INTEGRATION OF REFUGEES IN BULGARIA

ADVOCACY PAPER

SAFEGUARDING REFUGEE PROTECTION IN BULGARIA

This project is financially supported by the Social Transformation Programme (MATRA) of the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
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INTRODUCTION

The Advocacy papers on access to international protection, reception and integration of refugees in Bulgaria (Advocacy papers) have been developed by the Bulgarian Council on Refugees and Migrants within the framework of “Safeguarding Refugee Protection in Bulgaria” Project, financed by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs under the Social Transformation Programme (MATRA) with the support of the Dutch Council for Refugees.

The Bulgarian Council on Refugees and Migrants (BCRM) is a civil society organization acting in the field of asylum and migration in Bulgaria.

The BCRM was founded in 2005 by the Bulgarian Red Cross, the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee and Caritas-Bulgaria as a platform of their activities related to the refugee and migration policy, protection and integration of refugees and migrants. The Association for Integration of Refugees and Migrants joined the BCRM in 2007.

The BCRM is a platform for advocacy, lobbying and fundraising for the protection, reception and integration of refugees and migrants. The BCRM aims to further develop the relations among the nongovernmental organizations, based on common principles and values, division of functions and responsibilities. The BCRM objective is to enhance the role of the civil society in the formulation of a fair and just national and European asylum, migration, and integration policy and practice.

The vision of the BCRM is aimed at a fair and efficient asylum and migration system, with the active role of the civil society. The policy and practice for protection, reception and integration of refugees and migrants in Bulgaria to include and apply the internationally recognized principles and standards based on respect for human rights and human dignity.

The Mission of the BCRM is to ensure the sustainable role of the civil society organisations in the system for protection, reception and integration of refugees. It is focused on building a system where every person may freely participate in all spheres of activities of the Bulgarian society, based on the principles of equality, non-discrimination and tolerance. The BCRM works to develop and strengthen the cooperation and partnership between the state institutions, local authorities and non-governmental organizations for legal and social protection to refugees, and encourages intercultural dialogue, tolerance and non-discrimination towards refugees and migrants.
The BCRM, as an association of organisations of longstanding experience and professional competency has the capacity to influence and support the social transformation towards efficient protection and integration of refugees and migrants.

The development of these advocacy papers shall further enhance the role of BCRM in the formulation and implementation of the national policy and practice on access to international protection, reception and integration of refugees in compliance with international and European legal instruments and standards.

The advocacy papers were prepared on the basis of:

- The ideas and principles laid down in the BCRM Common Vision paper on protection, reception and integration of refugees in Bulgaria;
- The valuable expertise and support of the Dutch Council for Refugees;
- The knowledge and skills gained by BCRM and member organizations experts during the trainings and workshops on advocacy and lobbying under the Safeguarding Refugee Protection in Bulgaria Project:
  - Advocacy and Lobby Training, 13-14 November 2008, Sofia
  - Advocacy and Lobby Workshop on Access to Territory and Refugees Status Determination Procedure, 26-27 February 2009, Svilengrad
  - Advocacy Workshop on Integration of Refugees in Bulgaria, 10-11 March 2010, Sofia

The advocacy papers present three main areas of advocacy:

1. Advocacy on access to international protection for asylum seekers
2. Advocacy on reception of asylum seekers, and
3. Advocacy on integration of refugees.

The papers cover three intersection fields of advocacy:

1. Antidiscrimination
2. Asylum seekers and refugees with special needs
3. Participation of refugees in the formulation and implementation of measures related to integration and reception
Antidiscrimination issues, refugees and asylum seekers with special needs, refugee participation in the process of formulation and implementation of integration and reception measures are very important to the above three main areas, and are therefore referred to as separate intersection fields.

BCRM shall prepare annual Plans of Action based on the findings and recommendations of the Advocacy Papers with key priorities, concrete activities, indicators, and deadlines.
I. SUB-AREAS OF ADVOCACY ON INTEGRATION OF REFUGEES:

HOUSING

HEALTH INSURANCE AND MEDICAL CARE

SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN BULGARIAN LANGUAGE

EMPLOYMENT

FAMILY REUNIFICATION

BULGARIAN CITIZENSHIP

POLITICAL RIGHTS
II. INTERSECTION FIELD OF ADVOCACY:

ANTIDISCRIMINATION

REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

REFUGEE PARTICIPATION IN THE PROCESS OF FORMULATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF MEASURES RELATED TO RECEPTION AND INTEGRATION
INTRODUCTION

The integration of refugees in host countries is closely related and largely dependent on the access to protection and reception in the country. It starts from the moment of lodging the application for protection, goes through adaptation to the new environmental conditions during the status determination procedure, and ends up with full integration in all fields of public life.

Against the total number of refugees in countries - members of the European Union, the number of refugees in Bulgaria is relatively small. According to the State Agency for Refugees for the period 01.01.1993 - 31.12.2009 (17 years) 5,805 foreigners were granted protection, of which: refugee status to 1491 persons and humanitarian status to 4314 persons.

The refugee integration policy in Bulgaria recorded significant changes over the past 10 years. The amendments to the rules and regulations, the two programs for the integration of refugees in Bulgaria, the relations established between the state institutions and the NGOs were very important steps towards efficient integration services. The process was enhanced by the UNHCR Representation in Bulgaria in terms of expertise for establishing rules and regulations in compliance with international standards, and in terms of financial support for refugee integration in the country.

In 2009, the Bulgarian Council on Refugees and Migrants prepared a Report on independent monitoring survey of the implementation of the National Programme for Integration of Refugees in Bulgaria (2008-2010) within a contract with the UNHCR Representation in Sofia. The report proved that major positive changes in different areas of refugee integration were achieved, although there were still problems mainly related to the practical implementation of the National Programme for Integration of Refugees. The conclusions and recommendations of the monitoring report were taken into consideration while developing the advocacy for refugee integration.

Advocacy objectives and refugee integration activities were formulated on the basis of: the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria; the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees of 1951, CD 2003/86/EC of 3 September 2009 on the right of family reunification; CD 2004/85/EC of 29 April 2004 on minimum standards for the qualification and status of third country nationals or stateless persons as refugees or as persons who otherwise need international protection and the content of the protection granted; the Law on Asylum and Refugees and other acts of Bulgarian and European
legislation; UNHCR Agenda and Notes on the integration of refugees in Central Europe and other documents.

BCRM supports the understanding that the adopted Common basic principles on integration policy for immigrants in the European Union are also related to the integration of refugees in Member States.

Analysis of the refugee integration activities showed that:

- The National Programme for Refugee Integration in Bulgaria (NPRIB) has no clear division of responsibilities between the institutions, does not provide financial resources for the whole range of activities, and has no planned measures for monitoring the implementation;
- The National Programme for Integration is implemented only in Sofia, thereby refugees who live outside of the capital have no access to the program;
- Participation of refugees in policy formulation and implementation of integration measures is insufficient.
- The NPRIB has allocated funds only for the integration of newly recognized refugees, while the other integration activities are mostly desirable.

In the formulation of the refugee integration policy in Bulgaria, the Bulgarian Council on Refugees and Migrants and its member agencies shall advocate for:

1. Integration issues to be included in all policies concerning refugees.
2. Effective mechanism to be established for interagency coordination and cooperation for the development and implementation of integration measures.
3. Representatives of refugee communities to take part in the decision-making processes related to refugee integration in Bulgaria.
5. Long-term and sustainable financing of refugee integration measures.
HOUSING OF REFUGEES AND HUMANITARIAN STATUS HOLDERS

Housing of refugees and humanitarian status holders in Bulgaria is an important element for their integration in the country, as an available home address is necessary for their civil registration and for obtaining an identity document for access to various social rights.

Practice shows that most refugees look for accommodation in Sofia or other big cities, where there are better opportunities to find work. Smaller towns and villages are not attractive to refugees because of the high unemployment rate and an inability to find a job.

Currently the possibilities for refugee housing are temporary and do not offer long-term solution:

1. Under Art. 32 (3) of the Law on Asylum and Refugees, the State Agency for Refugees may further extend with up to six months the stay of newly recognized refugees in the registration-and-reception centers in Sofia. This provision applies to a limited number of vulnerable refugees.

2. Newly recognized refugees who are included in the National Programme for Integration of Refugees in Bulgaria (2008 - 2010) are eligible for financial assistance for housing and public utilities needs for up to one year from the date of receiving the decision.

In this connection the Refugee - Migrant Service of the Bulgarian Red Cross has concluded a contract with the State Agency for Refugees to support refugees to find affordable housing, as well as to conclude rental agreements. Most difficulties are related to:

- Insufficient knowledge of Bulgarian language.
- Acts of xenophobia and racism. Some landlords refuse to let premises/apartments to refugees for reasons of race and nationality.
- Landlords ask for higher rents and higher advance payment (usually for six months). Such rents and payments are unaffordable for refugees.
- Some landlords refuse to sign rental agreements so that refugees cannot defend their rights in case of breach of agreement by the landlord.
- Landlords sign agreements for lower rents than the actual amount in order to pay less for income tax. Refugees receive lower rent subsidy from the State Agency for Refugees, as the subsidy is based on the amount of the rental contract.

The financial support to newly recognized refugees for a period of up to one year is not applicable to refugees, who are not included in the National Programme for Integration of Refugees:
• Refugees with special needs (elderly, disabled, pregnant women, single parents, mothers with young children, and others) who are not able to attend the mandatory courses in Bulgarian language and vocational training courses for different reasons - taking care of the family, poor health, etc.

• Newly recognized refugees who have settled in places outside of Sofia are not supported to pay rents or meet household needs, as the National Programme for Integration of Refugees is implemented only in the capital.

A very serious housing problem is that refugees cannot apply for public housing immediately after receiving protection, mainly for two reasons:

• **Municipal council regulations** require Bulgarian citizenship of at least of one family member, as well as a definite period of time of permanent address registration in that same municipality.

• **Lack of available public housing, especially in big cities.**

**Advocacy for:**

1. National housing policy for refugees to encourage municipalities, on the territory of which refugees have decided to settle, to receive financial assistance for refugee integration by the state budget.

2. Refugee Housing Projects in municipalities with vacant public apartments to renovate and furnish the premises under the European Refugee Fund for accommodation of refugees and vulnerable Bulgarians.

3. Involvement of municipalities in development and implementation of policies and measures for integration of refugees in the country.

4. Dissemination of information materials to potential landlords on the rights of refugees and humanitarian status holders, and on their way of life and culture.
Refugees and humanitarian status holders are entitled to psychological counseling, health insurance, accessible medical care and free medical services under terms and procedures applicable to Bulgarian citizens.

Health insurance of refugees and humanitarian status holders, included in the National Programme for Integration of Refugees (NPRIB) is paid by the State Agency for Refugees financed by the state budget.

Refugees and humanitarian status holders who are not included in the NPRIR are obliged to pay their health insurance under the same terms and procedures applicable to Bulgarian nationals, depending on whether they have employment contracts, whether they are self-employed, or are insured on any other different grounds.

Difficulties related to health insurance and access to medical care:
- Newly recognized refugees have no command of Bulgarian language to choose a GP or receive medical care.
- Refugees are not well informed on their health insurance rights and obligations.
- Acts of xenophobia and racism towards refugees and humanitarian status holders when choosing GPs or looking for health care services.
- Medical doctors and other health care workers are not familiar with the health insurance rights of refugees and humanitarian status holders.
- Refugees with special needs are not included in the NPRIR and are not entitled to health insurance under the programme. They cannot pay their health insurance and lose the right to access to health care, guaranteed by the National Health Insurance Fund.

Advocacy for:
1. Mechanism to keep health insured refugees and humanitarian status holders informed on their rights and obligations.
2. Involvement of mediators from refugee communities to offer assistance for choosing GPs; to accompany and interpret during visits to the doctor; to help pay health insurance at the National Revenue Agency or buy medicines.
3. Involvement of refugees and immigrants, practicing medicine (MDs) in Bulgaria to provide medical care services to refugees and humanitarian status holders.
4. Guarantee payment of health insurance of refugees and humanitarian status holders with special needs.
5. Mechanism to provide guidance and advice on how to approach the Labour Expert Medical Commission and financial support to permanently disabled refugees/humanitarian status holders

SOCIAL ASSISTANCE AND FAMILY BENEFITS

1. **Under the Social Assistance Act (SAA)** refugees and humanitarian status holders shall be obliged to make efforts to secure adequate resources for meeting their basic necessities of life. Social assistance shall be provided to refugees or humanitarian status holders who are unable to secure adequate resources to meet the basic necessities of life.

   Taking into account the more specific situation of newly recognized refugees, the Regulations on the application of the Social Assistance Act stipulate some more favorable procedures, such as:
   - Newly recognized refugees and humanitarian status holders are eligible for monthly social assistance without an obligatory initial period of registration at the Employment bureaus (for Bulgarian citizens this period is at least nine months before applying for social assistance).
   - The deadline for registration at the employment bureaus is extended from one to three months of the date of the refugee status decision. This gives them more time for civil registration, for obtaining Bulgarian identity documents, finding accommodation, etc.
   - The benefits provided to refugees and humanitarian status holders under the National Programme for Integration of Refugees are not considered as an “income” when determining the differentiated minimum income for the right to monthly assistance.

2. **Social assistance to newly recognized refugees under the National Programme for Integration of Refugees in Bulgaria (2008 - 2010)** is provided by the State Agency for Refugees. The financial support and other integration benefits, however, are subject to mandatory attendance of Bulgarian language courses, vocational training or requalification.

   Practice shows that not all newly recognized refugees and humanitarian status holders are included in the NPIRB, because of:
   - Lack of information on the rights and obligations under the National Programme for Integration of Refugees.
   - The deadline for inclusion in the NPIRB is 15 days after notification of the status decision. This is a too short period of time, as in the meantime
refugees and humanitarian status holders have to apply for identity documents, look for accommodation, conclude a rental contract, etc.

- Refugees and humanitarian status holders, included in the National Programme for Integration of Refugees, receive their first support in the best case on the second month after their application for inclusion in the programme. Practically after the decision they are left without financial allowance for food, housing, for obtaining Bulgarian identity documents, etc.

- Newly recognised refugees who are settled outside of Sofia (for example, in the reception-and-registration centre in the village of Banya) have no access to the National Programme for Integration of Refugees, which puts them in disadvantageous position.

- The scholarship allowance provided for attending Bulgarian language and vocational training courses of the amount of 4. BGN / per working day is too small for food, clothing, and other household needs.

3. Family benefits under the Family Benefits Act

Pregnant refugee women and families of humanitarian status holders are entitled to family benefits for children under the terms and procedures established for Bulgarian citizens.

Families of humanitarian status holders have equal rights with that of long-term residents in Bulgaria. They are entitled to family benefits under the Act for Child Benefits on the condition that such benefits are not provided on the basis of other laws or international agreements to which Bulgaria is a party, which is an expression of discrimination against these persons.

Advocacy for:

1. Special measures to support refugees and humanitarian status holders during the first month following the decision (for food, identity cards, rent, transport, etc.) to be included in the NPIR.

2. Representative refugee participation in discussing, developing and formulating integration measures.

3. Mechanism for regular monitoring and evaluation of the National Programme for Integration of Refugees

4. National scope of the NPIR with adoption of “the money follow the refugee” principle.

5. Partnership and cooperation with experienced social assistance providers organisations in places outside Sofia with larger number of refugees.
6. Mediators from refugee community organizations and/or NGOs in the provision of social services to refugees or humanitarian status holders.
7. Amendments to the legislation related to child benefits and to abolish discriminatory restrictions on persons with humanitarian status.
8. Involvement of refugees and persons with humanitarian status in integration activities against payment for rendered services.

TRAINING IN BULGARIAN LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION

1. Training in Bulgaria language
Surveys among refugees show that training in Bulgarian language is the first important step for their integration in the country. Lack of command of Bulgarian language means inability for proper communication, finding jobs, access to health care and social assistance. Bulgarian language training is laid down in the National Programme for Integration of Refugees as a mandatory six-month training of refugees and persons with humanitarian status in the first year after the status decision. Enrollment in the program is voluntary, and refugees take the obligation to regularly attend the courses in Bulgarian. The program provides for a monthly scholarship of 88.- BGN for food, health insurance, means of transport, monthly rents and public utility costs. Courses are held in the Integration Centre at the SAR on a daily basis, within the working hours of the center. Bulgarian language courses are also held for children of refugees and humanitarian status holders to prepare them for enrollment in Bulgarian schools.

Some refugees and humanitarian status holders, however, have no access to Bulgarian language courses because:
- The NPIRB is not implemented outside of Sofia;
- Refugees with special needs (pregnant women, single parents, mothers with young children, refugees with chronic illnesses or permanently disabled, elderly over 65 years) are unable, for various reasons, to attend courses at the Integration Center.

Access of newly recognized refugee to Bulgarian language training is limited due to:
- Lack of flexible and alternative learning opportunities
Evening/weekend courses in Bulgarian language, held at other places (schools, community centres) than the Integration Centre at SAR shall facilitate refugees to attend language courses.
- Insufficient monthly scholarship (88 BGN)
Financial incapacity forces refugees to go to work and drop out of the training courses.

2. Education
Children of refugees or humanitarian status holders of up to 18 years of age may continue with their education at state and municipal schools under the terms and procedures applicable to Bulgarian citizens.

Existing difficulties relate to:
- Lack of diplomas or other documents certifying completion of education level in their countries of origin.
- Lack of standardized criteria for assessing children's level of knowledge and its compliance with Bulgarian education requirements.
- Lack of extra Bulgarian language training for children of refugees and humanitarian status holders who have enrolled in state or municipal schools.
- Parents often are unable to follow the progress of their children in school to provide timely assistance to overcome learning difficulties.
- Lack of financial resources, children's age, coming from large or single-headed families is a barrier to their integration into the educational system.

Advocacy for:
1. Development of rules and regulations on the terms and conditions for admission of refugee children, or children with humanitarian status to schools.
2. Development of standardized criteria for assessing the level of children's knowledge in compliance with the Bulgarian educational requirements.
3. Extra training in Bulgarian language for children of refugees and humanitarian status holders to be included in the school curriculum. Provide for additional training in the specific terminology of different school subjects.
4. Dialogue between teachers, school boards and parents of refugee children for faster and effective integration.
5. Training for teachers on how to work in a multicultural environment and get knowledge of culture and traditions of children's countries of origin.
6. Additional financial support to families, whose children attend kindergartens or schools.
7. Raising public awareness and in particular that of students and teachers on the rights of children of refugees.
Employment is a fundamental human right and an important element for refugee integration into the host society.

Refugees and humanitarian status holders have the same rights and obligations as Bulgarian citizens when applying for a job. They are not required to present work permits, they have the right to register in employment bureaus when unable to find a job, as well as to freely develop initiatives of their own.

The National Programme for Integration of Refugees (2008-2010) provides a package of measures to promote the integration of newly recognized refugees, including vocational training and re-qualification. While attending the training courses refugees or humanitarian status holders are entitled to a monthly scholarship for travel cards, health insurance, rent and household needs.

With the unemployment rates in the country going up under the present economic conditions, refugees and humanitarian status holders are mostly affected because of:

- Insufficient knowledge of Bulgarian language;
- Acts of discrimination;
- Difficult integration into the host society - culture, traditions, family life, etc;
- Lack of mechanisms to promote entrepreneurship among refugees to start and develop small businesses, including traditional national crafts, creation of cooperatives, etc.;
- Ignorance of labor and social security rights and obligations on the part of refugees and on the part of employers.

The lack of documents certifying their level of education, vocational skills and work experience is an obstacle for refugees and persons with humanitarian status to find a job to correspond to their professional qualification. In many cases refugees agree to take any job, most often without an employment contract.
Advocacy for:

1. Access to Bulgarian language courses for all refugees and humanitarian status holders, no matter whether included or not in the National Programme for Integration of Refugees.

2. Incentive measures to encourage employers who hire for training and/or work refugees or humanitarian status holders and include them in the employment policy regulations and annual employment plans.

3. Partnerships and contacts amongst key public and private partners, employment agencies, individual employers, associations of workers and of employers, training institutions for access to employment of refugees or humanitarian status holders, and for dissemination of information to employers on the rights and obligations of refugees or humanitarian status holders and on their traditions and culture.

4. Entrepreneurship among refugees to start and develop small businesses, including traditional national crafts, and the creation of workers' cooperatives.

5. Specialized Bulgarian language, social orientation and vocational courses and trainings to motivate refugees and to develop their skills on how to apply for jobs and be competitive on the labor market.

6. Employment and labour law consultations on issues related to conclusion/termination of employment contracts; documents certifying years of service in annual leaves, etc.

7. Mentoring and support to refugees from volunteers linking refugees with people of the same profession and get them acquainted with the specific professional areas in the country and help them find employment.

8. Training refugees to become mediators between employment bureaus, employers and refugees (pilot program “Activating inactive refugees”).

9. Database at employment bureaus to compile and update information on the skills and professional qualification of refugees and humanitarian status holders on the Bulgarian labor market.

10. Regular monitoring surveys to identify the extent of participation of refugees and humanitarian status holders on the labour market.
The right to family life is a key factor for the successful integration of refugees in the host society.

According to Bulgarian legislation refugees and persons with humanitarian status are entitled to family reunification in Bulgaria.

Family members under the Law on Asylum and Refugees shall mean:

- the husband, the wife or the person with whom the individual has a proven stable and long-term relationship, and their children who have not come of the legal age, where the latter are not married;
- children who have come of the legal age, who are not married and are not able to take care of themselves due to serious health reasons.
- the parents of each spouse who are not able to take care of themselves due to old age or a serious illness and need to live in the same household as their children.

The permit for family reunification is granted by the Chairperson of the State Agency for Refugees following the procedures stipulated in the Law on Asylum and Refugees. Family members have the same rights and obligations applicable to refugees or humanitarian status holders.

Unaccompanied minors and underage children with granted status are entitled to be reunited with their parents or another adult member of their family or a person responsible for them by law or custom, in case of deceased or missing parents.

Practice shows that in most cases an application for protection in Bulgaria is lodged by the husband. The family is waiting in the country of origin or in a neighboring country. Most refugees in Bulgaria apply for family reunification.

Problems related to family reunification of refugees or persons with humanitarian status in Bulgaria:

- Firstly, lack of documents proving kinship or marriage. In most cases refugees are requested to certify the above by signing a declaration, and whenever necessary additional interviews are held to further clarify the case.
- Secondly, the long procedure of issuing visas to family members, especially if they are in a country where there is no Bulgarian diplomatic or consular representation.
- Financial difficulties related to travel for family reunification.
**Advocacy for:**

1. Giving priority to applications for family reunification of unaccompanied minors or underage children with refugee or humanitarian status.

2. Transparent and objective procedure for family reunification of refugees and persons with humanitarian status by the State Agency for Refugees and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and for informing the refugee of actions taken.

3. Specialized programs for family reunification, including: publication of information materials, setting out measures for reception and integration of newly arrived family members, etc.

4. Maximum use of tracing and family reunification services provided by UNHCR, the International Federation of the Red Cross and the International Committee of the Red Cross.
BULGARIAN CITIZENSHIP

Acquisition of citizenship of the host country is the highest form of integration of refugees. Under Bulgarian legislation refugees or humanitarian status holders may acquire Bulgarian citizenship by naturalization under the terms and procedures stipulated in the Bulgarian Citizenship Act.

The law provides for more favorable conditions to refugees and humanitarian status holders to acquire Bulgarian citizenship, such as:

- a shorter period of required residence in the country - persons who have been granted refugee status not less than three years before the date of filing the application may acquire Bulgarian citizenship;
- in case of no evidence of birth certificate, to file the application with their Bulgarian identity documents.

Pursuant to Art. 98 of the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria citizenship is granted by an order of the President of the Republic of Bulgaria at the proposal of the Minister of Justice on the basis of a decision of the Citizenship Council with the Ministry of Justice.

Existing difficulties relate to:

- Application documents for Bulgarian citizenship should include evidence of command of Bulgarian language, subject to verification in accordance with a procedure established by order of the Minister of Education and Science. There are no specialized courses to prepare applicants for this examination.
- The refugee or humanitarian status holder should have an income and occupation enabling him/her to support himself/herself in Bulgaria;
- Ordinance № 1 of 19.02.1999 for the application of Chapter 5 of the Bulgarian Citizenship Act has no special text for documents to be presented by humanitarian status holders, i.e. they have to apply under the general order provisions. This is an obstacle, as humanitarian status holders are required to provide:
  - Criminal records from their countries of origin;
  - A document issued by relevant foreign authorities that the applicant was released from his/her previous citizenship or that such document should be presented within a three-year period following acquisition of Bulgarian citizenship.

For security reasons persons with humanitarian status cannot obtain these documents from their countries of origin.

The Bulgarian Citizenship Act does not stipulate the right to appeal in court the decision of the Citizenship Council with the Ministry of Justice.
**Advocacy for:**

1. Amendments to the rules and regulations on documents to be provided by persons with humanitarian status; abolish requirements for presenting criminal records and documents for release from citizenship of the country of origin.

2. Removal of the requirement that refugees or humanitarian status holders should have an income and occupation enabling him/her to support himself/herself in Bulgaria.

3. Advice and assistance to refugees and humanitarian status holders to prepare the set of documents for acquiring Bulgarian citizenship.

4. Accessible and timely information to refugees or humanitarian status holders, applying for Bulgarian citizenship on the course and results of the procedure.

5. Bulgarian language training of refugees and humanitarian status holders, applying for Bulgarian citizenship.

**POLITICAL RIGHTS**

Refugees and humanitarian status holders in Bulgaria have no voting rights to participate in state or local elections, in national or local referendums, as well as to create or join political parties.

With regard to freedom of speech, freedom of association and right of assembly and demonstrations, refugees and humanitarian status holders have equal rights and obligations as Bulgarian citizens.
Refugees and asylum seekers are potential victims of human rights violations in Bulgaria. They expect the international community and in particular the host country to guarantee their protection. However, granting refugee or humanitarian status does not always mean guaranteeing protection. Unfortunately, to be a refugee sometimes means to be a subject of racist or xenophobic attacks. Effective protection of refugees must include an active antidiscrimination policy and multicultural education to create a tolerant and respectful environment, providing equal opportunities for all.

The negative attitude towards asylum seekers and refugees in Bulgaria is connected to the country of origin, color of skin, poor knowledge of Bulgarian language, manner of dress, low financial and material status, habits, customs, culture and lifestyle.

Manifestations of discrimination, racism and xenophobia have different dimensions, and affect all spheres of public life: place of work, transportation, health care, schools, shops, etc. Surveys among asylum seekers and refugees indicate that they often become victims of attacks by nationalist groups or skinheads. Refugees from Africa especially, when trying to find a job are often confronted with offensive and discriminatory treatment. Low paid jobs without employment contracts is the usual expression of discrimination.

Advocacy for:
1. Strict compliance with to the principle of "non-refoulment" of asylum seekers by responsible state institutions.
2. Objective coverage by the media of the policy for access to protection, reception and integration of asylum seekers and refugees in Bulgaria.
4. Campaigns against acts of discrimination, racism and xenophobia exercised towards refugees and asylum seekers.
5. Annual award for media excellence in combating discrimination, racism and xenophobia acts against asylum seekers and refugees.
6. Raising Awareness Campaigns of the rights of refugees and persons with humanitarian status, including in schools and universities.
7. Stronger cooperation and partnership amongst government and
NGOs in combating discrimination, racism and xenophobia.

9. Including the topics of antidiscrimination, intercultural communication, human rights in the training programmes of civil servants working with/for refugees and persons with humanitarian status.

10. Refugee participation in trainings, campaigns and other activities for preventing and combating discrimination, racism and xenophobia.

11. No restrictions for refugees on the right of work or self-employment for certain professions or areas of economic life.

ASYLUM SEEKERS AND REFUGEES WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Art.30a of the LAR defines the vulnerable groups of asylum seekers and refugees who should be given particular consideration, as follows: minors or children under the legal age, pregnant women, elderly, single parents with minors or under the legal age children, persons with disabilities and persons who have been subjected to mental, physical or sexual abuse.

The process of identification of vulnerable groups begins with the registration and the first interviews held with asylum seekers, where the role of trained interviewers, interpreters, social and medical workers is extremely important and responsible.

It is very important to develop individual plans for social adaptation and subsequent integration for vulnerable asylum seekers and refugees.

Currently there are no clear rules for work with asylum seekers with special needs. The quality of the procedure is crucial for the integration of refugees. Asylum seekers with special needs often face social, economic and legal problems that require daily care and support.

Among the staff members of the registration-reception centre in Sofia there are no social workers and psychologists. Identification, consultation and recommendations for providing specific health, social and psychological support is not based on individual assessment and individual plans.

No training has been provided in recent years to SAR's officials on how to work with persons with special needs.

There are no procedures established to appoint guardians or custodians of unaccompanied minor asylum-seekers.

Children accommodated at institutions for children deprived of parental care have no access to additional courses in Bulgarian language. Studies show that some of them do not attend school and are completely isolated.
There is no current database of asylum seekers with special needs, which is an obstacle to monitor their condition, to develop and implement long-term measures for social adaptation and integration.

**Advocacy for:**
1. Needs assessment of asylum seekers and refugees with special needs.
2. Training the officials and staff of the registration-reception, transit and integration centers to work with asylum seekers and refugees with special needs.
3. Creation of a database of asylum seekers and refugees with special needs to monitor their condition and plan relevant long-term measures.
4. Create a database of asylum seekers and refugee children at risk.
5. Amendment of the Law on Asylum and Refugees to include procedures for appointing a guardian or custodian of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers.
6. Specific measures for housing and care of unaccompanied minors (protected housing, access to education, medical services, foster care, etc.).
7. Tailored support to asylum seekers and refugee children under the legal age to guarantee equal opportunities for access to the labour market (additional training, consultations).
8. Specific measures for consultations, guidance and provision of psychological and medical care to asylum seekers and refugees victims of psychological, physical or sexual abuse.
9. Trained mediators to work with asylum seeker and refugee victims of psychological, physical or sexual abuse.
10. Specific measures for elderly refugees and asylum seekers in compliance with their specific social, cultural and religious needs.
11. Flexibility to encourage the inclusion of women with refugee or humanitarian status in the NPIR to ease their integration through education and professional qualification.
12. Information materials to encourage asylum seekers and refugees with special needs to seek professional help and support.
PARTICIPATION OF REFUGEES IN THE FORMULATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF RECEPTION AND INTEGRATION MEASURES

The successful integration of refugees in the host country is connected with the protection policy of the country, the public attitude, and the opportunity given to asylum seekers and refugees to take part in the integration and decision making processes.

The development of the refugee protection system in Bulgaria underwent a number of positive changes in the course of Bulgaria's accession to the European Union in terms of the perception and attitude towards refugees, both on the part of institutions and of civil society.

Refugees and asylum seekers are an inexhaustible source of enriching the linguistic diversity, cultures and traditions of the host society. They have the potential to contribute to the development of the host society, while refugee associations are a source of support and mutual assistance for their members.

The refugee communities and community leaders are an efficient link for communication between refugees and the receiving society.

The Bulgarian Council of Refugee Women and the Ethiopian Association, as refugee community organisations are taking an active part to protect the rights and interests of refugees and asylum seekers. Recently the Council of Refugee Women became a full member of the Integration Commission with the State Agency for Refugees.

Existing problems:
- Lack of mechanism for asylum seekers, accommodated at the reception-and-registration centers of the SAR to make recommendations and participate in discussions and decision making process related to the internal regulations in the centers.
- Representatives of refugee organizations participate in practical activities related to the reception and integration of refugees - as translators and mediators - although they are not admitted in the discussion of regulations, internal rules and other documents.
- Refugee organizations are not actively involved in the discussion of setting out the priority activities to be financed under the National Programmes of European Refugee Fund.
Advocacy for:

1. Involvement of refugee representatives in the development, implementation, and monitoring of policies related to the reception and integration of asylum seekers and refugees.

2. Involvement of refugee organizations in the discussions for amending the legislation, the internal regulations and other documents related to refugees and asylum seekers.

3. Participation of refugee organisations in workshops and seminars on issues related to refugee protection in Bulgaria.

4. Participation of representatives of refugee organizations in surveys and monitoring of implementation of programmes, projects and action plans for protection, reception and integration of asylum seekers and refugees.
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