

MIXED MIGRATION AFTER THE TALIBAN TAKEOVER IN AFGHANISTAN: STATE CAPACITY AND PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS IN BULGARIA

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ABSTRACT

Mixed Migration After the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan: State Capacity and Public Perceptions in Bulgaria

In light of the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan in August 2021, this paper aims to analyze both the Bulgarian population's attitudes toward newcomers and the capacity of the Republic of Bulgaria to manage mixed migration adequately. Toward this aim, a public perceptions survey was conducted in the cities of Harmanli and Sofia, where four out of five migrant registration and reception centers (RRCs) in Bulgaria are located. The authors argue that the state's difficulties in coping with an increased influx of migrants and their possible integration are mainly due to its apparent refusal to take the lead in this regard and the lack of communication with the local population, especially where RRCs are situated.

KEYWORDS: refugees, asylum seekers, migration, armed conflict, local perceptions, Afghanistan

IZVLEČEK

Mešane migracije po talibanskem prevzemu oblasti v Afganistanu: zmogljivosti države in percepcije javnosti v Bolgariji

Cilj prispevka je analizirati odnos prebivalcev Bolgarije do prišlekov ter zmožnosti Republike Bolgarije za upravljanje mešanih migracij v okoliščinah talibanskega prevzema oblasti v Afganistanu. V ta namen je bila opravljena raziskava javnega mnenja v mestih Harmanli in Sofija, v katerih se nahajajo štirje izmed petih centrov za registracijo in sprejem migrantov v Bolgariji. Avtorja argumentirata, da vzroki za težave države pri spoprijemanju s povečanim prihodom migrantov in njihovo potencialno integracijo ležijo predvsem v dozdevnem zavračanju države, da bi pri tem zavzela proaktivno držo, ter v pomanjkanju komunikacije z lokalnim prebivalstvom, zlasti na območjih, kjer se nahajajo centri za registracijo in sprejem.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: begunci, prosilci za azil, migracije, oboroženi spopadi, lokalne percepcije, Afganistan

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INTRODUCTION

The significant refugee and migration influx of the mid-2010s toward the EU led to disputes and tensions between the member states over its present and future. Nowadays, “the open border” policy issue has become so unpopular that even countries that previously supported it have become more reserved in their actions in terms of accepting asylum seekers. Over the last two years, the situation in the EU in this respect has been relatively calm, mainly due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the related restrictive measures put in place regarding traveling within and between countries. In fact, compared to 2019, in 2020 at the EU level, there was a decrease of 32% in asylum applications (European Asylum Support Office, 2021: 72) and a 24% decrease in first residence permits issued (European Commission, 2021). Nonetheless, with high vaccination rates in most countries in the Western world and the perception that some political shifts favor migration globally, changes have already started. For example, the migrant influx to the United States has increased significantly since the election of Joe Biden as US president (Miroff, 2021; Camarata & Zeigler, 2021).

Against this background, the Doha Agreement of February 29, 2020, and the decision of the NATO Allies of April 2021 to start a withdrawal, among other internal and external circumstances, led to the Taliban’s takeover and seizure of power in August 2021. This takeover, in turn, resulted in another impetus for the local people to flee the country. Since then, the health and economic situation in Afghanistan has been deteriorating. The World Food Programme (2021) notes that only 5% of Afghan families (10% among those considered middle class) have enough to eat daily. At the same time, the loss of jobs and skyrocketing prices severely affect most of the population. Even before the withdrawal of the foreign military forces, the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan was already one of the worst at the global level. In fact, at the beginning of 2021 alone, nearly 18.4 million people needed some form of humanitarian assistance (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, 2021).

Under such circumstances, an increase in mixed migration toward the EU countries was expected, although not at the same pace as it was in the mid-2010s. While one can suggest that most countries are prepared in terms of administrative capacity compared to the situation a few years ago, some are not prepared. We argue that the Republic of Bulgaria is among the latter. Not surprisingly, the worsening living conditions in Afghanistan have caused particular concerns in Bulgaria. To some extent, these concerns can be attributed to the fact that Bulgaria is considered to have the fastest-shrinking population in the world (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019: 12) and the lowest standard of living of all EU member states. At the same time, there is a visible literature gap in the study of public perceptions of where the RRCs are located. Moreover, the state authorities have proved in many cases that strategically important changes, including political ones, regarding irregular migration are undertaken exclusively once a particular

(tragic) event has occurred rather than in a proactive and preventive way. Therefore, this paper explores the state's capacity to cope with a new influx of asylum seekers and migrants in general and the local population's perceptions of newcomers in such a situation.

The paper does not consider the armed conflict in Ukraine resulting from the Russian military aggression in February 2022 as it did not happen at the time of writing, nor is any other data available after January 31, 2022.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between mixed migration, armed conflicts, and voluntary migration has been particularly evident in the EU in the aftermath of the so-called "open-door policy" declared in 2015 by former German Chancellor Angela Merkel. In the literature, the concept of mixed migration was intended in the 1990s to distinguish more clearly those protected by the International Refugee Law from those who were not (Linde, 2011). However, with broader connotations introduced over the years, the concept leads to a risk of amalgamation and confusion between security, economic, and political-related considerations, and humanitarian concerns" (Linde, 2011). The UNHCR (2016) regards mixed migration as "flows of people who travel together, but for different reasons: they are either forced to flee their homes due to armed conflict or persecution or migrate voluntarily in search of a better life." This distinction is still the predominant separating line between forced migrants/refugees and voluntary migrants (International Organization for Migration, 2019: 15).

Concerning mixed movements to and through Bulgaria, it should be noted that, geographically, the country has always been on the path of migrants of different nationalities. In the case of mixed migration from Afghanistan, crossing Bulgaria is part of one of the two primary routes to reach the EU, especially for young people with fewer financial resources (Nimkar & Frouws, 2018: 10).

In general, irregular migration and refugee integration are relatively new topics for scholars in Bulgaria. Since the end of the totalitarian regime in Bulgaria in 1989, emigration and the country's demographic crisis have dominated the academic field. The issue of asylum seekers has become popular among scholars in Bulgaria amid the increased migrant influx due to the armed conflict in Syria. Concerning this, Krasteva (2021: 70–71) notes that despite the small number of refugees on Bulgarian territory, a rapidly growing number of studies in this area is observed. According to her, this "paradoxical characteristic" is mainly due to the active policy of the UNHCR – Bulgaria and the participation of Bulgarian researchers in international projects (Krasteva, 2021: 70–71).

More often than not, the research in this field in Bulgaria has been with a particular focus on policies related to refugee integration and asylum seekers. For example, Nancheva (2016) argues that certain narratives and practices across the

Bulgarian–Turkish border “undermine the notion of protection,” while Krasteva (2021: 64) further states that populism and anti-migration discourses have a significant negative impact on integration policies and practices. Other scholars argue that public attitudes affect the implementation of state policies related to international protection and the integration process, apart from the lack of clarity and specificity of the national policies in this respect (Nakova, 2021: 135–135). Health aspects of the refugee and migration influx as a potential threat (Mihaylova-Garnizova & Garnizov, 2018) and terrorism and radicalization have also been among the main research topics (e.g., CSD, 2015).

Some surveys about the Bulgarian citizens’ perceptions toward refugees and migrants, in general, have also been conducted. Two of those, one by the UNHCR in 2019 and the other by the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (BAS) in 2020, suggest that the lack of direct contact between the majority of Bulgarians and refugees leads to impressions and perceptions among the former toward the latter based mainly on media and social networks (UNHCR, 2020: 5). Both surveys also state that most Bulgarians tend to show more tolerance and acceptance toward refugees than toward economic migrants (UNHCR, 2020: 7).

In another survey, the poor economic conditions in Bulgaria and the likelihood that there could be terrorists among the newcomers were indicated as the main reasons for Bulgarian citizens’ reluctance toward possible refugee integration in the country (Kyuchukov, 2016: 8–9). In fact, the public representation of asylum seekers and irregular migrants contributes to forming certain local attitudes toward them. According to Erolova (2017: 369), since 2013, apart from the number of asylum seekers, their public image in Bulgaria has also been influenced by their media coverage and political discourse.

A special focus on asylum seekers and migrants arriving from Afghanistan in Bulgaria, however, can be observed mainly in the mainstream media. To a certain extent, this is understandable, as the Taliban takeover happened in August 2021. Moreover, although in previous years, the Taliban were seen to play a crucial role in the migration movements from the country toward the EU, Afghanistan was regarded as a relatively safe country (Dimitriadi, 2017: 35). This perception was also reflected in a large number of refusals to Afghan asylum applications, including in Bulgaria. However, at the same time, other scholars argue that the civilian population was generally in grave danger all across the country during the presence of the international forces there (e.g., Mesovic & Pichl, 2017).

Generally, the current situation in Afghanistan has not been seen as similar to the situation in Syria from the mid-2010s. Sayed et al. (2021), for example, suggest that a new Afghan refugee influx would mainly depend on the type of rule of the Taliban, including in the human rights area, as well as the economic circumstances. In case such a crisis emerges, it is more likely that, in the short term, it would affect primarily Pakistan and Iran and possibly some central Asian countries (Sayed et al., 2021). In previous migration waves, most Afghans fled to Iran and Pakistan and then

returned to Afghanistan with the power shift in the country (Elliott & Segal, 2012: 230). In addition, Villa (2021), among others, states that it is highly improbable that a significant number of refugees from Afghanistan will come to the EU as they also depend on the situation in transit countries such as Turkey and Iran.

On the other hand, despite the involvement of many Western countries in the war in Afghanistan, their role in taking refugees has been limited mainly to individuals who previously worked for them or were part of the State apparatus (Loft, 2021: 12). Lieven (2021) among others, underlines that the United States and their Western allies are supposed to take in and give protection to many Afghans who worked for them during the presence of the foreign military forces in Afghanistan as this is mainly a moral duty. However, some (Batha & Saif, 2021; The Economic Times, 2021) argue that the brain drain from Afghanistan of both men and women who actively participated in the country's development in the last two decades is disruptive for many achievements in numerous public areas such as education and civil rights protection.

ASYLUM SEEKERS' SITUATION IN BULGARIA IN 2021

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic around the world and the related restrictive travel measures, in the second semester of 2021, there was an increase in asylum-seeker applications in Bulgaria. During the first half of 2021, the number of people seeking international protection in the country was 2,277, almost six times higher than in the same period in 2020 (State Agency for Refugees, 2022). Furthermore, in August–December 2021 alone, another 7,864 asylum seekers were registered, while their total number in 2021 reached 10,999 (State Agency for Refugees, 2022). This number is three times that of the total number of asylum applications in 2017–2019. All this suggests that the intra-Afghan peace negotiations failure and the Taliban takeover, with its economic and social consequences in Afghanistan, seriously impacted the number of asylum seekers in Bulgaria in 2021. Most were Afghans, 6,026, followed by Syrians, 3,758 (State Agency for Refugees, 2022), as shown in Figure 1, compared to 1,736 and 1,089 asylum seekers, respectively, from both countries in 2020.

Furthermore, although Syrian citizens were the leading group of asylum seekers in Bulgaria during the civil war in Syria between January 1, 1993, and December 31, 2021, the number of asylum seekers from Afghanistan was the highest, 36,437, followed by that of Syrians, 27,837 (State Agency for Refugees, 2022). These numbers suggest that Bulgaria is familiar to Afghans as a transit country.

In addition, in the first nine months of 2021, five thousand Afghans arrived and/or transited through Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Kosovo in comparison with 10,940 in the same period of 2020 (UNHCR, 2021: 2). To some extent, we can see this decrease as a result of the increased number of Afghans choosing the route to the EU through Bulgaria.

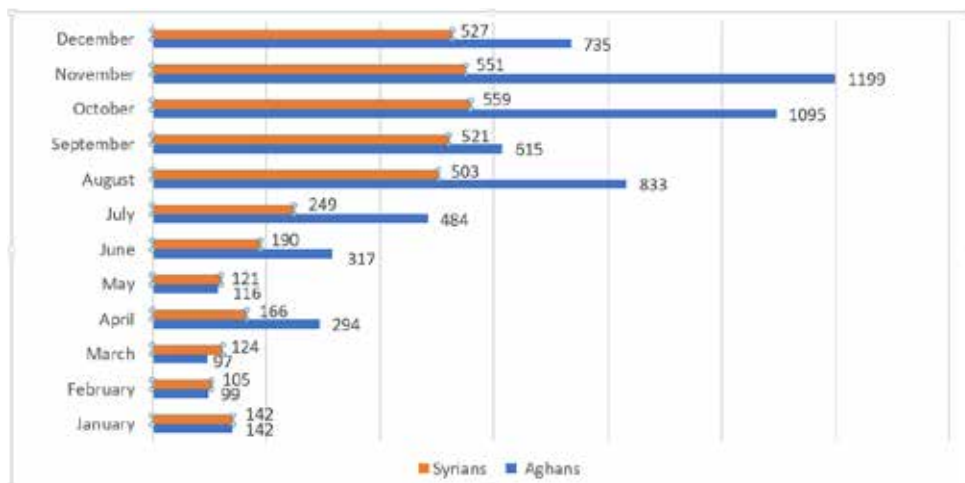


Figure 1: The number of asylum seekers from Afghanistan and Syria in 2021 per month. Data: State Agency for Refugees, 2022.

Furthermore, the number of irregular third-country citizens detained in Bulgaria in 2021 amounted to 10,799, which is 3.1 times greater than in 2020 (Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2021a: 2). In this regard, the number of Afghans in the second half of 2021 was 6,111 (Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2021a: 3).

The current situation evokes comparisons with the so-called refugee and migrant crisis of the mid-2010s. Although Bulgaria was not so deeply affected by that crisis, mainly because of the intentions of the migrants not to remain in the country, some risks and uncertainties in managing an increase in mixed migration have persisted. This situation is due to two main reasons. On the one hand, the state has not achieved considerable progress in refugee integration. On the other hand, 10,999 asylum seekers in 2021 is a number that had not been registered in the country since 2013–2016, when the numbers were 7,144, 11,081, 20,391, and 19,418, respectively. In contrast, in 2017–2020, the highest number of asylum applications was 3,700 in 2017 (State Agency for Refugees, 2021).

NATIONAL POLICY TOWARD ASYLUM SEEKERS IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE TALIBAN TAKEOVER

Despite Bulgaria's existing normative and legislative base concerning the migration and integration of third-country nationals, the state policy remains unclear or is not consistently implemented. For instance, the National Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria on Migration and Integration (2008–2015) emphasized that the policy on admission and integration of third-country nationals was based on a consensus

reached between all social partners, the non-governmental sector, and academia, including holding a broad public debate on the matter (National Council on Migration, Borders, Asylum and Integration, 2008: 26). However, at the time of writing, such a debate had not been initiated.

Furthermore, implementing a consistent and lasting policy on refugees and asylum seekers was intended to be based on two primary key points: the implementation of the then National Program for the Integration of Refugees (NPIR) and the implementation of the Multiannual and Annual Programs of the European Refugee Fund (National Council on Migration, Borders, Asylum and Integration, 2008: 29). However, the NPIR has not been active since 2013, and it can be considered mainly unsuccessful.

In 2011, the National Strategy on Migration, Asylum and Integration (2011–2020) was adopted, which led to the revision of the then National Strategy on Migration and Integration and its transformation into a Migration and Integration Program (2008–2015) (National Council on Migration Policy, 2011: 43). The new strategy's primary purpose was "to develop a policy framework providing a comprehensive and sustainable regulatory and institutional basis for ensuring the successful management of legal migration and integration while preventing and counteracting illegal migration (National Council on Migration Policy, 2011: 5). Nonetheless, refugee integration was more or less related in the document as a matter of learning the Bulgarian language. The information regarding how to assist those who had been granted international protection in finding a job was mostly generalized without going into further details (National Council on Migration Policy, 2011: 27).

In 2017, an Ordinance on the terms and procedures for concluding, enforcing, and terminating the integration agreement of beneficiaries of international protection was adopted to promote refugee integration. Its success, however, was very limited as no state funding was provided (European Commission, n.d.).

However, it should be noted that refugees see Bulgaria mainly as a transit country. Thus, most of them do not intend to remain. As Iliev (2017: 17) argues, roughly 80–90% of the asylum seekers in Bulgaria go to Western countries or at least plan to do so.

As no state-governed refugee integration policies in Bulgaria can be defined as successful, more NGOs have been involved in refugee integration, with some of their integration activities even more successful than the state's. Consequently, on the one hand, many Bulgarians have lost trust in the state institutions' capacity to cope with the increased number of asylum seekers and their possible integration. On the other hand, NGO activities have surprisingly generated negative perceptions among the local population that has predominantly seen them as external actors. Against this backdrop, what usually follows is the spread of populism with respective consequences for the country's political, economic, and social development.

Furthermore, although the Government Management Program for 2017–2021 ranked the sustainable solution to the migration problem among the country's main foreign policy priorities, one may perceive that the leading role should come from outside and not from the state. The program itself outlined the importance of joint efforts and common decisions at the EU level, including the implementation of all aspects of the March 2016 EU-Turkey Joint Statement, as well as the Partnership Framework with third countries on the European Agenda on Migration (Council of Ministers, 2017: 13).

Since 2016, specific policies related to the situation in Afghanistan have not been adopted. In the National Strategy on Migration of the Republic of Bulgaria 2021–2025, Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan are indicated as key third countries for achieving effective migration governance through dialogue and partnership (National Council on Migration, Borders, Asylum and Integration, 2021: 35). At the same time, though, it should be noted that according to the Updated National Security Strategy, "migration is becoming a long-term and deepening problem with the risk, if left unmanaged, to become a strategic threat to the democratic societies and economies in the transit countries and those of final destination" (Council of Ministers, 2018). Regardless of the likelihood that there could be terrorists among the migrants, such statements can still contribute to growing hostility among the local population toward asylum seekers.

More recently, amid the security and political crisis in Afghanistan in August 2021, the then Bulgarian prime minister Stefan Yanev declared that the country would give asylum to up to 70 Afghan refugees, all of whom had previously worked with the Bulgarian Embassy in Kabul (Council of Ministers, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

This paper includes two anonymous surveys of Bulgarian citizens aged 18 and over currently living in the country and aims to examine their attitudes toward the migrants accommodated in the RRCs, especially in the aftermath of the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan.

The first survey was conducted among 84 residents in different places in the town of Harmanli, of which 50 were interviewed face to face within two days in September 2021, and the rest completed an online questionnaire on October 15–16, 2021. This town was chosen because it houses Bulgaria's biggest RRC for those applying for international protection. Also, it is located only 45 kilometers from the border with Turkey and has a total population of 18,589, according to the 2011 Population Census (National Statistical Institute, 2022). In addition, with the increase of the people accommodated there, the center has attracted the attention of politicians and the public several times, once leading to physical violence and the intervention of the police authorities (e.g., Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2016).

The second survey was conducted in October 2021 within four days in different locations in Sofia—Bulgaria’s capital and largest city—including close to the RCC. Its sample consists of 136 respondents, of whom 78 were surveyed face-to-face and the rest online, similar to the first survey.

The participation of the respondents was fully anonymous and voluntary. The survey, elaborated in Bulgarian, included sixteen questions, five related to participants’ gender, age, religious belief, educational degree, and country of origin. The rest of the questions—requiring an answer based on a *five-point Likert scale*—were directly related to the possible increased influx of refugees and migrants as a consequence of the security and economic situation in Afghanistan. The results of the study are presented below.

The study also explores normative documents and official data regarding asylum seekers and irregular migration in Bulgaria.

SURVEY ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Many of those surveyed, respectively, 44.9% in Sofia and 38.1% in Harmanli, were not familiar with the conditions in the RRCs in Bulgaria (Figure 3). In addition, almost three times more people in Harmanli (27.4%) compared to the respondents in Sofia (10.3%) stated that the conditions in those centers were definitely suitable for migrants. At the same time, a total of 31.6% in Sofia and 17.8% in Harmanli consider the conditions in the RRC in Bulgaria unsuitable for the people accommodated in them. Similar to other answers given by the respondents, this perception could be attributed to the fact that many people in Harmanli are in daily direct contact with the migrants from Harmanli’s RRC.

Against this background, more than half of the respondents (56% in Harmanli and 58.8% in Sofia) find the actions of the Bulgarian authorities inadequate in terms of the migrants’ stay in the country (those expressing certainty were 29.8% and 17.6% respectively). Unlike the replies to the previous question, this could be explained by the overall lack of trust in the state authorities. Regarding this, for example, 67% of Bulgarian citizens consider most or all country’s parliament members corrupt and constantly show the lowest level of trust in the state institutions within the EU (Kukutschka/Transparency International, 2021: 14–17).

It is worth noting the difference in the opinions of the people living in Harmanli and Sofia regarding possible discrimination of migrants and refugees by both the Bulgarian authorities and the local population. In Harmanli, 80.9% do not think that the migrants are discriminated against by the Bulgarian authorities or the local people (60.7%), while in Sofia, the percentages are 45.5% and 30.2%, respectively. Only 4.8% in Harmanli state that migrants and refugees are discriminated against by the Bulgarian authorities, while in Sofia, a similar opinion is expressed by 39%, i.e., approximately eight times more people (the difference is four times when it comes

to the answer “definitely yes”). In addition, 30.9% of the respondents in Harmanli and 64.7% of those in Sofia think migrants and refugees are discriminated against by the local population.

Moreover, 47.8% in Sofia and 50.2% in Harmanli find that asylum seekers should not be granted free healthcare services during their stay in Bulgaria. The opposite is stated by 37.5% in Sofia and 32.2% in Harmanli. Although the survey itself did not reveal the motive, a few respondents pointed out as a reason for their negative answer that healthcare services are not free of charge, even for many Bulgarian citizens, including themselves. Based on the answers gathered and the authors' own observations, we argue that the responsible institutions failed to present the necessary information to the local population in an acceptable way, i.e., there is poor communication between the state and the Bulgarian citizens in terms of asylum seekers.

Most of the people surveyed in Harmanli (82.1%) and Sofia (64.7%) also consider that asylum seekers must not stay in Bulgaria permanently. The difference between the answers in Harmanli and Sofia is even more visible when it comes to a “definitely no” position: almost twice as many people in Harmanli (60.7%) compared to those in Sofia (36%). At the same time, only 1.2% in Harmanli and 0.7% in Sofia state the exact opposite. The reasons for such public attitudes can be various. For example, “politically correct talk” often sidesteps the real problems, thus creating the conditions to generate fears of refugees (Kyuchukov, 2016: 2) as well as the lack or failure of integration policies, to name just a few.

The abovementioned percentages could also be seen as related to the answers to some of the other survey questions. For example, 77.3% of the respondents in Harmanli state that Bulgaria is not morally obliged to accept refugees from Afghanistan, given the security situation there. At the same time, the percentage rises to 85% when it concerns people fleeing other armed conflict countries. Once again, those saying “definitely no” to this question were significantly more in Harmanli (57.1%) than in Sofia (25.7%) in terms of accepting refugees from Afghanistan, and 48.8% and 27.9%, respectively, for refugees from other conflict-torn states. We argue that such answers are related not only to the reasons stated above but also to the economic difficulties that many Bulgarians experience. Many respondents in Harmanli share the opinion that they feel neglected by the state at the expense of asylum seekers in the allocation of limited state financial resources. Therefore, the state authorities should encourage constructive communication with its citizens rather than creating a feeling among them that they are in a competitive situation with asylum seekers.

Concerning refugee integration, 71.5% of respondents in Harmanli and 58.8% of those in Sofia think that those who have been granted protection cannot be integrated socially and economically. These percentages are 41.7% and 20.6%, respectively, for the “definitely no” answer. Although this question could be seen as misleading as it includes both economic and social aspects, we considered other

surveys, such as those previously mentioned conducted by UNHCR and the BAS, regarding the familiarity of Bulgarian citizens with the refugee issue to avoid confusion among the respondents.

The poor performance of the state institutions could be considered a possible reason for the strong doubts about the integration of asylum seekers. In fact, 58.3% of the respondents in Harmanli and 62.5% in Sofia indicate that the state has not done enough to integrate refugees, unlike the 21.5% and 14.7%, respectively, who share the opposite view (Figure 2).

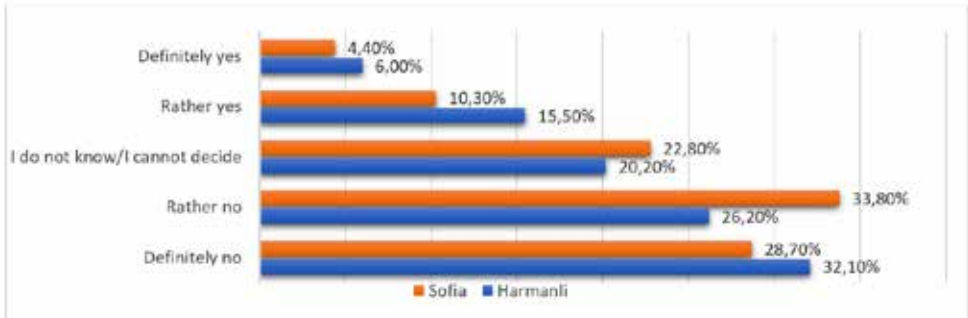


Figure 2: Do you consider the work of the Bulgarian institutions regarding the integration of refugees successful?

The most striking answers were registered to the question of the efficiency of the border fence between Bulgaria and Turkey (Figure 3) constructed by the Bulgarian authorities and completed in 2017. Most (85.7%) of the respondents in Harmanli indicated that the fence had not served its purpose well (70.2% with absolute certainty). In Sofia, these numbers were 81.5% and 48.5%, respectively. Such answers should not be surprising since even the Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Bulgaria (2021b) published a video revealing the current poor condition of some parts of the fence.

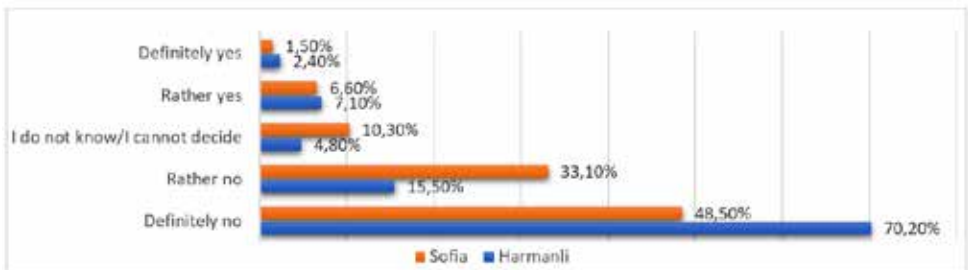


Figure 3: Do you think that the border fence on the Bulgarian-Turkish border stops illegal migrant crossings into Bulgaria?

As the answers show, all respondents expressed certainty toward discouraging the acceptance and integration of asylum seekers and the lack of trust in the state institutions in Harmanli. These results could be explained by the fact that the town is located near the Bulgarian–Turkish border, and the RRC is right in the town center. In addition, the ratio between the number of migrants accommodated there and the town’s population can be another reason for the definitive answers to the question.

In addition, the lack of trust in the government institutions is hard to be compensated with some presumably great amount of trust in the EU ones. Especially when Afghanistan’s security and economic situation in 2021 further created doubts about the usefulness of the 2016 EU-Turkey migration deal. That agreement raised concerns among members of the EU parliament, humanitarian organizations, and human-rights activists regarding the fate of those fleeing armed conflicts. Moreover, it also led to assumptions that, in this way, a vicious practice can be created and promoted to cope with an increased influx of migrants. Actually, on November 9, 2021, the Russian minister of foreign affairs suggested that the EU should similarly pay Belarus in order for the latter to stop irregular migration through its borders to the member states (Osborn & Antonov, 2021).

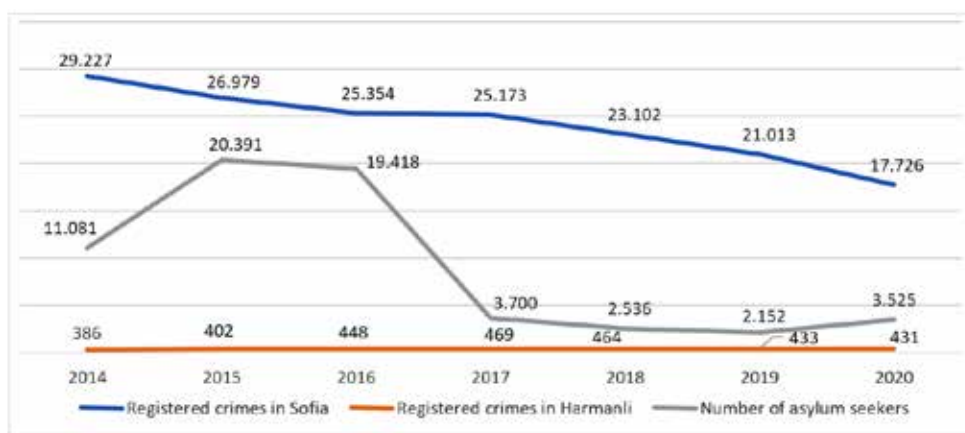


Figure 4: Registered crimes in Sofia and Harmanli vs. the Total number of asylum seekers in Bulgaria in 2014–2020. Data: Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2022.

Apart from the survey questions, many of the respondents in Harmanli shared that they were concerned about their own personal security or that of their relatives, mainly children. Those concerns stem from migrants in the RCC freely roaming constantly and at all times, although they were not allowed to leave the RCC after a specific hour of the night. According to locals, “the situation would have been much calmer if the centers were of a closed type.” Some could interpret this concern as fear of the “foreign.” As Bauman (2016: 14) states, being foreigners, migrants and refugees are dangerously unpredictable; hence, we do not know how to control the

situation. At the same time, it could also be seen as a sign of the state's poor capacity to deal with an increased migrant influx.

In light of the above-stated, no positive correlation has been found between the increase in the number of asylum seekers and the registered crimes in Harmanli and Sofia over the last few years (Figure 4). In Sofia, for instance, the number of registered crimes since 2014 has been gradually decreasing, although from 2014 to 2016, a large number of asylum seekers were housed there. On the other hand, in Harmanli, there is a slight increase in crimes, though it is so insignificant that it cannot be linked to the other indicator. Moreover, of all registered crimes in the two cities, only a small part was allegedly committed by foreign citizens (Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2022).

CONCLUSION

In 2021, Bulgaria witnessed a significant increase in the number of people seeking international protection, especially in the aftermath of the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan. Taking this fact into account, the state's role in dealing with irregular migration and refugee integration has come to the fore again. It cannot and should not be replaced by an NGO or another type of organization. The state's active role is crucial in contributing to a positive perception of the local population toward asylum seekers and fostering cooperation and coordination between the state, NGOs, and other stakeholders.

Despite some concerns in Bulgaria, it is currently unlikely that many Afghans intend to settle in the country. This assumption is not only based on the two decades of Afghan asylum seekers seeing Bulgaria mainly as a transit country but also on the lack of any significant refugee communities in the country due to a low international protection recognition rate, as Brown and Krasteva (2013: 97) state.

Similar inferences can be made based on refugee integration-related normative documents in Bulgaria. Although the country has adopted several national strategic documents, most were or are literally left only on paper. The state's passivity has resulted in strong doubts and distrust of the people living in Harmanli and Sofia about the Bulgarian institutions' capacity to deal with an increased influx of migrants and refugee integration.

It should be emphasized that such a situation can bring about another rise in populism. Although it is very unlikely to find a positive correlation between the registered crimes in Harmanli and Sofia and the number of asylum seekers in Bulgaria, the demographic crisis in the country and the poor communication between the state and the local population can be exploited by political actors. Most of the answers in the conducted survey suggest that. Therefore, it is necessary to introduce an approach toward both the local population and asylum seekers where a more central role of the state in refugee integration is reinforced and sufficiently visible.

This study has its limitations, particularly regarding the survey population size. Thus, nationally representative studies in Bulgaria on public perception toward asylum seekers from different conflict zones (and not only) would benefit all stakeholders involved in dealing with asylum seekers and refugee integration. Also, the communication between the state authorities and the local population should be further studied. Such studies might help avoid the misrepresentation of information and fake news that contribute to negative attitudes among local citizens.

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POVZETEK

MEŠANE MIGRACIJE PO TALIBANSKEM PREVZEMU OBLASTI V AFGANISTANU: ZMOGLJIVOSTI DRŽAVE IN PERCEPCIJE JAVNOSTI V BOLGARIJI

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Povečana negotovost v različnih državah in območjih po svetu se pogosto povezuje s povečevanjem mešanih migracij. Talibanski prevzem oblasti v Afganistanu ni v tem pogledu nikakršna izjema. Ker je v državah članicah EU prišlo do razhajanja mnenj glede begunske in migracijske politike že pri oboroženem konfliktu v Siriji, ne prese- neča, da še ena varnostna kriza na Bližnjem vzhodu ni bila sprejeta z navdušenjem. Bolgarija je imela kot država z zunanjo mejo EU glede tega še posebne težave. Tali- bansko strmoglavljenje vlade v Afganistanu je kljub pandemiji bolezni Covid-19 ter omejitvam potovanj znotraj in med državami po vsem svetu, ki smo jim bili priča v zadnjih dveh letih, povzročilo znatno povečanje prošenj za azil v Bolgariji. Samo v letu 2021 je za azil v tej državi zaprosilo več ljudi kot v celotnem obdobju 2018–2020.

V tej luči avtorja študije analizirata zmožnost države za spopadanje s povečanim prihodom migrantov, vključno z integracijo beguncev. Pri tem zagovarjata stali- šče, da se Bolgarija še vedno sooča s precejšnjimi težavami na tem področju, kar je mogoče razumeti kot hudo opustitev dolžnosti, zlasti z vidika tako imenovane begunske in migrantske krize sredi prejšnjega desetletja.

Avtorja navajata, da v času pisanja prispevka na splošno niso bile pripravljene nobene posebne strategije ali podobni dokumenti na nacionalni ravni, ki bi obrav- navali problematiko beguncev in migrantov po talibanskem prevzemu oblasti v Afganistanu. Poleg tega so bile na področju integracije prišlekov nevladne organiza- cije aktivnejše od državnih organov.

V takšnih okoliščinah je ključnega pomena odnos lokalnega prebivalstva do prišlekov. Rezultati študije, izvedene na to temo, kažejo predvsem na slabo komuni- kacijo med državo in lokalnim prebivalstvom ter na nejasno vlogo državnih organov pri soočanju z velikim migracijskim pritiskom na svojih mejah. Avtorja trdita, da je nepripravljenost države, da bi prevzela pobudo in zavzela proaktivno vlogo pri ustreznem upravljanju mešanih migracij, negativno vplivala na percepcije bolgar- skih državljanov, ki živijo v Harmanliju in Sofiji (kjer se nahajajo štiri izmed petih centrov za registracijo in sprejem migrantov v Bolgariji).

Vse naštetto lahko vodi v porast populizma, do česar je v nedavni preteklosti že prišlo. Zato je nujno oblikovati nov pristop do prosilcev za azil in lokalnega prebival- stva, ki bo okrepil in postavil v ospredje ključno vlogo države pri integraciji beguncev.

