

ARAB CCOMMITTEE FOR INTEGRATION IN BULGARIA

ASSOCIATION OF AFRICANS AND THEIR FRIENDS IN BULGARIA

CVS – BULGARIA

CARITAS

MULTI CULTI COLLECTIVE

UNHCR – BULGARIA

BULGARIAN RED CROSS

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF DEMOCRACY

BULGARIAN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY

CATRO

CENTER NADJA

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF MUNICIPALITIES ON THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA

CONFEDERATION OF INDEPENNDENT TRADEUNIONS IN BULGARIA

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APPENDIX 2: SERVICES FOR TCN IN SOFIA PROVIDED BY NGOs AND CSOs

- Conducting information sessions;
- Assistance to register at the labour bureaus;
- Assistance to find employment;
- Assistance to register with a GP, to finding housing, signing up in Bulgarian schools and kindergartens, health insurance, applications for identity documents;
- Assistance with translation and interpretation, accompanying the client to doctor's appointments/treatment, buying medication, covering the cost for medical interventions and health benefits, providing a non-recurring financial support for asylum seekers;
- Consultation for voluntary return to the country of origin;
- Assistance to search for family members and relatives/restoring family ties;
- Bulgarian language and English language classes;
- Opportunities for professional training and education;
- Organizing labour fairs with the participation of potential employers;
- Social consultations;
- Translation and legalization of documents;
- Legal assistance;
- Additional education of refugee children enrolled in Bulgarian schools;
- Organizing art therapy and art classes;
- Visits to historical and cultural sites and cultural events.